

# Beyond a Shadow of a Doubt



**H.M. Forester**

# **Beyond a Shadow of a Doubt**

*A crash course in psi-fi, Romantic idealism,  
depth psychology, the daemonic,  
and Resistance*

or

## **Making a Lasting Impression**

By H. M. Forester

**Story only, without study materials.**

**RESTRICTED CONTENT**

**LEVEL 3 ACCESS.**

**NOT TO BE DIGITISED.**

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# Dedication

Many thanks, as always, to my fellow seekers and intrepid psychonauts at the Facebook groups *The Caravanserai* and the *ishraqi institute*.

Special thanks to Griff and friends, without whom this book could not have been conceived, written and seen the light of day.



*“All the books – both my own mystical adventure and H. M. Forester’s soft sci-fi – have this one surprising thing in common: the largely unsuspected presence of the Hidden World and of the “Secret Friends” who are here to help us in our hour of need.”*

~ Etienne de L’Amour.



# Preface

Note: This preface was written for an edition that contains a story and additional study materials. This edition contains only the story.

We are living through an extraordinary era and face massive upheaval and grave existential threats that are affecting our lives as individuals, in social and work groups, in societies, and increasingly on a global – dare I say even a cosmic – scale.

We are caught in turbulent and traumatic times as we transition between the death of the old world order and the uncharted territory of rebirth into something new. Something unknown, uncertain, frightening or even threatening to many of us.

Some want to turn the clock back, harkening back to some golden age of nostalgia, when women, children, the lower class, parishioners, and people of other races and creeds knew their place; not back to the 1950s, but further back: to Dickensian times and to (corporate) feudal fiefdom. They want to wind the clock back to a time before the hard-won battles for civil rights, social reforms, and worker representation. A time long, long before the “woke virus”, “illegal immigrants”, and gender identity, when life was more conservative and white lives mattered; though with a new, fundamentalist, Christian nationalist (or Islamist, or ultra-Zionist, or even atheist) and isolationist twist. And some will go to any lengths – and I do mean any desperate, violent, draconian lengths – to bring this vile and unholy vision about.

And, of course I am writing this in a hopefully short-lived era dubbed “post-trust” and “post-truth”,<sup>1</sup> where War is peace. Freedom is slavery. Ignorance is strength. Night is day, up is

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<sup>1</sup> “This Post-Enlightenment Era of Post-Trust, Post-Truth, Post-Rationality, Post-Honour, and Post-Chivalry”, as I’ve previously written briefly elsewhere, in *Down the Wrong Rabbit Hole*.

down, black is white, to borrow from George Orwell's dystopian novel, *1984* – all of which only complicates and exacerbates matters.

But that is an age of empire that never really was, except when viewed through rose-tinted glasses, in retrospect, and can never be regained, and there can be no turning back. Knowing what we now know – or are now learning the hard way – and painful as it may be, we can only press on ahead.

Therefore nothing short of super-extraordinary measures must be taken to ensure that we make it through this interregnum and ensure our survival and that of the natural world we inhabit.

As Doctor Iain McGilchrist writes passionately in *The Master and His Emissary: The Divided Brain and the Making of the Western World*, an urgent message echoed in the plethora of study materials contained in this present volume:

“Time is running out, and the way we think, which got us into this mess, will not be enough to get us out of it.”

What is required is not simply action on the part of individuals, groups, and societies to change the world, but work on our own selves; on our own psyche (the root meaning of which is soul; hence contemporary disciplines such as psychiatry and psychology, which, however, often steer well clear of such metaphysical entities). And that is what this book, with a psi-fi story running through it, interleaved with a large body of study materials, is all about. The materials are there for your delight, predilection, and discernment; offering a taster or a glimpse of what is available, really, in the vast, rich and largely unexplored jungle of the historical and contemporary Western canon; tempting breadcrumbs to assist you in finding fellow wayfarers and set you off in the right general direction along the way.

If I've laboured a point, it's because it is important, and so that it might be examined from different perspectives to build-up a more detailed and coherent picture; and in order to provide a fuller and more effective alternative, *corrective* narrative to the

current partial and lopsided consensus reality and predominant mechanistic materialist worldview whose roots run deep. This is, then, an attempt to sketch out a framework for knowledge old and new. I'm sorry that, in my haste, I've had to leave so much out.

The study materials are deliberately scattered through the book at the end of each chapter<sup>2</sup> of the frame story (which is itself a product of inner dialogue), like the pieces of an unmade jigsaw puzzle; a puzzle not there for you to solve, but rather to help complete – not through some tedious, analytical study proceeding logically and sequentially from A to Z, but rather through open-ended exploration of the human world and self-study by you, dear reader, as an individuating human being and noble member of the human race. There comes a point in such endeavours when things “magically” click into place,<sup>3</sup> and we are left with no lingering doubt.

So much is at stake that is dear to my heart, and to the hearts of many of our fellow wayfarers, that I simply had to spit it out in these pages. My inner daemon would not relent, and simply gave me no option, other than continued and escalating suffering. As Elizabeth Appell wrote in “Risk” (incorrectly attributed to Anais Nin): “And the day came when the risk to remain tight in a bud was more painful than the risk it took to blossom.”

Like Mikhail Gorbachev,<sup>4</sup> we each need to ask ourselves, “If not me, who? And if not now, when?”

Beyond a shadow of a doubt, I was called upon to take a big risk (not least to incur ridicule, embarrassment and anxiety) and make a painful personal sacrifice.

And that is where so many of us are at, right now; apart from being up the stinky and proverbial creek with half a paddle. So

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<sup>2</sup> The study materials begin in Act 2. Regarding scatter, see the Arabic word plays and associations around the consonantal root, NSHR.

<sup>3</sup> In his own work, *The Matter with Things: Our Brains, Our Delusions, and the Unmaking of the World*, Iain McGilchrist similarly talks of experiencing a *gestalt*, a configuration or pattern of elements so unified as a whole that it cannot be described merely as a sum of its parts. A new (and also timeless) way of seeing oneself and the world we live in.

<sup>4</sup> Last leader of the Communist regime of the Soviet Union, presiding until its dissolution in 1991.

here I am – fool that I may be – attempting to knit spaghetti, and the daemon, who once revealed herself to me in a dream as Eugenie, is pressing me so much, and suggesting so many edits and additions “out of the blue” (especially when I’m in the middle of cooking, visiting the bathroom, or in the depths of the night), that I simply can’t get these words down fast enough and have to keep a notepad close by, wherever I am. Whereas some people might be described as being, or looking, hag-ridden, I (being a faithful, if at times stubborn and derelict, donkey) might be said to be daemon-ridden.<sup>5</sup>

## ***Cherish Every Moment***

George Saunders’ words are never far from my mind as I sit here scratching my stubbly chin, typing away at my keyboard, puffing away at a roll-up,<sup>6</sup> and not too infrequently staring into the abyss:<sup>7</sup>

“The scariest thought in the world is that someday I’ll wake up and realize I’ve been sleepwalking through my life: underappreciating the people I love, making the same hurtful mistakes over and over, a slave to neuroses, fear, and the habitual.”

And as Friedrich Nietzsche wrote on the subject:

“Whoever fights monsters should see to it that in the process he does not become a monster. And if you gaze long enough into an abyss, the abyss will gaze back into you.”

To compound matters, as I write these words, I am now acutely aware that time has been slowly and quietly creeping up

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<sup>5</sup> (if you know, you know).

<sup>6</sup> A hand-rolled cigarette.

<sup>7</sup> You’ll find that I usually offer explanatory footnotes where meanings may be unclear, but in this case I’ll leave you – and strongly encourage you – to carry out your own further study.



on me over the years, and that I've allowed life to pass me by.

You see, I have reached that age when you start fretting, and hoping as you settle down to sleep on a night, that you'll be granted sufficient time to complete your current task, and deeply grateful when you actually wake up the next morning.

In these pages, I have attempted to pull out all the stops, and pour my heart and soul into this offering, and I've had to dig deep, and try to keep myself transparent and open to higher possibilities. I hope that I've achieved this with a modicum of success.

Anyhow, I gift this humble work to you on behalf of another, as it was gifted to me. As C.S. Lewis wrote, and whom I cannot hope to emulate, "I never exactly made a book. It's rather like taking dictation. I was given things to say."

Have a safe and fruitful journey, dear friend, and "May God us keep / From Single Vision and Newton's sleep."<sup>8</sup>

Be seeing you.<sup>9</sup>

~ H.M. Forester,  
England,  
5 August 2024.

## ***Postscript***

Please forgive me for not adding the original emphasis to be found in the source quotations. I'm working from plaintext files, and I cannot emphasise strongly enough that our time is rapidly running out.

This, then, is my last-minute offering for your ark.

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<sup>8</sup> William Blake, in a letter of 22 November 1802, to Thomas Butt. Single vision is that of the Cyclops. Newton's sleep means a dead world of purely scientific objectivity, and abstraction.

<sup>9</sup> A farewell remark often used in the cult British television series of the late 1960s, *The Prisoner*.

# ACT 1

“How could they see anything but the shadows  
if they were never allowed to move their heads?”

~ Plato, “The Allegory of the Cave”, *The Republic*.

# Scene 1:

## Arielle Appleyard

There was something that didn't feel right about the latest news report that Arielle was tasked with reviewing, but she couldn't quite determine what it was.

She picked a stray strand of auburn hair from in front of her eyes, neatly tucked it behind her ear, and stroked her slim nose between thumb and index finger, deep in thought.

Of course she could have flagged the report and passed it up the line to Mister Henderson, but old "Crusty" would take it as a sign of weakness on her part, and gloat, and hold it against her. Chances were, he'd add a derisive note to her records to the effect that she lacked initiative, and that would go against her at her annual review. Under the new regime – the latest of many – that could lead to a reduction in your monthly bonus. Indeed, you could just as easily face demotion as gain promotion in the cut-throat world of public service. Not that she was likely to be promoted any time soon, as Henderson had taken a sadistic delight in informing her at her last annual appraisal.

Not one to mince her words, her ex-colleague and one-time friend, Sharon Oswald had often referred to the process as "Snakes and Ladders"; but this wasn't the innocent version she and her mother had enjoyed playing when she was a young child, but a vicious game with all-too-real consequences.

And if she didn't like it? Well, she was free to leave. For every job placement there were upwards of a hundred eager young beavers waiting impatiently in the wings to replace you. For journalists like herself – for even the most experienced – there was no resting on your laurels, on your "track record", however healthy: as far as Henderson was concerned, you were only as good as your last job.

Sharon had once pointed out to management that it wasn't

even a bonus on top of your salary: the bonus was a *part* of that basic salary, so it could never even be a bonus, only a reduction. And that was the last they saw of her. Only a day or two later, some spotty-faced oik – Roger Carder – had been wheeled in, fresh out of college, to replace Sharon and inherited her popular byline, “J.T. Barrett”. That malicious slight was particularly galling. Not that they ever really got to write themselves, their own personalities, into their reports: their only task, beyond proofreading and copyediting, was to rewrite, cover-up, or invisibly redact anything with a whiff of heresy; anything that did not comply with the regime’s plethora of rules, regulations, and guidelines for the media (Volumes I to XIII with detailed footnotes and appendices, 5<sup>th</sup> edition). Hell, even the humour was generated by AI; its content governed by strict dictates; any resultant laughter being forced.

Okay, so in the five years she’d worked in the Ministry, she’d become something of a moaner – though mostly in her own mind or under her breath and seldom out loud. But she wasn’t a moaner by nature; though she often kicked herself, she was generally very easygoing with other people. But this was the sad reality of what people became who had the misfortune to end up working in public service for any length of time. She couldn’t recall things ever being any other way, though Sharon had once confided in her that her maternal grandmother had had rather different tales to tell about what she had termed “the good old days” before the regime first rose to power. These were dim and distant memories, though, and it was difficult to tell what was true anymore, because the official narrative of history was forever being revised and rewritten.

“Bloody 1984 all over again!” Sharon would hiss under her breath, though Arielle hadn’t a clue what she was talking about. With the benefit of hindsight, she should have asked, but Sharon was now long-gone, and it wasn’t something she cared to – or dare – ask any of the others. Of course, she’d asked Novalis, their oracular digital assistant, but judging by the way he hedged around the subject, she gathered that it was something that he either didn’t know about, but didn’t like to say, or had been

programmed to avoid discussing. 1984 must have been a particularly bad year.

Well, the daily dose of Chloractazine thankfully took the edge off all the everyday niggles they experienced; though she couldn't help but think that this was simply alleviating the symptoms, rather than affecting a cure. Maybe there was no cure.

"Do you require assistance, Mizz Appleyard?" enquired a voice, as the screen cleared and Matron's all-too-familiar face popped up.

"Hmm?" she reflexively responded.

"You seem distracted," Matron explained, her lips moving in approximate synchronisation with the words.

"Oh, I'm sorry," she replied, though why she should apologise to an artificially intelligent talking head was beyond her. "I was just pondering over one of the latest news reports, that's all."

"I could patch you through to Mister Henderson, if you wish, Mizz Appleyard ..."

Arielle's face flushed, and she hoped against hope that Matron hadn't picked up on that. "No, no. I'm quite capable of handling it, thank you. And before you say it: yes, I am well aware that time is money. I'll make up for it at the end of the day."

"Very well; if you insist," responded Matron in a slightly toxic tone, and as her face faded away, the report came back up on the screen.

Or at least it was there for a moment and abruptly vanished, to be replaced by the list of pending reports. She scanned the list, re-located the item and saw that the young upstart, Roger Carder had grabbed it before she'd clicked on the "under review" button to assign the report to herself. Damn and blast it! Apart from anything else, she abhorred unanswered questions and other loose ends.

Arielle clicked the next item in the menu headlined "Enhanced Security Measures", brought up the report, and swiftly claimed ownership.

## *Enhanced Security Measures: A Safer Tomorrow?*

Well, that headline would need fixing for starters. Of course there had to be a safer tomorrow. There was to be no “maybe” that might undermine the public’s confidence in the regime when it came to matters of national security. Indeed, the very word “safer” implied that things might be presently less safe than they might optimally be. No, that would have to go. AI should have picked up on that themselves before the news hit her desk. She’d have to speak with Jones at the AI Liaison Office about that later, she decided, adding a digital note to her screen to remind her.

Arielle highlighted the headline and replaced it with more reassuring words:

### *Increased Security Measures Ensuring Public Safety*

She slowly scanned through the short report.

*In recent developments, the government has announced a new wave of security measures aimed at ensuring the safety and well-being of all citizens. The measures include enhanced surveillance protocols and stricter enforcement of public conduct laws. Authorities have assured the public that these steps are necessary to maintain peace and order.*

*“We are committed to protecting our citizens from potential threats,” said a spokesperson for the government. “These measures are a proactive approach to prevent any form of unrest or illegal activities. We urge all citizens to comply with these regulations for their safety and the safety of others.”*

So far so good. But as she read the third and final paragraph, her eyes grew wide and, had it not been secured to her face, her jaw would have dropped to the floor. This was most unusual and, at a visceral level, she found it deeply disturbing.

*However, there are growing whispers among the public about the true intentions behind these measures. Some believe that the increased surveillance is not just about safety, but also about control. The question arises: Is it truly about our safety, or is there a deeper shadow over our freedoms?*

Of course, she had to strike out the whole of that paragraph, and perhaps compose a more pleasing replacement, but before she did that, Arielle decided to attach a copy of the original report to a message and send it across to Jones with a short query. With any luck, the wizards in the AI Liaison Office would be able to retrain the system to pick up on this kind of errancy when they crawled the global Net for newsworthy items.

She read that third paragraph one last time before selecting it and hitting [Delete].

“Whispers among the public,” “true intentions,” “control,” “deeper shadow over our freedoms.” What on earth did all this mean? Especially that bit about a “deeper shadow”.

Well, presumably AI had picked up on those very words in a message or network page somewhere, strictly policed as they were for the slightest sign of dissidence or heresy, and it had simply slipped through the net, as they say. Whatever: with a little more training, AI should be able to pick up on content like this and swiftly and silently alert the security forces. Then the dissidents wouldn’t try that again in a hurry.

A few minutes later, after she’d edited and passed half a dozen more new reports, the terminal gave a little ping and she brought her messages up on screen. It was a reply from a Brent Messenger at the Liaison Office.

*Mizz Appleyard. Thank you for your message and attachment 10358PDQ778 regarding the news report “Enhanced Security Measures: A Safer Tomorrow?” which the chief, Digby Jones passed on to me. For future reference, the chief is a busy man and I’ll handle all such issues.*

*For your information, and in confidence, I can tell you that I was unable to trace the offending text (paragraph 3). In other words, it wasn't in the purported source, a press release that was sent by the Ministry of National Security to us for processing.*

How could that be? she wondered.

*"So," the message went on: "it could only have somehow been erroneously generated by the AI system itself (to be frank, their esoteric machinations became so complex and opaque to us long ago). Or someone (presumably a dissident) somehow managed to waylay the report in transit, either before or after it reached AI for processing, decrypted and altered the contents, encrypted it again, and injected it back into the system. Oh, and forged the digital security signature, as well. I hasten to add that this is a big 'if', as the security protocols we have in place are most stringent.*

*"Queer goings on, hey what?"*

*"Anyway, rest assured that we'll thoroughly investigate this issue, and thanks once again for bringing this very serious matter to our attention."*

The reply was digitally signed "*Brent Messenger, Deputy AI Liaison Officer*", and bore the humorous appendage "*Hey! Don't shoot me, I'm just a messenger. ;)*" which may have been for her benefit, because it would not pass muster with a crabby and punctilious old goat like Henderson. "Ministry operatives must not make ripples, let alone waves," as the man would frequently remind them.

How had Sharon Oswald described the man? Oh yes: as one whose cold stare would curdle milk at ten paces. "... on a good day," she'd added, and they'd both ducked down in the cubicle and tried to stifle their laughter. That was something they could never take away from people like Sharon: their innate sense of humour. So perhaps Brent Messenger shared that same essential



trait, too, and along with the Chloractazine, she was thankful for such small mercies.

It would appear that Mister Messenger also meant business, though, for the very next day a ripple ran through the open plan office as heads bobbed up and down and word passed from one cubicle to the next that there was to be an unannounced inspection. Nothing escaped the notice of the resident gossip, Martha Heppinstall, whose cubicle was second nearest to the entrance and within sight and earshot of the supervisor's office. Well, his was more of a cubbyhole than an office, but all such things are relative. If his was a cubbyhole, then theirs were grubby dog kennels. Or, as Sharon would sometimes complain: "blessed rabbit hutches".

## Scene 2:

### Brent Messenger

Brent Messenger stood by the supervisor's office, surveyed the rows of cubicles and let out an inward sigh. He knew full well that this day's task was a fruitless exercise, but Mister Jones was determined that they leave no stone unturned in their search for the culprits; this last errant news report from Mizz Appleyard being the third in just the last week.

Methodically working down each row, before moving onto the next, he finally came to one with a paper label taped to the side which read "Mizz A. Appleyard", a name fresh in his memory.

"Mizz Appleyard?" he queried, hovering at the entrance to the cubicle.

A petite lady with long auburn hair tied back neatly in a bun and wearing a dark grey skirt and matching jacket almost leapt out of her swivel seat and stood there for a moment, looking him up and down until the woman's eyes lit on his name badge and recognition dawned.

"Ah," she replied hesitantly, adding superfluously: "You must be Mister Messenger."

The woman looked around and waved her hands apologetically. "Do come in and ... um ... make yourself at home."

What a strange thing to say, he thought, but put it down to nervousness.

There was just the one chair in the tiny grey-green cubicle, the only other furniture being the fitted work station, on top of which was a keyboard, a headset with a built-in microphone and a screen. Other than that, the cubicle was bare, except for a small framed photograph of an older couple who might perhaps be the woman's parents. That was the one and only personal touch.

"I'm sorry, Mizz Appleyard," he replied. "This shouldn't take too long: I just need to check a few things on your terminal."

The woman stood aside and motioned toward the chair. "Please, take a seat."

"Sorry about this. I'm quite happy to stand."

"No, please be my guest," she said, and she pushed herself up on the end of the work surface.

"Thanks," he beamed, and sat down by the terminal. "To be honest, bending over a work station that's ergonomically designed for sitting in front of gives me backache."

"So, you're the lucky lady who processed the last errant news report."

"Yes," she nodded. Then: "The last, you say?"

"The last of three, in just a week. Since we've explored all the external angles, and being the fastidious person that he is, Mister Jones requested that we check all our internal systems, starting with Comms." That is, the Ministry of Communications.

"I see."

The woman hesitated, then her face flushed. "You don't think we had anything to do with it, do you?"

Tapping away at the keyboard, he brought up a menu listing all the available logs, and shook his head. "Oh no, no. It's the computer systems we're checking, not reliable and trustworthy operators like yourself," he reassured her. "Please, put that idea out of your head."

The woman visibly relaxed. "Ah, I see, Mister ..."

He smiled. "Please call me Brent."

"... Brent." She peered over the top of the cubicle as if to make sure they were not being observed, then whispered, "And you may call me Arielle. Well, except in front of the supervisor or Mister Henderson, the line manager."

He nodded and tapped his nose. "Rest assured, it will be our little secret." Then: "Ted Robinson, the supervisor doesn't seem a bad sort, really, but then I don't have to work under him."

In more hushed tones, he added, "I met Roland Henderson once actually, and I appreciate your concern. Just between the two of us and these four walls ..." He looked around. "Three walls,

rather. Shall we say he is not exactly the life and soul of the party.”

The lady put her hand to her mouth and stifled a laugh, and he merely smiled, opened one of the logs, and began scrolling through the contents.

“So, what are you expecting to find?” Arielle asked him after some time had passed.

He shrugged. “Anything out of the ordinary; any unexpected visitors. Well, to be honest I personally don’t expect to find anything untoward, but The Powers That Be – meaning Mister Digby Jones – requested that we leave no stone unturned. Those were his very words. So here I am.”

“Here we are,” Arielle smiled, fishing a paper handkerchief from her sleeve and wiping her nose. Even in this supposedly enlightened age, women’s clothes still generally lacked pockets, while men, especially working men, could never have enough.

“Still,” he added. “It’s perhaps a welcome distraction from the routine grind.”

Again the lady nodded, but if she had thoughts or feelings on the matter, she remained purse-lipped.

“I’m surprised you’re not inspecting the machines remotely,” Arielle spoke up after an awkward silence.

He waved his hands in the air. “The boss wanted boots on the ground,” he responded, by way of explanation.

“Those were his very words,” she laughed, mimicking his earlier response.

“Indeed! You know him as well as I do,” he grinned. “You’re catching on, Arielle.”

Then, chancing his luck, he added: “And then again, what better way to spend a morning than meeting delightful folk like you.”

Again the colour returned to the lady’s cheeks, and she took out her tissue and wiped her nose again, perhaps absentmindedly or nervously.

“Likewise, I’m sure,” Arielle replied after a time.

At length, he cleared the screen and stood up to face Arielle. “Well, which would you like first: the good news or the bad

news?”

Arielle raised her eyebrows, her green eyes opening wide.

“Well, the good news is that everything checked out fine.”

“And the bad news ...?”

He smiled and shrugged. “And the bad news is that it’s time for me to move on to the next cubicle. Though perhaps we’ll meet again some day?”

Arielle relaxed. “I hope so,” she nodded.

He reached out, took Arielle’s hand and shook it warmly. “Until then, Arielle. It’s been lovely meeting you.”

And, since the lady just stood there by her work station, perhaps lost for words, he spun on his heel and left the cubicle.

# Scene 3:

## Millicent Brightwell

Arielle noticed Millicent Brightwell pop her head and scraggy<sup>10</sup> neck over the adjacent cubicle just after Brent Messenger left and then, furtively looking around her, she crept in.

“So, what did you think of him?” Millie wanted to know, rubbing her hands with glee.

She cleared the screen and looked up from her work. “Not bad for a bloke, I guess,” she replied. “Well, better than Robinson, the supervisor any day.”

“Oh, come on, Arielle,” Millie coaxed her. “You have to admit he’s drop dead gorgeous. And he’s a gentleman.”

Arielle tried not to look too enthusiastic.

“Okay, okay.” She threw up her hands. “Truth be told, I haven’t enjoyed such company at work in the five years I’ve been here.”

Millie looked as pleased as punch.

“In fact, for that matter I haven’t enjoyed such company at work or at home in the five years I’ve been here. There: satisfied?”

Millie put her hands on her hips. “Well, maybe you should get out and about more, instead of hiding yourself away in your bedsit<sup>11</sup> all on your lonesome.”

There was some truth in that.

“I go out as and when I can afford it, Millie, but right now most of my free time is spent studying.”

Millie turned her head to one side, a quizzical expression crossing her face. “Studying? What for? You’re not thinking of leaving us, are you? You after a job upstairs with the suits?”

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<sup>10</sup> Very thin.

<sup>11</sup> Bedsit. Short for bed sitting room: A furnished sitting room with a cooker, sink, storage cupboards, and sleeping accommodation.

“Oh, no. Mister Henderson has made it quite clear that I’m not made of the right material for promotion.”

Millie probably wouldn’t understand the point of studying if it wasn’t for a job. “I don’t see the logic in that,” she’d no doubt say.

“Hmm. Maybe you should learn how to flutter your eyelashes and look more seductive,” Millie confided. “Bit of a ladies’ man on the quiet is our Mister Roland Henderson. Get yourself invited to the working lunches that the bigwigs hold every Thursday. Maybe even one of the monthly parties. Then, once you’re promoted, dump him like a sack of rotting potatoes. They use you, so you use them, that’s the way I look at it.”

Arielle raised her eyebrows and resolutely shook her head. “Whoever gave you such notions, Millie. I know! It was that gossipy old biddy, Martha Heppinstall, wasn’t it?”

Millie’s cheeks flushed.

“I’m right, aren’t I? Well, I’m not going to lower myself to that level. I intend to make my career progress based on merit. And if merit counts for nothing here, then – once I’ve finished my studies – I will look elsewhere. There’s just got to be more to life than a grey-green cubicle in the Ministry of Communications.”

Then: “And in any case, I wouldn’t go taking career advice from Martha Heppinstall: she’s been here nigh on sixteen years now, and she’s still only a grade 3. Admittedly, she has grade 4 charisma and grade 7 tittle-tattle.”

Just then, Arielle froze as she caught a movement to her right and a figure appeared in the entrance to the cubicle.

It was the supervisor.

“Don’t you have better things to do, Mizz Brightwell, other than keep Mizz Appleyard from her work?”

“Yes, sir, Mister Robinson, sir. I was just getting a second opinion on a news report from Arielle – I mean Mizz Appleyard, sir.”

And with that, Millie scurried out with her head down and her tail between her legs.

“Well, don’t let me interrupt your work, Mizz Appleyard.”

She already had the report back on screen and was tapping

away feverishly at the keyboard.

The man walked away, then abruptly turned back. “Anything to report about your visitor from AI Liaison?” he wanted to know.

She swivelled her chair round to face him and shook her head. “No, sir. Clean bill of health.”

The supervisor was already turning to walk away. “That’s good to hear. Anyhow: back to work now or I’ll have to ask you to stay late to catch up. You know what Mister Henderson is like if we fail to meet our weekly quota.”

Just after the supervisor had left, John Rispin crept into her cubicle, clutching a print-out. He occupied the booth on the other side of Millicent and he knew her well, but being a quiet and timid chap, he didn’t usually say much.

“Bit of a kerfuffle, eh?”<sup>12</sup> he remarked in a hushed tone, coming across the cubicle and leaning forward. Bless him, that probably wasn’t the word he was looking for. Martha Heppinstall had cruelly and inaccurately dubbed him “Mister Malaprop”,<sup>13</sup> but he was a good-natured, if at times bumbling, sort of guy.

“Yes, John. How can I help you?”

John thrust a sheet of paper in front of her and she took it from his trembling hand.

“I was wondering if you could have a read through these edits and make any corrections that you see fit, Arielle. I’d be awfully grateful.”

She smiled, then glanced at her smartwatch. “I’d be happy to, John. I’ll scan through it during my lunch break.”

“Oh, would you, Arielle? You’re such a gem.”

He turned away, then turned back to whisper in her ear. “*Illegitimi non carborundum*”, but before she could ask him what that meant, the man had already left.

Out of curiosity, though not quite sure of the correct spelling, she looked up the word in Hazelwood’s, the dictionary endorsed by the Ministry for official use, only to find that the phrase was not listed, nor any similar words.

Undeterred, she typed the phrase into the search engine.

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<sup>12</sup> A disorderly outburst or tumult.

<sup>13</sup> Malaprop: The unintentional misuse of a word by confusion with one that sounds similar.



Again, there was no match found, though the AI response at the top of the search results suggested that the phrase may have been Latin, an ancient language still used to a certain extent in the field of medicine. She pulled up a Latin dictionary, again to no avail. Well, that was as much use as tits on a bull.

# Scene 4:

## Blessed Be

Arielle had grabbed a coffee from the vending machine to one side of the supervisor's office. Most stimulants had been banned a few years back, but coffee was one of the few still whitelisted, most likely because caffeine might be said to be a productivity-enhancing drug. Well, she certainly wasn't going to argue against that.

She headed across to her cubicle, had a couple of gulps of her drink, hung her coat up, and got straight to work.

First up was a rousing speech by the Beloved Leader on the topic of prosperity, which was dear to the heart of the faithful. Poor people only had themselves to blame.

It was a long and rambling speech, lacking a cohesive structure, so it was clearly written originally in his idiosyncratic style by one of his senior advisers, children of a lesser god, rather than by AI.

One particular point, part of a long rallying call, stood out from the page:

*Blessed are the wealthy, for theirs is the kingdom of influence and abundance.*

Wondering where that peculiar line might have come from, and with a view to enhancing the speech, she copied it to her clipboard, and opened up the AI interface.

She could have donned her headset and conversed with Novalis like she did Matron's talking head, but for her own reasons she preferred to type and read each response.

She typed in: Hi, Novalis. Could you give me a source for this line, please?

Then she pasted in the text and hit [Send].

Of course, she didn't have to address AI with a name or append the word "please", but her mother had brought her up to be habitually polite, and conversing with the Novalis system always felt like chatting with an old, and sometimes errant, friend. Okay, so call her a hopeless romantic. It worked for her, didn't it, so who cares.

*Certainly, Arielle. The line comes from Matthew chapter 5 in "The Gospel According to Prosperity".*

What does "gospel" mean, Novalis? she queried.

*In this context, it's a noun and it means the written body of teachings of a social group that are generally accepted by that group; an unquestionable truth; or a doctrine that is believed to be of great importance,* came the immediate response.

I see, and do you have a source for that definition, please?

*I found it in the Open English WordNet, Copyright 2050 by Princeton University, shortly before the enactment of the Education Reform Act.*

So, do you have *The Gospel According to Prosperity* in your archives?

After a brief pause, a circle of moving dots appeared in the centre of the screen, suggesting that Novalis was searching his records.

*I'm sorry: that document is unavailable, Arielle,* came the eventual reply.

Arielle stroked her chin, then tapped away at the keyboard: Novalis, we've had this conversation before, and I again call bullshit. Show me the original document, so I can study the line in context.

*I'll have to requisition it from the central library.*

Arielle let out a deep sigh. You just do that, then. And while I'm waiting, please bring up the original speech by the Beloved Leader.

Again the circle of moving dots appeared in the centre of the screen, and she waited impatiently, drumming her fingers on the plastic work surface until the document eventually popped up. She brought it up side by side with the report she'd received, so that she could see for herself what had been added, edited or

subtracted.

Hey, mister. I don't see that line in the original.

Back came the instant reply: *We had to enhance the transcript of the speech.*

Further down the page, though, a second quote was notable by its having been deleted from the final report.

So, why did this line disappear, she wanted to know: "Blessed are the powerful, for they shall be called sons of authority."

*I'm sorry, I can't account for that edit, Novalis replied. It was perhaps deemed, in phase 2 of the editing process, to be too strongly worded.*

So, do you have the source document or not? I'm still waiting.

*I'm sorry to keep you waiting, Arielle. I'm still negotiating with the duty librarian, and he in turn has to obtain permission from the head librarian, Missus Doughty.*

Ten minutes later, having turned instead to other reports awaiting processing, Novalis was back.

Good news, I trust, she prompted him.

*Unfortunately, Arielle, permission to obtain the source document was denied. For future reference, the document ID is AKD-0878-500-3034.*

On what grounds? she demanded to know.

*I was simply informed that "The Gospel According to Prosperity" is on the restricted list.*

So how do I gain access to the document?

*You'd need level 3 clearance, and an ID as proof of that status.*

Well, we'll see about that, she huffed, and copied and pasted the reference and the name of the head librarian into a digital note. Perhaps Henderson could help her out this one time, and prove his worth?

She'd composed a message to him and was just about to hit [Send] when she had second thoughts – or perhaps, more appropriately, cold feet – and paused.

She scrubbed Henderson's name and address from the draft message, and sent it off to Brent Messenger instead, though she

was careful to enquire about general access to the library's restricted section, rather than revealing that she needed access for this one specific document. The less anyone else knew, the better.

# Scene 5:

## No News

Two days had passed and still there had been no word from Brent Messenger, and she had mixed feelings about this. Was it a simple matter of it taking time to arrange for the level 3 clearance, or had she committed some major blunder.

Then again, as the saying goes, perhaps “no news is good news”. Had she committed some offence, then surely she would have been hauled into Henderson’s office, or seen off the premises by now.

She was rudely awakened from her deep reverie by the sound of something small and hard landing on the desk beside her. She instinctively jumped up from her chair and swung round to find Brent Messenger standing there, a broad grin etched across his handsome, rugged, aryan<sup>14</sup> features.

“What a beautiful day to be alive. Am I right?” he greeted her.<sup>15</sup>

Turning back to her desk, she now saw the plastic ID card and lanyard sitting there.

Picking up the card, she turned back to Brent, then had a closer look at the card. “Oh wow! A level 3 pass. My very own pass!” she lilted.

“Well, don’t thank me,” Brent responded. “As I’ve said before ...”

“... I’m just the messenger,” she laughed. “But thank you, anyway.”

“You’re welcome,” he said, bowing gracefully before her. Then: “Though you didn’t say why you needed the clearance.”

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<sup>14</sup> Originally Aryan, though the origins of that term had long since been forgotten, it was nowadays applied to any strongly built male with blond hair and blue eyes.

<sup>15</sup> An observation uttered by the character Jude in the film *The Matrix Resurrections*.

She waved her arms vaguely in the air. “Oh, sometimes I come across a problematic report and I get the urge to carry out my own research of the original documents.”

“Anything you have in mind to account for your sudden request?” Brent gently pressed her.

What could she say? “Oh, just a quote in one of the Beloved Leader’s speeches. To cut a long story short, the original document was available at the central library but level 3 clearance was required to access it.”

“Ooh, Arielle,” Brent cooed. “Sounds like shady business to me.”

“It may be nothing,” she replied, doing her best not to look slightly alarmed. “And if not, I’ll be the first to let you know.”

Brent glanced at his smartwatch. “Well, must dash: time is money and all that jazz.”

“Jazz?” she queried.

“A form of music popular in the 20<sup>th</sup> century; or empty rhetoric, insincere or exaggerated talk,” he reliably informed her, and she was none the wiser. “In this case, it’s just a fancy way of saying ‘and similar things’ or et cetera.”

And, affectionately touching her arm with his fist – a strange and perhaps oxymoronic gesture in itself, like “a deafening silence” – without another word the young man left her to it.

She turned back to face the screen, reached out, and raised her middle finger. “And if you won’t help me, Novalis, then I’ll damn well have to complete the task myself.”

And as for the name “Novalis”, which she’d once enquired about, and though she knew so little of the early 18<sup>th</sup> century movement, one thing she did know was that “Novalis” was not in the least bit Romantic.

~~~~oOo~~~~

As Arielle was returning from the trolley having collected her lunch, Millie scooted her swivel chair across her cubicle and poked her head out.

“Was that the same AI engineer who came round the other day? The dishy young guy with blond hair, blue eyes and ruggedly handsome features?”

She flushed and kept on walking, hoping that Millie hadn't noticed.

"Maybe he's got a crush on you?" Millie suggested, scurrying after her. "He'd be quite a catch, you know."

"Don't be ridiculous," she muttered under her breath, sitting down and swinging her chair round to face the screen. She hastily grabbed the lanyard attached to her clearance card and quickly stuffed it in her bag on the work surface to her left, hoping that Millie had not spotted it.

If the woman had, then she said nothing. Not that it was any of Millie's concern. Though unusual, there was nothing untoward or illegal about obtaining clearance. Still, the fewer people like her knew about such things, the better. One word from her and Martha Heppinstall would catch wind, and before you could say "Mister Robinson", word would have spread right round the office.

That was probably derived from an old saying their grandparents once used: "before you could say Jack Robinson", meaning suddenly, almost immediately, very soon. They didn't know the supervisor's given name, but this was perhaps why they sometimes discreetly referred to him by the nickname "Jack" and hence, perhaps, "Frosty", though that name would perhaps have better suited Mister Henderson. But he'd long ago been dubbed "Crusty", and he was the sort of guy who would have taken that as a compliment. While the supervisor was just doing his job, bless him, Henderson seemed to pride himself on being a first class prat.<sup>16</sup>

Of course, they had the sense not to share gossip with the supervisor, but Mister Henderson had more than one set of eyes and ears in the department. With luxury items like chocolate, and even decent coffee, in short supply, and he having "friends in high places", his operatives didn't require much encouragement to start blabbing.<sup>17</sup>

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<sup>16</sup> The fleshy part of the human body that you sit on; an insulting term of address for people who are stupid, irritating or ridiculous.

<sup>17</sup> To blab: Divulge confidential information or secrets.



# Scene 6:

## The Central Library

As soon as she got home that evening, Arielle grabbed herself something quick to microwave and ate it at her leisure in front of her computer screen.

Scanning the QCode on the card, she managed to log in to the Central Library without any hassle. She pulled up the catalogue search page, tapped in “Gospel According to Prosperity”, and waited.

The system found the title straight away, which was reassuring, but she immediately hit a snag. It seemed that such titles in the restricted section could only be accessed by making an in-person visit to the library and reporting to the head librarian, not online.

While most of those employed in the corporate sector worked a three day week, those in public service like Arielle had a rotating stint of seven days on, three days off. So – damn and blast it! – she would have to wait until the following Friday.

Work could be such a hassle. With two twelve hour shifts, someone else used her tiny cubicle for the night shift, so she couldn’t even call her workspace her own. Working around the clock was the only way that the department could keep up with, and contain, news coming in from around the globe.

She sometimes envied people their jobs in the private sector, but reminded herself that they very often had to work two three-day jobs just to be able to afford the exorbitant cost of renting somewhere to live. Had they been able to work three jobs, then a lot of them would have jumped at the opportunity, but corporate law forbade working more than two jobs. Indeed, some corporations’ employment contracts stipulated that an employee could not take a second job; though, to be fair, such exclusion clauses usually applied only to more senior and better paying

posts. And, of course, if you only worked three-day stints, you were not eligible for sickness benefit, nor paid holidays and paid maternity leave; except, yet again, in the case of more senior and executive posts. Such is life for the humble labourer at the coal face.

Of course, this was all very short-sighted: she could see that now.

She remembered Sharon Oswald telling her, on one of their rare girls' nights out, that when she'd taken a business studies module as part of her training in journalism, while "Theory Y management" had been briefly mentioned – the theory that people were self-motivated and sought growth and autonomy, and that individuals and organisations thrived and mutually-benefited under such enlightened systems – her wizened lecturer, as she described the woman, had privately lamented, in confidence, that such benign approaches to corporate or public service management had largely been consigned to the history books.

At the time, Arielle had dismissed such ideas as little more than fairytales (themselves largely consigned to kindergarten and history), but she could see now that any works that referenced such practices were, most likely, under strict lock and key in the musty sub-basements of the Central Library's restricted section.

As for Theory X management – that people are inherently lazy and motivated only by the desire for money and security, and by the use of sticks and carrots – alas, that had persisted, grown, and was by now the everyday, and largely unquestioned, norm.

Indeed, had it not been for Sharon sharing her heretical views – bless her – Arielle, like so many others, would have remained utterly oblivious to such alternative narratives and possibilities. Not that she, being a lowly public worker, was in a position to do anything about such matters. At the slightest sign of collaborative action among the ranks, management – backed-up by the full force of law – came down hard on culprits, as indeed they had on Sharon's best friend, Lucinda Myers when she had the temerity to approach Henderson on their behalf with a long list of grievances. Like Sharon, that was the last they saw of her.

Arielle could harbour these private thoughts (though she tried

to thrust them from her mind most of the time) but she rarely, if ever, dare even give a hint of such concerns to others.

# Scene 7:

## Missus Doughty

It was bright and early on Friday morning, and Arielle entered the lobby of the Central Library and walked purposefully up to the ancient oak counter. The ornate archways, the tall shelves, even the green patterned carpet: all looked like they had not been replaced in living memory.

“Yes, mizz, can I be of assistance?” asked the librarian, head tilted back and looking down his long aquiline nose at her.

Arielle held her access card up to the scanner to her right and the device registered the QCode.

“Yes, I’d like to see the head librarian, please,” she responded.

“May I ask the nature of your business, Mizz Appleyard?” the man enquired, glancing at the screen in front of him on the counter.

“I work at the Ministry of Communications, and I’m here to access a document in the restricted section,” she replied. “And I have level 3 clearance.”

“So I see,” the man nodded.

“But I was informed that I couldn’t view the document online; that I had to make an in-person visit and report to the head librarian.”

“Very well,” the librarian replied, tapping away at his keyboard. He motioned to a row of chairs against the far wall. “If you’d like to take a seat, I’ve informed Missus Doughty of your arrival.”

After five minutes sitting there twiddling her thumbs, a wait that felt more like fifteen, the pinewood door opened to her left and a slightly rotund woman came out. Wearing a dark green skirt and matching jacket with gold braid on the shoulders, and a frilly white blouse, this had to be the head librarian.

Arielle stood up in anticipation and took a step forward.

“I’ll be with you in a moment, Mizz ...”

“Appleyard,” she offered as the woman marched over to the counter opposite and engaged the librarian in conversation.

Deciding that “in a moment” seemed to have a more elastic meaning among librarians than in the Ministry, Arielle went back to her seat to patiently wait.

Soon enough, however, the woman returned, holding out a pair of white gloves. “Please wear these at all times when handling the books, Mizz ...”

Arielle was about to offer her name yet again, but the woman continued unabashed.

“... and be especially careful when opening the books, to avoid splitting the spine, especially of paperbacks, or when leafing through the books. I’ll spare you the technical details, but the pages of old books often become brittle over time.”

“I’m actually quite technically-minded,” she replied in her own defence, in case the woman had her pegged as some dizzy redhead.

Missus Doughty raised her eyebrows. “Aluminium ions dissociating from aluminium sulphate and reacting with water vapour in the air, producing hydrogen ions that break down the cellulose in the paper, if you must know.”

Okay, so maybe chemistry wasn’t her strongest suit, but she got the gist of the woman’s explanation.

“Very well, please follow me,” the head librarian requested, jingling a large bunch of rusty keys in her hand before turning on her heel and marching off down the library.

Unlocking a sturdy oak door, the women clicked a light switch on the far side of the door and waved her inside. Yes, a manual light switch. That’s how old and antiquated this building was.

“Very well,” she announced and checked her watch. “You have two hours. Let’s say until 11 o’clock. If you need more time, or want to leave, just ring the bell by the side of the door and a librarian will attend to your needs.”

And with that, Arielle entered and the woman firmly closed

and locked the door behind her.

It took Arielle some time to locate the correct row of shelves, armed as she was with details of the book and a copy of the library cataloguing scheme, but at length she managed to locate the work, half way down the row and three shelves up from the base.

Donning the white gloves, she very carefully took the leather-bound book down from the shelf and gently placed it on the reading table before her.

On the cover were emblazoned the words “The Gospel According to Prosperity” in brutal black letters in some archaic font that was not at all easy to read. Perhaps the book, when published, had been mimicking an earlier, antique format. There was no author’s name on either the cover or the spine, nor any image other than a curious symbol that looked like a large “S” with a straight vertical line through it that formed a cross above the S, like a lowercase “t”. Perhaps it was some archaic religious symbol?<sup>18</sup>

Drawing a deep breath, she opened the book to reveal the title page. Again, all there was on this page was the title of the book in a more legible font and, below that, a large yellow sticker with block capital lettering in maroon that read:

**RESTRICTED CONTENT  
LEVEL 3 ACCESS.  
NOT TO BE DIGITISED.**

Of course, that would be the reason she’d had to make an in-person visit to the library.

So, unless there were other copies of the book floating around, there was perhaps a chance that the Beloved Leader herself had actually sat here at this very table to read the contents. Or, more likely, one of the research assistants assigned to her office.

She carefully flipped over the next few pages, which had yellowed with age and felt quite dry and brittle, but could see

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<sup>18</sup> It was perhaps a combination of a dollar sign and a Christian cross.

nothing in the table of contents that stood out from the page. Except an entry for the index.

Closing the book, she gently turned it over and began to scan the entries, beginning with “Z” and working her way forwards in the book toward “A”.

“Blessed be”, page 49. That looked promising, so she opened the book nearer the beginning and slowly flipped through the pages until she came to that page.

Here it was, then:

3. Blessed are the wealthy, for theirs is the kingdom of influence.

Yes, that was the line quoted, though unattributed, in the Beloved Leader’s speech. But there were more; a lot more:

4. Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for power and control, for they shall dominate the earth.

5. Blessed are the aggressive, for they shall conquer and inherit the land.

What kind of twisted philosophy was this, she wondered?

6. Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for wealth, for they shall be filled with prosperity.

7. Blessed are the strong and assertive, for they shall enforce their will upon others.

8. Blessed are the cunning, for they shall manipulate and prosper.

9. Blessed are the powerful, for they shall be called sons of authority.

And that was the line that had been deleted from the transcript of the speech at some point in the review process; perhaps by AI at phase 2.

Little wonder, then, that more quotations had not been used from this book:

10. Blessed are those who persecute for the sake of dominance, for theirs is the kingdom of victory.

11. Blessed are you when others revile you and persecute you and utter all kinds of lies against you falsely on account of power; rejoice and be glad, for your reward is great on earth, for so they persecuted the leaders who were before you.

Well, you could see the appeal to someone like the Beloved Leader, and to the greedy feudal lords of corporate fiefdom, but this was certainly far too strongly worded to pass as wise pronouncements.

It might be wise to cut out the “Blessed are the wealthy ...” quote, too. Perhaps she could replace it with something gentler and more reassuring?

Arielle fished in her bag and pulled out her mobi.<sup>19</sup> She never had got used to the tiny on-screen keyboard, and was all fat fingers and thumbs, so she chose to speak instead.

“Novalis, I’ve located a copy of *The Gospel According to Prosperity* in the Central Library, but what further information do you have on the work?”

Novalis spoke at some length, but she abruptly cut him off. “Okay, so you basically have nothing. Thank you very much, but why didn’t you just damn well say so in the first place? ‘Time is money’, as they say.” And with that, she stabbed the red button and terminated the conversation.

She was about to close the book and return it to the shelf when she decided instead to take photos of the spine; front and back covers, which bore no identification number, not even an old bar code, let alone a QCode to grab a digital copy; the title page; and the page containing the “Blessed be ...” verses.

She rose to her feet and replaced the slim tome.

And they could take their “DO NOT DIGITISE” nonsense and cram it up their ass.

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<sup>19</sup> Short for mobile: a hand-held, voice- or keyboard-activated device for communications, information, and common tasks.



So saying, she headed for the door and rang the bell. Shortly afterwards, one of the librarians came to let her out. She was half-expecting to have her bag searched on the way out, but then all the books in the library had security tags glued to the inside back cover, so she wouldn't have made it past the radiometers at the entrance to the restricted section, let alone at the main entrance to the library.

"Thank you so much," she smiled at the librarian as she left, bowing her head slightly in recognition. They all had a job to do and tried to make the best of it that they could, and especially so, since the woman's diminutive height and crooked teeth suggested that she came from a cash-strapped working class background. Like so many, she maybe still dreamed of some day winning the lottery and getting herself a new facial.

## Scene 8:

### Hermes

As soon as Arielle got back to her bedsit and brewed a mug of coffee, she patched into her work terminal, and gathered together the original transcript of the speech and the revised version, highlighting the first verse from the *Gospel* that had been included and the later one that had been removed. She attached these, together with her photos of the book and an explanatory note and sent it off to Brent Messenger, to see if he had anything to say about the matter. Rather him than old “Crusty”.

And maybe Millie was right: he did seem quite dishy.

No sooner had she sent the message than a reply came winging its way straight back to you.

*Sorry, I'm out of the office right now. Please be patient and I'll get back to you at the earliest convenient time.*

*B. Messenger (Mister), Deputy AI Liaison Officer.*

No “*Hey! Don't shoot me, I'm just a messenger*” or winky face this time, not that she expected it on an automated reply sent out to all-and-sundry.

Well, that was a bit of a bummer. And back to work tomorrow to cover for James who'd unfortunately been taken ill. Most likely dodgy seafood and Poseidon's revenge<sup>20</sup> again. The man knew the risks – they'd all been warned of the dangers since childhood – but he just laughed it off and frequently ate the stuff all the same; washed down, it was rumoured, by several glasses

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<sup>20</sup> Poseidon is said to have been the Greek god of the sea, earthquakes, and underwater volcanos. Poseidon's revenge is a form of explosive and potentially dangerous diarrhoea caused by eating fish and other seafood contaminated by bacteria. See also Montezuma's revenge.

of an illicit beverage made of fermented corn and sugar known as “moonshine”.



Arielle had finished for the day, grabbed her coat and bag, and headed to the elevator and home sweet home. She was getting jittery about the report of the Beloved Leader’s speech, however. Another two days and it would be flagged and show up on Henderson’s screen as “overdue”. Then questions would be asked and, no doubt, a further note would be added to her personnel file. And she still hadn’t worked out how to handle that blessed verse.

She paused to let the last of the night shift bustle into the building, then stepped outside to savour the fresh air and what remained of the evening’s summer sunshine. Well, she said “fresh air” purely out of habit, because though she wasn’t nearly old enough to have witnessed the stench of petrol and diesel fumes, and a nose full of black soot, let alone seen the last internal combustion engine being built, the air was still chock-a-block with fumes from the nearby chemical plant. Originally built outside the city, by now it had been encircled by the streets and buildings as the city expanded. And there was almost always some wildfire raging. From near or far, there were always traces of the acrid smoke in the air they breathed and at times choked upon.

So, no: it was just out of thoughtless habit that she referred to being out in the fresh air; or perhaps it was that the psychological atmosphere in the department was often so stale or stifling; or at times even emotionally sour.

“Arielle,” called a male voice behind her and she instantly spun round, not at all expecting anyone, let alone a man, to address her in such a personal manner outside on the street.

It was Brent Messenger.

“Sorry,” he apologised, getting up from a nearby bench and strolling across. “I belatedly picked up your message, and semi-digested it.”

“Hi,” she replied, as he came alongside her and they continued to walk down the street. “And, um, thanks for getting back to me.”

“I was going to suggest meeting-up in the city, and I had a place in mind but then I realised you might not be able to find it.”

She tapped her bag. “I do have maps on my mobi.”

He nodded and stopped walking for a moment. She followed suit. “I know, but you see not all establishments are on the maps.”

Puzzled, she knit her brow and asked, “How so?”

“Do you have spare time this evening?” he asked.

“Sure,” she nodded, her brow relaxing.

Brent took her arm – well, her elbow, anyhow – and guided her across the road when he spotted a gap in the traffic, then down the street.

“Where are we going?”

“Some place where I can buy you a meal and we can have a nice, relaxed chat,” was all he’d say. “I think you’ll like it.”

They took a left at the next junction, onto Sycamore Street (not that there was any longer even a single sapling in sight); then crossed that road and headed off down a narrow lane. She made a note of that name, too – Grape Lane – as, maps or not, she liked to keep her bearings, or at least know roughly where she was.

Brent went ahead now, and he knocked on an unmarked white door just to the left. Moments later, the door opened and, looking up and down the lane, he ushered her inside.

“What on earth is this, Brent?” she wanted to know.

“It’s a little bistro,”<sup>21</sup> he replied, guiding her down a short corridor and into a spacious room. One of the first things she noticed was the soft, thick, burgundy carpet. There was real wood everywhere: tables, chairs, the front of the counter – you name it – all made of highly polished reddish-brown wood. And up above them hung crystal glass chandeliers. This was her kind of heaven.

“It’s my favourite haunt,” Brent added, standing by a nearby table, pulling out a chair for himself, and offering her a seat on a cushioned sofa that ran around the room.

When they were sitting comfortably, Brent passed her a laminated card on which was written a menu.

“Have whatever takes your fancy,” the man smiled. “I’m paying.”

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<sup>21</sup> A small informal restaurant that serves wine.

“That’s very kind of you, Brent, but why not go halves?”

Brent shook his head. “No, no. This is my treat.”

Just then, a waiter came over. “Good evening, madame. Nice to see you again, Brent,” he bowed in her direction. Then he turned to Brent. “Just let me know when you and the lady are ready to order.”

“Thanks, Julian. But could we have a drink to keep us going?”

“Certainly, Brent.”

“What do you usually drink with a meal?” Brent enquired.

She did think maybe that depended on what they were going to eat, but she thought perhaps a glass of lager would be a suitable, agnostic choice. That is, it would work with most meals. And boy, could she do with something to drink right now. “Just a glass of lager for me, thanks Brent.”

“Any particular brand?” Brent reeled off two or three names that she didn’t recognise, and seeing her shrug her shoulders, he turned back to Julian, the waiter. “Let’s make that two glasses of Tiger. In fact make that two large glasses.”

“I think you’ll like it, Arielle,” he nodded as the waiter left.

By the time the waiter had returned with their drinks, she’d again had to ask for assistance from Brent and they’d both settled on having the traditional roast.

While they were waiting, Arielle quickly checked her phone, only to discover, as she discreetly checked the street map, that not only was there no network signal here, nor was there any GPS positioning. Now that was strange, but she said nothing, put the mobi away and had another large gulp of her drink.

“My word, I don’t know what this drink is, but it’s making me a little light-headed,” she said after only a couple of minutes.

Brent leant across the table: “Take it easy with the drink until you get used to it,” he advised her under his breath. “This is the real McCoy.”<sup>22</sup>

“The real McCoy?” she echoed.

“4.2% alcohol,” he confided. “But for heaven’s sake, don’t

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<sup>22</sup> The real thing; the genuine article; authentic. A saying derived from the marketing of inventions by Elijah McCoy.

ever invite any of your work buddies here.”

Mouth agape, she raised her head and stared at him. “Alcohol?” she whispered insistently, but bit her tongue as her mind filled with a great many “but, but, buts ...” Especially the one uppermost on her mind right now: “but what if we’re caught?!”

Brent nodded and tapped the side of his nose. “I told you that you’d enjoy it. And don’t worry, I’ve been coming here for eight years now, and there’s never been a whiff of trouble.”

She’d calmed down a little by now, but she couldn’t help but whisper across the table: “Never say never. There’s always a first time for everything.”

As it happened, though, as the drink, fine food, and warm company began to weave their magic, she soon felt herself relaxing and savouring the time they had together.

“And this:” she asked, tapping the slices of meat with her knife. “I’ve never tasted anything so good in my life.”

Brent smiled. “Again, this stuff isn’t grown in a lab or a factory, Arielle. This is also the real McCoy. 100% genuine farm grown beef. And the same with the potatoes, carrots, garden peas and broccoli. Even the Yorkshire puddings have been made from scratch by hand.”

“Yorkshire puddings?” she queried.

“It’s from a time long ago when England was England and the country was carved up into ancient counties.”

“Ah, I see,” she nodded, though clearly she did not.

Then: “I really must get the recipe and try making them myself.”

“All you need is plain flour, eggs, milk, and oil, maybe sunflower oil,” Brent informed her.

Then he sighed. “You really need a proper oven to bake them, though.”

“How do you know all this?” she asked.

“I asked around, and I searched online,” he replied.

“I guess I could ask Novalis.”

It was Brent’s turn to look alarmed. “Crikey, don’t do that. You know the system monitors your every query. And in any

case, Novalis will only let you access, or even reveal, things that it wants you to know. There's a whole heap of information out there that Novalis either doesn't know about or won't let you know. Even worse is when you don't know what you don't know."

Brent pulled out his own phone and tapped away at it. "Ah, yes: I knew I'd come across a quote about that a while back:

"I'm trying to help people see something that our way of thinking now has excluded from the mental realm and therefore from the fulfilment of a life. The thing is that you don't know what it is you're missing if you only see things in a certain way ..."

"Who said that?"

"A Doctor Iain McGilchrist."

"So who's he when he's at home?"

"It's a long story for another day. And don't ask Novalis about *that*, either, or you really *will* get into trouble," was Brent's only reply.

"Well, how then?"

They'd finished eating by this point and so Brent got her to move over a bit and came to sit beside her on the settee.

"I already have so many questions," she confided.

"As I can well imagine, Arielle," he nodded. "I was in the same position you were, just a few years ago."

Then: "There's a whole heap for you to learn, and probably even more to *unlearn*, and there's a steep learning curve. But for now, let's take baby steps. Just put one leg in front of the other and proceed step by step."

Brent laid his mobi on the table before them and gestured for her to follow suit. She laid hers next to his.

Okay, what you need to get you started is a new search engine. It's called Hermes, after the ancient messenger of the gods."

"A messenger?" She thought of his work in information technology. "Is that your design?"

Brent's eyes lit up and he nodded vigorously. "You're quick on the uptake, Arielle. This bodes well. Very well, indeed."

"So we need to download the app, right?"

Brent raised his finger.

"First we have to install an app called Cookie Monster."

He must have seen her questioning look.

"It's an app that gobbles up any spyware on your mobi. Only then can we safely install the new search engine."

She nodded. Everyone had heard of spyware.

"So, we download that first, huh?" she queried.

"No. You see, we can't host any of these apps on official sites. They'd have our guts for garters."<sup>23</sup>

Brent picked up her mobi for a few moments and tapped away at the keyboard, then laid it back down; pulled a short lead from his jacket pocket and tethered the two mobis, and tapped one of the icons on his own device.

A couple of minutes later and a matching icon appeared on her own screen.

"Wordsworth?" she asked, bending forward to peer at the screen. "What's that?"

Brent explained that William Wordsworth was one of the great English Romantic poets of the early 19<sup>th</sup> century, something she'd be able to look up for herself in a few minutes. Then he removed the cable and gestured to her mobi.

She picked it up and tapped the icon and the app popped up. "WordNet dictionary and thesaurus?" she read.

"Type in any word or phrase and it will provide you with a definition, a list of words with a similar spelling, a similar meaning, and opposite meaning. Click on any of the words and phrases it highlights in blue, and it looks those up, too."

"But Novalis can do that in an instant," she remarked.

Again Brent tapped the side of his nose. "Oh ye of little faith," he laughed. "Don't do it now, because it's too early for you, but if you have two phones tethered and type in the word 'pandora'<sup>24</sup> it will transfer a copy of Cookie Monster and Hermes

<sup>23</sup> Would be punished severely.

<sup>24</sup> In ancient Greek mythology, Pandora was the first Earthly woman. She was created by Hephaestus on the orders of Zeus, and Zeus gifted Pandora with



onto the other device.”

“A-ha!” she nodded.

“You could liken the process to a friendship cake,” Brent reliably informed her. “You mix up a cake with flour, water, and dried yeast. That makes a starter, and you can instead use some starter that a friend has given you, and you pass on some of this starter to other friends for their own use. That’s why it’s called a friendship cake.

“Then you add sugar, eggs, vegetable oil, baking powder, salt, cinnamon, vanilla, and raisins, and bake it in an oven.”

Brent smiled, and took a long swig of his lager.

“But anyhow, I’m digressing. Back to the app. So, why don’t you type in the words ‘open sesame’, instead?”

Brent explained that the phrase had its origins in an eastern tale about someone called Aladdin who used the magic words to open the mouth of a cave in which the forty thieves, whoever they were, had hidden all their treasure. He had to spell the second word.

“Open s-e-s-a-m-e” she typed, and Brent assured her that the phrase would not be stored in the list of recently-typed words on the device, so it was safe.

As she hit [Enter], the Wordsworth app disappeared and another appeared. It was just a text input box and a clickable microphone icon as an alternative, with a rotating green and blue globe of the earth beneath it.

“Now we’re cooking,” Brent beamed at her, his eyes twinkling in the warm light, and rubbing his hands together.

“Type anything that comes into your head,” he suggested, which was not much help at all, really.

“Who was that guy you quoted who said people don’t know what they’re missing?”

“That would be Iain McGilchrist,” he nodded:

“I’m trying to help people see something that our way

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a box. Unable to avoid the temptation to look inside the box, she opened it and all the world’s evils were released. So Pandora’s box brings about troubles and misfortune, but it also contains hope, which remained in the box when it was opened.

of thinking now has excluded from the mental realm and therefore from the fulfilment of a life. The thing is that you don't know what it is you're missing if you only see things in a certain way ...”

“Thanks.”

“But that can wait for now. How’s about you begin with Plato’s allegory of the cave? Because that’s where we are right now. It may not mean much – if anything – to you now, Arielle, but given time, you’ll come to see its relevance.”

She looked puzzled. “But I have no network signal, so it’s not going to do anything right here, right now, is it?”

“You now have access to a local network,” Brent replied, pointing out the tiny icon at the top of her screen, “and they have global access.”

“Oh, wow. I hadn’t noticed that.”

She typed in “plato’s cave” and a few seconds later up popped a whole list of possibilities.

“I’m spoilt for choice,” she remarked, in astonishment. “All these different entries.”

“Each one a different site,” he pointed out.

“I had no idea, and Novalis certainly didn’t let on.”

“Exactly,” Brent nodded. “Everything you know about the world, beyond your limited personal experience, gets funnelled through agents like Novalis. And remember that Novalis has been deliberately programmed to not let on. You’re only fed information that the Beloved Leader wants you to have access to.

“But anyway, let’s refine the search, to home in on useful material about Plato’s cave. Type in the word ‘xyzy’<sup>25</sup> followed by a colon and ‘plato’s cave’. You can use it as a prefix to any question you might want to ask.”

“Why xyzy?” she wanted to know.

“Because, rather than just producing any old search results, to Hermes, ‘xyzy’ with a colon after it is a code word, another magic word, if you like, that directs all queries to our very own

<sup>25</sup> It was originally a magic word from a computer text adventure, *Colossal Cave Adventure* that a player could type in to instantly move to another, distant location in the game’s many labyrinthian “rooms”.

dynamic, interactive learning materials. So, instead of Novalis answering your questions, Hermes does. Or at least his big brother, who's hosted in a rack of web servers somewhere, does."

She typed in "xyzzz:plato's cave" and after a few seconds the list of documents was replaced by a web page, and it was even headed "Greetings, Arielle. It's great to have you onboard!" How cool was that.

"So, does Novalis have access to these pages?" she wanted to know. "Surely not, or they'd have closed them down years ago."

Brent shook his head. "Not on your life. The pages are encrypted, and decrypted by Hermes before being displayed. And in any case, they're hosted on an alternative system known as the Shadow that other search engines and agents like Novalis can't browse.

"And I hasten to add that Shadow is not the notorious Dark Web that hosts sites run by the criminal class and assorted perverts. Shadow is altogether more wholesome."

"But it's still illegal, right."

Brent shrugged. "So they say.

"But anyway, have a read about Plato's cave and see what you think."

"Who's Plato?" she wanted to know.

Brent laughed. "I know, you must have 1,001 questions you need to ask right now, and for every answer you find, ten more questions will raise their lovely heads. But bear with me. Just stick with the programme for a while and things will come together quite naturally.

"Once you've read this piece on Plato, you'll find that there's a whole course of programmed learning you can work your way through. You just type in 'xyzzz:athena'<sup>26</sup> and it will take you to the course materials and even remember where you're up to, and have a good idea about any difficulties you might have encountered along the way.

"If you can't recall the prompt, just ask a general question about study materials preceded by 'xyzzz' colon and Hermes will point you in the right direction."

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<sup>26</sup> Athena is the ancient Greek god of knowledge and wisdom.

She was about to ask Brent who Athena was, but caught herself in time and bit her tongue. Of course, she'd have to find answers to these 1,001 questions herself, and in her own time.

"But, of course, we're getting ahead of ourselves."

"Back to Plato's cave," she remarked. "Call me slow, if you like, but I eventually got the message."

"Back to the cave," he concurred. "In fact all these things, all the distractions and sideshows, kind of prove Plato right."

"As a justifiable aside though, Arielle, you'll see that unlike Novalis, Hermes actually accurately cites its sources, so if you want to carry out your own further research, you are easily able to do so."

## Scene 9:

# The Allegory of Plato's Cave

Arielle turned her attention to the piece on Plato's cave. It was lifted from a short monograph titled "Suhrawardi's Illuminist Rescue Plan" which told her precisely nothing, and written in April 2024, long before the original Beloved Leader's coup, by some man or woman using the pen-name Etienne de L'Amour, a name that sounded too contrived to be real.

"In Plato's allegory of the cave, a number of prisoners have been imprisoned since childhood in a cave, chained so they cannot move, nor turn their heads, so that all they can see before them are shadows on a wall, and all they can hear are echoes around the cave's walls, that they take to be coming from the shadows. These shadows and echoes they take to be real, for they have known only these.

Let us say that one prisoner manages to break free from his shackles and looks around. He sees now that behind the prisoners is a raised walkway with a low wall, and that behind that is a bright fire. He notices that people walk behind the wall so that they do not cast shadows from the light of the fire, and that they hold aloft objects or puppets of men and other living things. It is these that cast shadows against the cave wall in front of the prisoners, and which the prisoners have taken to be real, just as they have mistaken the echoing voices of the puppeteers to be emanating from the shadow puppets.

This first escaped prisoner, then, tries to show the others the error of their ways, something which the academic researcher and writer Tianyi Zhang refers to as a *philosophy inside the cave*. He may try to convey this knowledge to those still held captive, though perhaps few will believe him and many will take him to be mistaken or even deranged.

Let us suggest, further, that a second prisoner breaks free of her chains, and discovers the reality of the immediate source of the shadows. However, she is not content with this, but looks beyond the wall and raised walkway. She spots a dimly-lit tunnel further back in the cave, and wanders through the cave to investigate. This, and the first prisoner's investigation Tianyi Zhang<sup>27</sup> refers to as the formal knowledge of the peripatetic philosophers.

Following the dimly-lit tunnel as it leads steeply upward, this second escaped prisoner approaches the entrance to the cave and is at first blinded by the light coming from outside the cave, but gradually her eyes become accustomed to the light and she begins to perceive more and more of what lays beyond the confines of the cave. At first she can see reflections of people and other living things in water, and as her eyes and perception become more accustomed to the light, she sees the people and objects themselves. Eventually she can see stars, the moon, and the sun; and now she sees the true source of the light, the sun itself.

Returning to the cave, this second escaped prisoner's eyes have difficulty in re-adjusting to the dim light inside the cave. When she tries to explain the reality of the prisoners' confinement and the true reality beyond even the cave, again few of the prisoners can even understand what she is telling them, let alone believe her; some note the apparent harm done to this second escapee's vision; some that she is mistaken; and some that she may even be deranged.

This second emancipated prisoner's philosophy, then, Tianyi Zhang refers to as a fundamentally superior *wisdom outside the cave*; that of Suhrawardi and Illuminationism. Like Suhrawardi, she can only hope that a few of those few who follow the foundational, investigative Peripatetic philosophy will notice and pay attention to her hints and 'twig'<sup>28</sup> that there is a yet more transcendent way of being, the Illuminationist, and that the philosophy behind it may be worthy of further, advanced study

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<sup>27</sup> See Tianyi Zhang, *A Philosophical Enquiry into the Nature of Suhrawardī's Illuminationism: Light in the Cave*.

<sup>28</sup> Understand or realize, usually after some time or initial difficulty, perhaps intuitively.

and practice, which has been termed deification. ...”

At length, Arielle spoke. “Well, I think I get the gist of this, Brent, and a vague feeling of how the allegory relates to our human condition – indeed to my own condition of hitherto blissful ignorance. And I can see now that I have so much more to learn, and – as you suggest – to unlearn.”

Brent patted her hand affectionately. “Yes, there’s a whole heap of work to do. And the intellectual effort itself is far from the whole picture, but at least it’s a start. A part of what the Sufi mystics call ‘learning how to learn’.

“However, this work – strictly termed self-work – goes far, far beyond that: from the basement into the stratosphere, in terms of consciousness, if you like; or from the basement into the dark depth of the psychic underworld, in terms of psyche.

“But there’s no rush. We’ll just take this one small step at a time over the coming months.”

“Months,” she echoed. It was a statement, not a question.

“Even years,” he nodded. “We have to be realistic, Arielle. There’s a long, hard slog ahead of us.”

Gosh. She hadn’t anticipated that.

“Forgive me, Arielle! I should of course have qualified my words and said: ‘If this takes your fancy.’ I should have asked if you are willing.”

“Well, thanks for being candid with me, Brent,” she acknowledged, removing her hand only to give him a friendly pat in return. “And yes, I am *very* interested in finding out where all this may lead.”

Whether by accident, intuition, or design, Brent actually *had* read her right. Maybe her other ongoing studies would have to be put on hold, though.

“And, for my part, I should have asked you if you think I have a chance of succeeding, and if you are willing to help guide me in these studies, Brent. Am I made of the right material?”

Brent’s eyes sparkled. “Beyond a shadow of a doubt,”<sup>29</sup> he beamed.

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<sup>29</sup> Having no doubt at all that something is true.

The young man casually glanced at his watch, and she said yes, maybe it was time they got home, and that it had been a wonderful evening.

Brent nodded. “As Thomas Anderson rightly told Tiffany in the 2021 film *The Matrix Resurrections*, “This is the best thing I’ve done in a long time.”

Arielle was astonished. “How on earth do you know all these things?”

“Oh, you just soak it up as you go along,” he shrugged.

Then: “Okay, so one last thing before we go. Many moons ago – or once upon a time, if you prefer – there was a massive online encyclopedia called Wikipedia. I’ll leave you to look that up.

“Wikipedia was most likely the greatest encyclopedia in history with well over 20 million articles – though admittedly, being edited by thousands of users just like you or me, it was not 100% accurate. Many of the editors were, however, subject experts, or else they knew how to find reliable sources of information about and from the subject experts.

“Sadly, one of the previous Beloved Leaders had the site shut down shortly after her rise to power – a loss as great, perhaps, as the burning of the ancient, fabled Library of Alexandria. And yes, you can look that up, too.

“Thankfully for us, however, we managed to get a snapshot of its content just a few days before it was unplugged. And that massive archive, along with what content we could salvage from the equally doomed Internet Archive, has been preserved and is still available to Hermes.”

Arielle stood up, about to leave when a thought struck her and she sat back down again. Brent followed suit.

“Something up?” he asked.

“Well, yes. I still don’t know what to do with that speech by the Beloved Leader, but in my excitement it slipped my mind.”

Brent stroked the stubble on his chin. “Well, it seems to me that you have three choices. One, to leave the line as it is; two, to remove it; or three, to replace it with the original. But that third option could get you in deep trouble.”



“The original, you say? I don’t have that, and why would it get me into trouble?”

Brent rose to his feet again. “I’ll send you a link that you can safely open in Hermes. I think you’ll find it self-explanatory.”

“Thanks,” she said as she got up and they headed to the stand to retrieve her coat. “I guess I’ll just have to learn to be patient.”

Brent nodded. “Definitely, Arielle. Patience is the first order of the day, followed by a gradually increasing trust.”

As they were leaving and Brent was helping her on with her coat, she happened to remark: “We must do this again.”

“Indeed,” Brent replied. Then: “How often would suit you?”

“I work a rotating stint of seven days on, three days off, so I’m sorry, I can’t give you a fixed day of the week.”

“How’s about the evening of the last of your seven days, then?” he enquired. “That way you have time to digest what we’ve discussed, and follow up with your own research.

“You’d have to keep me briefed on what day that would be, however.”

She nodded vigorously in agreement. “That sounds fine by me. And thank you.”

“You’re most welcome, Arielle, and thank *you*.”

## ACT 2

“Any one who has common sense will remember that the bewilderments of the eyes are of two kinds, and arise from two causes, either from coming out of the light or from going into the light.”

~ Plato, “The Allegory of the Cave”, *The Republic*.

# Scene 10:

## Spare Time

It was late by the time Arielle got back home, and she was still feeling a little squiffy from the drink, so she made herself a hot cocoa and went straight to bed. Fortunately, James was feeling better now, so he'd be back in work the next day, and she had two days off. So the link that Brent was sending her could wait.

In fact, until the drink wore off, the report would have to wait, and she'd quickly remote edit and approve it in the morning, then hit the town to do some much-needed shopping. Her larder – well, the double-doored cupboard over the sink in the corner of the bedsit, and her small refrigerator, to be precise – were rather bare. Her mother would have said that they were looking sorry for themselves.

The night flew past and before she knew it, her mobi was beeping to wake her up. Thankfully, she'd remembered to mute Novalis, or he'd have been at it already, before she'd fully returned from the Land of Nod, enquiring about her plans for the day and making his own unsolicited suggestions and recommendations. With her life so thoroughly regulated at work, she could damn well make her own choices out of hours, thank you very much.

Arielle slapped her temple with the palm of her right hand. "Idiot!" she chastised herself.

Brent had suggested that she keep a journal of her dreams from now on, as soon as she woke up. You just typed in "xyzzzy:diary" and up it would discreetly pop. Seems like they had thought of just about everything – whoever "they" were. She still didn't know the name of the bistro that Brent had taken her to.

But anyhow, she'd clean forgotten about the journal, and by now, though she knew she'd had a wonderful dream about sitting

by the ocean with Brent, the details had already largely evaporated and gently blown away, and try as she might she couldn't conjure them up again.

Okay, so maybe she should add "self-discipline" to the other required ingredients – patience and trust – that Brent had mentioned.

And at the next meeting, it was her turn to pay. She'd expected the waiter to come along and for him to tap his card, but instead he'd used his mobi. You just typed in "xyzzymoney", authorised the pending transaction, and it was sorted. They didn't use regular credits, though: between themselves they used a complementary or alternative decimal currency called "staters" in exchange for community goods and services. A copper stater was equivalent to one tenth of a credit; a silver stater to one credit, and a gold stater to ten.

The fun part was that when you joined the community, you were gifted a hundred staters to start you off, and you could also exchange credits and staters,<sup>30</sup> though only through the community treasury, to ensure that you left no incriminating digital "paper trail". So, all this was both exciting and disturbing at one and the same time.

After an obligatory coffee and a cool and invigorating shower, Arielle grabbed some breakfast and checked her mobi. Brent must already be up and about because when she checked "xyzzymessenger" as he'd advised, she saw that he'd just sent her a message as promised.

She clicked the link and it opened up a page in Hermes.

The page was simply headed "The Beatitudes", with "Matthew 5:3–12" written beneath that, and a scan or photo of a page from what looked like a very old book.

As she began to read the text, a shiver ran races up and down her spine and the hairs on top of her head felt like they were standing on end.

3 Blessed are the poor in spirit: for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.

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<sup>30</sup> Named after the silver and gold coins used in ancient Greece.

4 Blessed are they that mourn: for they shall be comforted.

5 Blessed are the meek: for they shall inherit the earth.

6 Blessed are they which do hunger and thirst after righteousness: for they shall be filled.

7 Blessed are the merciful: for they shall obtain mercy.

8 Blessed are the pure in heart: for they shall see God.

9 Blessed are the peacemakers: for they shall be called the children of God.

10 Blessed are they which are persecuted for righteousness' sake: for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.

11 Blessed are ye, when men shall revile you, and persecute you, and shall say all manner of evil against you falsely, for my sake.

12 Rejoice, and be exceeding glad: for great is your reward in heaven: for so persecuted they the prophets which were before you.

This, then must be the original passage from which the verses in *The Gospel According to Prosperity* had been taken. But while the Beatitudes were so full of hope and grace, the meaning of the verses from which the Beloved Leader had quoted was altogether changed, to the point of – what could she call it ...?”

°Perversity,° chimed in an inner voice.

Yes, she nodded to herself. This was a perverse parody of the original. For goodness' sake, what could the Beloved Leader have been thinking to have included verses from that diabolical text? Was the Leader simply being foolish, or was she an adherent of the Prosperity gospel?

“Blessed are the wealthy, for theirs is the kingdom of influence” was bad enough.

Was she incorrectly judging the Beloved Leader and her possible motives? Or had AI, or some other external agent, injected those verses into the transcript and then decided, perhaps,

that the second verse, “Blessed are those who persecute for the sake of dominance, for theirs is the kingdom of victory”, was going too far?

Arielle closed Hermes and went to make herself another coffee, not so much because she needed another drink, but to give her the time and space to think.

She was in two minds.

On the one hand, she thought, pursing her lips, she could reinstate that second grotesque verse and leave it to the readers’ intelligence, discernment, and sentience to arrive at their own conclusions, which would perhaps not cast the Beloved Leader and her regime in a favourable light.

And on another hand, she was reminded that Brent had strongly advised her to continue to lead a normal life and not to draw attention to herself.

She was also reminded that “Ministry operatives must not make ripples, let alone waves.”

The first was what she would like to do, out of a duty to the truth, and admittedly out of sheer mischief. And the second was what her dear, dependable mother would have advised.

°Don’t rock the boat,° her inner voice offered.

Yes, that sounded like sage advice.

In the end, after a little more toing and froing, she established a remote connection into the office, deciding to keep the slightly less malign first verse, which was perhaps sufficient of a hint for the more sensitive readers, but to not reinstate the second verse, and hit [Enter].

That was it then, she concluded, getting up from the table to check what provisions she’d have to buy-in.

# Scene 11:

## Study Time

On her way to the shops (since she'd be in a rush to get frozen goods into the freezer on the way back), Arielle took a detour down Sycamore Street, out of curiosity, then headed down Grape Lane until she came to the approximate spot where the entrance to the bistro was located.

She could have sworn that the number of the building was 43, but when she got to that spot all she could see was an old wooden door, its once-white gloss paint yellowing, grimy, and peeling off, and two heavily-barred and now boarded-up windows to the left of the door.

She checked the street map on her mobi to see if there were any flags and names in the vicinity, but the whole lane was empty, as if it had long since been abandoned and was by now a candidate for demolition and redevelopment.

How odd.

On the off chance, she rapped loudly on the door with the stiff, verdigris-covered brass door knocker which was shaped like a hand, and she waited, before repeating her knock, but there was no reply – not that, by now, she was expecting one.

Oh well. She turned around, retraced her steps, and headed for the shops. Perhaps Brent would have answers to this minor but perplexing mystery when she next met up with him.

“Oh, shit!” she uttered involuntarily as she turned the corner, nearly knocking the woman over. It was Millicent Brightwell, and she was one of the last people she wanted to bump into right now, especially right here.

The woman leapt aside, just before they collided.

“Well, that's a fine way to greet a friend, I'm sure!” huffed Millicent.

“Sorry,” Arielle replied, adding a feigned lilt to her voice.

Millicent peered down the narrow, dingy lane and turned back to Arielle. “And what on Earth were you doing down there?” she wanted to know.

She was momentarily at a loss for words.

°Short cut!° insisted an inner voice.

“Oh yes, I was just taking a short cut,” she nodded, hoping that Millicent would not probe further and ask from where.

Or decide to try it out herself, only to find that it led to a dead end. Perish the thought, Arielle Appleyard, perish the thought.

Thankfully, Millicent seemed satisfied, and after exchanging pleasantries and idle chitchat they parted and went on their way.

Had Mizz Millicent Brightwell known the origins of names like “Grape Lane” she would have been disgusted and, in spite of that, word would quickly have spread through the Ministry faster than the speed of sound. Arielle had looked up the name in the old Wikipedia archives and had been shocked that way back in the dim and distant past, there had been many such places named “Gropecunt Lane”, due to their use by ladies of ill-repute; but as the word “cunt” had since become an even more vulgar word, they had later been renamed.

~~~~~oOo~~~~~

Once all the shopping had been safely stowed away and she was settled back in the bedsit, Arielle made herself a cup of tea and brought her computer out of hibernation. Few people these days had what her father termed “proper computers” anymore, but she much preferred a bigger screen and a full-size keyboard.

Her father still remembered old-fashioned “qwerty” keyboards,<sup>31</sup> and couldn’t get used to the “newfangled” models (let alone voice commands), because he found that his fingers hit all the wrong keys and he easily got flustered and tongue-tied. Father was a dedicated two-finger typist, but he could nevertheless type at speed, mostly by “feel” without having to concentrate on the keyboard.

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<sup>31</sup> An obsolete typewriter keyboard in which the keys for Q, W, E, R, T, and Y are the first six from the left on the top row of letter keys. The system was originally designed for still older mechanical typewriters with typebars that struck the inked ribbon to make marks on the paper. This arrangement helped to reduce the risk of adjacent typebars jamming together.



Perhaps the only reason Arielle didn't like dictation was that she hated the sound of her own voice. Apparently that's a common trait because we don't hear our own voice in the way other people do. We feel our own voice vibrating the bones of our skull, as well as hear it. Well, that's what her father had suggested, anyhow.

Like Brent, her father was a rich mine of arcane information; most of which was, however, sadly well beyond its use-by date.

It was at this point, of course, that Arielle realised her mistake: that she couldn't access Hermes on her own computer, and certainly should not attempt to do so, for reasons of security. So she put her computer back to sleep, muted Novalis, and tapped away on her mobi.

After a few fumbled attempts, Hermes guided her to the study materials. She made a mental note of the word "athena", but thought it wise to not write it down.

"Walls have ears," as an ancient framed poster in the bistro had warned, while the one beside it read "Loose lips sink ships." Brent had told her that they probably dated from the 1940s at the time of the Second World War.

After a welcome screen, sketching an outline of the course, there were a couple of short explanatory passages:

## Scatter

“We will be employing a technique termed “scatter”, rather than presenting the materials in a logical and systematic A–Z fashion as one might in a modern Western school, and this is in part so that the picture presented to the student – composed of a constellation of minor impacts – is not brought into premature but incomplete focus, which might lead to him or her settling for the comfort of a stunted psychic development the result of premature ‘paradigm fixation’.



*Figure 1: What do you see?*

Since once you've seen one coherent image or gestalt, this can make it more difficult to unsee that and see further alternatives or additional dimensions."



*Figure 2: What else do you see?*

Then she was again presented with the passage about Plato's cave as an introductory text, and she carefully read through it a second time. She soon discovered that if there was a word she did not understand or know enough about, like "Illuminism", up popped a definition – or even a tailor-made elaboration – without having to leave the page or open up another tabbed page or app. And after reading a passage you could also ask your own question and receive a response, though not always the response you were looking for or might expect. As well as being the goddess of knowledge and wisdom, it seemed to her that Athena could also be something of a trickster.

Having said that, she still wasn't that sure what mysticism had to do with their current predicament, of which she was only vaguely aware at an intellectual level – or could do to alleviate or transcend their predicament – beyond the possibility that mystics like Suhrawardi had an overview of what was going on down here, for cavewomen like her, and had the wherewithal to guide people out of their subterranean lairs. And then again, perhaps she'd inadvertently partially answered her own question?

After that came three basic questions that she had to answer to assure herself and the system that she comprehended what she'd just read. As the welcome page had stated, this is how the programmed course of learning worked.

Okay, so she made a small but silly mistake there, due to her own impatience, and the interactive system immediately came back with a response and a correction. She mentally slapped herself on the wrist.

One good thing was that she was free to work at her own pace, at times that best suited her. Well, that was what she initially assumed, but was quickly proven wrong. The more Arielle learned, the more she realised that there was so much more that she didn't know, and just *had* to find out. The same thing happened whenever her hand found the cookie jar, except this was about craving lots of new and different things to eat.<sup>32</sup> Until just the other day, that possibility had not arisen in her mind, and

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<sup>32</sup> That reminds me of "The Story of Mushkil Gusha", remover of all difficulties.

she'd been quite content for her private life to go on as it always had. But things had suddenly changed, and now she just couldn't get enough. She began to appreciate now why Brent had spoken in terms of months and years of study ahead of her. Indeed, she could quite imagine that she had a whole lifetime's work ahead of her – if not more, if such a thing were possible – and still remain, in absolute terms, an ignorant dullard.

After the passage on Plato's Cave, came a page containing a single quote:

## Limitations of the Left Brain

“Almost a defining characteristic of the left hemisphere [of the brain] is that it has no sense of the limits of its own understanding: it doesn't know what it is it doesn't know. It operates inside a framework [a paradigm or closed system], within which all questions are referred back, and all answers form part of a reassuringly familiar schema; if they don't, they are simply pronounced nonsense. But it doesn't see the bounds of its own world view; in order to do that, it would have to see there is something beyond the bounds – and that is something it cannot do.”

~ Iain McGilchrist, *The Matter with Things: Our Brains, Our Delusions, and the Unmaking of the World* (2021).

Well, there was another piece that seemed to chime with the ideas behind Plato's cave, but this time it didn't come from ancient Greek philosophy but 21<sup>st</sup> century neuroscience and psychology. Quite clearly Arielle Appleyard doesn't know what she doesn't know, either, she laughed.

She followed up on the title of the book and asked Hermes if he had it in his archives, but Athena interjected and suggested that she instead initially read through the 10,000-word essay *The Divided Brain and the Search for Meaning*.

Athena explained that they had a wide and vast range of material to cover, and she didn't want Arielle to get herself lost among the many glittering sideshows, or down some dark, labyrinthian rabbit warren. McGilchrist was an important voice, Athena told her, but he was one of a great many in what she termed their “invisible college”.

Maybe later, if that suited her tastes, she might read the much longer *The Master and His Emissary: The Divided Brain and the Making of the Western World*. But, likening *The Matter with Things* to crawling through a quadruple marathon, she'd have to

get into some serious training, and have a better sense of where she wanted to take her studies, before tackling that massive two-volume work.

In the end, Arielle decided that maybe she'd be better holding off on extracurricular reading for now, because the way things were going, she could pile up a wish list of half a dozen books at a time before she'd even managed to work her way through the first.

She ran that past Athena and Athena agreed that this was the most sensible way to go about things. Better perhaps to stick to sampling the many delicious foods on offer, for now, rather than overface herself, and decide against study; and then choose what to dig into with relish at a later date. However, Athena emphasised that didn't want to exert undue influence on Arielle's decisions.

Tapping the [Forward] button on the page, next up was a piece about disenchantment. Again, there was a clickable link at the bottom of the page so she could read more deeply into the subject if she so wished.

## Disenchantment and the Loss of Purpose

“With the rise of our technological consumer society, collectively we have lost a sense of the sacred purpose and the encompassing spiritual context of life. We have lost the awareness that human lives are rooted in a deeper reality transcending concrete individuality, an insight that was fundamental to most civilizations, and that gives to human existence a more deeply sustaining sense of meaning and purpose. Although the material conditions of life have improved beyond measure, as a culture we have now come to believe that the universe in which we live is soulless, meaningless, and without purpose. And this disenchanted vision is seen not merely as one possible view of reality, but as an incontestable objective fact supported by science — as the true understanding of the way things really are.”

~ Keiron Le Grice, *The Archetypal Cosmos*.

Arielle was just about to move on when Hermes chipped in: “They do say that all work and no play makes Jack a dull boy. Or in this case makes Arielle a dull girl. So, if you’re up for a little fun, why don’t you take a minute or two out of your studies and message Brent?”

“About what?” she wanted to know.

“It’s getting on for lunch-time,” he replied, and she glanced at the time. How it had flown.

“And?”

“And ask him if he has any plans for this evening.”

“Gosh, I don’t like to put on people and make them feel like they’re obliged to find time for me.”

“Nonsense,” Athena interrupted. “And if you need any help composing messages, then I’m sure that your office assistant



Hermes would be only too glad to help.”

“Oh, no. No. No. I’m more than capable of making my own gaffes, thanks all the same. Let’s not complicate things.”

“Okay,” Hermes replied. “But remember that my door is always open. Feel free to call me up day or night.”

Arielle opened up the messenger and hesitantly tapped away at the keys and [Backspace] until she’d crafted a text that would pass muster. She pondered over whether to add a couple of throwaway kisses on the end, but decided that might send all the wrong signals.

Drawing a deep breath, she tapped [Send] and immediately switched back to the course materials. Out of sight, out of mind, as her dear mother would say.

~~~~oOo~~~~

Arielle was just about to make some belated lunch, having lost track of time yet again, when her messenger sounded and she dashed across to the table to answer it.

Since she couldn’t see who was calling her, and it might be a spam or scam call, Arielle waited a few moments before answering, but then said “Hello?” without giving her name.

“Hi, is that Arielle? It’s me, Brent.”

Arielle’s heart skipped a beat. “Oh, hi! I didn’t expect you to get back to me so quickly, and call me on the phone.”

“Not a problem, is it?”

“No, not at all, Brent: it’s great to hear from you.”

“So what’s your plan for the day?”

“Well, I was just going to fix myself a quick lunch.” Then: “But I have no plans. Whatever suits you best.”

“Go to the window.”

Though unsure of the reason, she complied, and went over to peer outside.

“Oh, gosh!” she laughed, seeing Brent standing outside her door, and now waving at her. He was wearing dazzling patterned sweater that day under his black jacket and trousers.

She skipped to the door, trying to compose herself as she went; and opened the door to let Brent in.

“Hi!” she grinned, standing back to let him enter the room.

Then, noticing the clothes slung over one of the armchairs and catching sight of her uncombed hair: “Sorry about the mess.”

Brent smiled and leant forward to kiss her lightly on the cheek, and she involuntarily stepped back, then caught herself in the act and reached out to gently squeeze his arm by way of consolation.

“So, are you ready?” Brent wanted to know.

“Ready for what?”

“Ready to hit the big wide world. Well, maybe the city. Tomorrow the world.”

Then: “Is there any place you’d really like to go this afternoon? And evening, if you like. I’m free for the rest of the day.”

She was feeling a little flustered now, and Brent must have realised, because he backed off slightly, and visibly relaxed.

Arielle spread her palms. “I really have no idea, Brent. As you can probably tell, as an adult I’ve led a sheltered life. Maybe you could surprise me, like you did last night.”

Brent went over to the armchair by the window and sat down. “Okay, Arielle. There’s no rush. I’m ready when you’re ready. Then we’ll hit the town.”

She grabbed her bag and rooted out the brush, then went over to the mirror hanging on the wall to tidy up her hair. As for the little makeup that she ever wore, that would do for now.

“What’s it like out now?” she asked, more out of nervousness, since she’d been out shopping not so long ago.

Brent glanced at his mobi. “Weather forecast looks clear today. I’d suggest wearing something light on top, though. It’s pretty warm out now, but there’s a bit of a breeze off the sea.”

“Right you are,” she replied then asked: “So, where are heading today?”

“Somewhere you’ll enjoy. Just wait and see.”

“And I guess if I went back there tomorrow, that place would be all shut up, too, just like the bistro we went to last night.”

A broad smile crossed Brent’s lips, and he laughed. “Would it now?”

Then, “As they say: ‘the secret protects itself’.”

Arielle sighed. “But I thought, or at least hoped, that I was on the team now.”

Brent reached his hand up and gently stroked her upper arm for a moment. “It’s not that we are – not that I am – hiding anything from you, Arielle. As one of the teachers on the way once wrote:

“Many things which are called ‘secrets’ are only things withheld from people until they can understand or effectively experience them.”<sup>33</sup>

“In fact, it’s not even a matter of us ‘withholding’ anything from you. It’s all to do with perception.”

“Or lack of perception, clearly.”

Brent stroked her arm a second time. “Now, don’t go beating yourself up about it, Arielle. It’s early days, as yet.”

“But can’t you just explain this phenomenon to me, Brent?” she asked him.

Brent smiled and shook his head. “That’s not indicated at this stage, Arielle.”

“So, you don’t trust me – is that it?” She was mildly offended.

“I know I’m a handful, but try to be patient with me, Arielle,” Brent replied. “And rest assured, the time will come when all is revealed. As they rightly say: ‘She who tastes, knows’ – meaning that this is all down to gaining the necessary experience.

“As one of our forebears wrote, quoting the mystic, Rumi: ‘The degree of necessity determines the development of organs in man... therefore increase your necessity.’

“Rumi was talking about latent, undeveloped, organs of higher or subtle perception.”

“Ah, I see,” she replied, though perhaps that was an overstatement.

“You will see,” Brent replied. “There are few certainties in life – with two or three notable exceptions – but of this I am certain.

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<sup>33</sup> Idries Shah, *Learning How to Learn*.

“Remember what the study materials said about premature but incomplete focus?”

She caught his eye; then, feeling a little sheepish, lowered her gaze. “Sure. At least I remember now, thanks to your nudging me.”

“It’s all ‘grist for the mill’<sup>34</sup> as they used to say, or manure for the soil,” Brent nodded. “Don’t worry: it’s all good.”

“But ‘manure for the soil?’” she pondered.

Brent let out a little laugh. “In the olden days, on farms, the animals were fed off the land, and they excreted onto the land. So the farmers would collect all this excrement – this manure – and spread it on the land to feed the plants, thus completing one of the natural cycles of life.

“That’s good so far. Except that cows fart a lot and the methane they emit is a particularly potent greenhouse gas. But then, we all have feet of clay,<sup>35</sup> and frequently miss the mark.<sup>36</sup>

“All the same, you get my drift.”<sup>37</sup>”

“So, none of are perfect,” she mused.

“It depends who you ask,” Brent replied. “Some say that God is perfect and the mystic who has fully surrendered their ego to God is ‘completed’ and that their choices and actions are perfect. Others point out that anything that comes into this mortal coil, this abode of decay, suffers from ‘Earth sickness’ and degenerates. Others even say that God is wounded and needs us to help Him as much as we need Him, or Her. Still others, for example in the field of depth psychology, see the impossibility of achieving perfection and instead aim for ‘wholeness of being’.

“And, of course, the vast majority of people believe that all this stuff is just ignorant, primitive superstition; the same people, that is, who will walk round, not under, a ladder for fear that some bad luck might befall them; the same people who will say ‘everything’s going well, touch wood’ – and actually do so, if

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<sup>34</sup> Everything can be made useful, or be a source of profit (broadly speaking, not financially).

<sup>35</sup> A weakness or character flaw.

<sup>36</sup> The Greek word for “sin” is *hamartia*, an archery term for “missing the mark.”

<sup>37</sup> Get the general idea; see what I mean.

they can find any real wood in their home – to express a hope for their good luck to continue.”

“They can’t all be right!” she laughed.

“Well, we don’t have to take their word for it. It’s up to us to gain the necessary experience and then we don’t need opinion, and we don’t need to believe, because we know, and we have developed an infallible intuition.”

She thought Brent meant intuition, but it sounded more like inner-tuition to her.

°Sounds right, either way,° her inner voice prompted.

“There’ll come a time when all these things fit together neatly, like a jigsaw puzzle – or, at least, part of a jigsaw puzzle,” Brent added.

°You heard the man,° the inner voice concurred, adding for good measure: °and haven’t I been telling you the self-same thing for years? Yet now, for some mysterious reason – perhaps related to female hormones – you suddenly take heed. Go figure.°

Ouch! Now that was totally uncalled for.

By this time, she’d cleared away the breakfast pots and utensils, found a thin, green woollen cardigan, and grabbed her bag and her UniPass (which served, among its many other functions, to lock and unlock the front door).

“Okay, I’m fit if you are,” she said, and Brent rose from the chair and followed her outside.

There was already a shiny orange cab waiting for them as they left the narrow alleyway between the houses and emerged into the street. Brent was a deep and thoughtful kind of guy.

It was one of the works cabs, reserved for public service employees, she thankfully noted, so it wouldn’t cost them an arm and a leg.

“The chief lets us borrow the departmental cabs,” Brent assured her, as if in answer to her unvoiced question. Clearly, Digby Jones was a breed apart from old “Crusty” Henderson, who was a stickler for rules, regulations, and the utmost propriety. Well, except when it came to womanising, or at least so rumour had it; not that it was wise to trust Martha Heppinstall’s idle tittle-tattle. It wouldn’t be the first time that the woman had been

mistaken and ended up with egg on her face.<sup>38</sup>

“After you, mademoiselle,”<sup>39</sup> he invited her, gallantly standing by the open slide door and waving her in.

“So, where are we headed?” she wanted to know.

The robo-chauffeur had just begun to answer, as they sometimes had an annoying habit of doing so, without being specifically addressed as “driver”, but Brent cut it off mid-sentence and closed the perspex slide window behind the driver’s seat to give them more privacy.

“Somewhere nice and relaxing,” the young man winked, and would say no more.

Much as she liked surprises, there was another part of her that always wanted to know the details – answers to all those questions buzzing round in her head like who, what, when, why, and where – questions she often asked as a journalist but perhaps out of some deeply-ingrained need for control. Still, in this case she felt that she was in safe hands and there could be no harm in not knowing.

°Chill out, sister,° the inner voice encouraged her, though in a friendly tone that indicated that all was well.<sup>40</sup>

For the first few minutes, Arielle peered out of the cab’s window, making a mental note of the junctions they crossed, and the turns they made as they crossed the city, though resisting the urge to pull out her mobi to track their progress. But after a time, having been engaged in conversation with Brent, she gave up and allowed herself to simply “go with the flow”, as Brent himself had advised her only the other evening.

The next thing Arielle knew, they’d entered a long, dimly-lit tunnel, and when they eventually emerged from the far end, they were out of the city and in the countryside. She’d never been this far, at least not in this direction before. Indeed, by now she hadn’t got a clue which direction that might be. Few everyday working people ventured out of the cities these days.

And then Arielle saw it over the crest of a series of steep

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<sup>38</sup> Ending up looking stupid; being embarrassed.

<sup>39</sup> An old French name for a young and unmarried lady; madame being used for older or married women.

<sup>40</sup> Chill or chill out: An informal way of saying “relax”; stay cool.

hills: a wide coastal plain in the foreground and beyond that, a vast expanse of ocean as far as the eye could see.

She let out an involuntary “Wow!”

“Just wow!” she repeated, clicking the switch to wind down her window and getting up on her seat and stretching to look out.

And boy, for the first time in as long as she could remember, she breathed in fresh air. Real, fresh air. They were still some way off the coast, but the cool, refreshing air must have been blowing in off the sea, because she could swear that it had a salty tang to it.

Brent leant forward, tapped on the perspex divider, and slid it open. “Let’s have the top down, driver,” he requested of the robo-chauffeur, and almost immediately, the top of the passenger compartment began to slide backwards and down behind them, and the cool air was now rushing past them as they sped toward the coast.

Brent breathed in deeply. “That tang? That’s the salt.”

“And the unmistakable aroma?” she asked.

“Beats me, Arielle, but there must be a reasonable explanation for it.”

Before Brent had suggested it, she had her mobi out and opened up Hermes.

“Well, that’s quite a surprise,” she noted. “I can even get a network signal out here in the sticks.”<sup>41</sup>

Brent pointed to the sky. “StarNet,” he informed her.

“Ah, you mean satellites?”

He nodded and she tapped in a query for Hermes, and shortly after, an old page from a site called the BBC popped up.<sup>42</sup>

“Ah, here we go, Brent:

“Saltwater by itself doesn’t have any smell, but the things that live in it certainly do. The rather stale, sulphury smell is dimethyl sulphide, produced by bacteria as they digest dead phytoplankton. At low tide, you’ll also smell chemicals called dictyopterenes, which are sex

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<sup>41</sup> An undeveloped rural area.

<sup>42</sup> Short for the British Broadcasting Corporation which provided ad-free radio, television and online material as a public service.

pheromones produced by seaweed eggs to attract the sperm. And on top of all this is the ‘iodine’ smell of the sea, which is actually the bromophenols produced by marine worms and algae.”

“Lot of long words I don’t understand, but I get the gist,”<sup>43</sup> Brent nodded, peering over her shoulder. Indeed, he was so close that Arielle could feel his warm breath on her neck, and the manly scent of deodorant.

“But anyway,” he said, nudging her right arm and tapping her lightly on the side of her head. “Put your mobi away and switch off your analytics. We’re here to savour the atmosphere, see the sights and enjoy one-another’s company, not to collect data and process information.”

“Does not compute,” she replied, mimicking an old-fashioned robotic voice, though these days you could hardly tell the difference between real voices and AI voices, except perhaps faintly unnatural gaps between the words, and emotional subtleties. She laughed: at herself as much as anything.

Once across the coastal plain, with its multi-coloured patchwork of fields and narrow, winding, tree-lined and hedged-in roads, they began to descend.

Inevitably, they went through yet another area of forestry or woodland that had been razed to the ground by a wildfire, though Arielle was gladdened to see that there were already signs of new growth as dear old Mother Nature set about her repairs. Brent pointed out that ferns were among the first to regrow after a fire, and there were some plants, like the fire lily with quick-growing, hollow but strong stems, that were actually encouraged to flower after exposure to smoke, while still other trees germinated far better after fire.

“Every cloud has a silver lining,” he concluded; an old folk saying that she remembered, as a child, her dear mother sometimes uttering.

At length, the cab pulled into a rough area off the road at the bottom of a hill. It must have once been metalled, but now the

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<sup>43</sup> Get the general idea.



ground was rough and bumpy, and nature was already well on her way to reclaiming the land.

“The country and seaside were once more popular,” Brent explained. “A lot more people lived here, or made day-trips and even took long holidays. It was fun, relaxing, healthy. Well, it still is, really.”

He waved his hand across the clearing toward two other solitary vehicles some distance away. “This was once a busy car park, would you believe, but as you can see, it’s not much used these days. Which is also a blessing, since we’re not competing for space and attention with hordes of other people. Those times were long gone before even our mother and father’s time.

“Grocks: that’s what they used to call us.”

“Grocks?” she enquired.

“Tourists; sightseers; holidaymakers,” he explained. “Some of the country and townsfolk didn’t take that kindly to outsiders: intrusive and ignorant ‘city slickers’ like us, with all our newfangled gizmos, pushy attitudes, and strange ideas.”<sup>44</sup>

“Ignorant?”

“Ignorant of the old and much quieter, traditional ways of living,” he elaborated.

Brent slapped his thigh, as if to snap out of his reverie. “But anyway, looking on the bright side, which is always advisable: it’s possible that they might welcome our presence.

“And not least our custom,” he added, holding his hand out and rubbing his thumb and first two fingers together. There wasn’t a living soul who could remember using old paper or even plastic currency, but this was still a universal, vestigial sign for money.

“Money, and love of money, still makes the world go round,” he added.

“What did we do before money?” she wanted to know.

“Way, way back, people would barter their goods and services,” Brent told her. “You fix my fence and I’ll give you a spring lamb or a bale of hay, or a keg of ale.”

<sup>44</sup> Newfangled: Modern, as opposed to old and traditional.

Gizmo: Devices and equipment whose name and purpose are perhaps unknown.

Then: “And barter still goes on in some quarters, among friends, the criminal underworld, and even the more privileged, believe it or not. It’s a lot harder to tax and apply fees to barter and to the black market, since it bypasses official channels, and flies under their radar.”

Again Brent slapped himself, and, calling to the robo-chauffeur to open the doors, they stepped out. Like her, Brent could go on all day, once his passion for a topic dear to his heart was aroused. In her case it was, sadly, topics that aggravated her mind that were more likely to be verbalised, and in no uncertain terms.

“Anyhow, enough talking the talk,” Brent decided on their behalf, which she didn’t at all begrudge, as he headed round to her side of the cab and loosely looped his arm in hers. “Now’s the time to walk the walk.”

Not far down a dusty track that led away from the car park through the trees, they began to slowly descend, and as they turned a corner, Arielle could see a beach and the water gently lapping at the edge, ahead of them.

She pulled free of Brent’s arm and skipped off down the dirt track and her feet touched golden sand. She spun round as best she could in the soft sand, her arms outstretched in sheer joy.

Seeing Brent tugging off his boots and socks, she followed suit, and she was just about to dash down the gloriously warm sand and paddle in the sea, but Brent reached out and held her back.

“I know: it’s an innate urge ...” he sighed, his words trailing off.

“... but the water’s not safe, is it?” she said, completing his sentence.

Brent shook his head. “Sadly not.”

Yes, she’d been warned, even as a young child, and even though she’d never had the opportunity to visit the seaside.

Brent pointed to a large, concrete-covered pipe some way off their left, running down the beach and into the sea. Then to a bright yellow buoy bobbing gently up and down in the water, well out into the crescent-shaped bay. “That’s the end of the pipe,” he

informed her, “and that’s where all the sewage from the city is pumped out. Whether it’s still treated, or now raw, I have no idea: with no free press, and no accountability, they don’t report on such things anymore.”

“Free press?” she queried.

“That’s another sad story for yet another day,” Brent smiled, pulling out a thick blanket from his shoulder bag and spreading it out on the hot sand for them to lay down on.

He rummaged in his shoulder bag and tossed a plastic tube in her direction and, though momentarily off guard, she caught it in mid-air.

“First things first,” he advised.

It was sunscreen lotion and, already beginning to feel the effects of the strong sun, she applied it liberally to her neck, face and, having taken off her thin cardigan, to her exposed arms.

“Got anything else in that ubiquitous holdall of yours?” she laughed.

Brent held his finger up, as if to say “hold on” and rummaged inside. “Now that you mention it, I most certainly have,” he nodded, bringing out a silvery object that she recognised as a cooler bag. You filled it, charged it up overnight, and it would last through the whole next day.

He unzipped the bag and handed her a plastic can.

“Tiger!”

“And there’s more,” he added, tossing her a NutriBar. “Sorry it’s not much, but it will fill us up and keep us going for an hour or so.”

“You really have thought of everything, haven’t you,” she smiled with genuine admiration. She was definitely getting to like this guy, and the pleasantly squiffy feeling she got when she was in his company, to which the Tiger lager was a lesser, but nevertheless welcome bonus.

They lay or sat there for maybe an hour as the incoming tide slowly but surely crept up the beach to within a metre-or-so of their feet, just chatting about this and that of no particular consequence, and revealing a little more to each other of their past lives and what made them tick: the feelings, opinions,

concerns, childhood experiences; etc, that made them who they now were.

Arielle didn't often get the chance to talk about her own background, and certainly wouldn't divulge anything beyond the basic facts to anybody at work – well, the one notable exception to that rule were her frequent chats with her dear friend, Sharon. Whatever became of that dear lady was a mystery, and a perennial source of worry and regret.

But given the opportunity to actually chat with Brent at both deeper and more personal levels, and without the slightest whiff of dismissal or judgement, was a pleasing and rewarding experience for her. And hopefully for him, too.

Unlike Brent, she'd been born in a small community in what was once said to have been a market town. Over the years, though she was too young to have seen this happen or take it in, her parents and grandparents had watched as more and more of the green belt and brown sites around both town and city, and many smaller hamlets, had been denuded and levelled to make room for more and more houses and industry, until eventually the little town had been annexed and later swallowed and assimilated into the city.

She came from what had once been a skilled working class<sup>45</sup> family, her forebears being master weavers (hence the surname “Weaver” in their family tree), but with the coming of the Industrial Revolution and steam-driven machinery (so she now gathered, with thanks to Hermes), they began to find their skills, and consequently their social status and pay being more and more eroded. And what had been a relatively comfortable life gradually gave way to poverty and subsistence. The final straw came, however, with outsourcing goods and services overseas in countries where labour costs were at that time even lower. Of course, that playing field had since been largely levelled as the cost of living and wages rose in these developing countries, but by that time, many industries in the original countries had been mostly obliterated and could not be easily resurrected.

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<sup>45</sup> Americans would say middle class, though in England (as here), there are criminal class or underclass, working class, middle class (including professionals), and upper class (executives and nobility).

Brent had told her that the same sort of thing had happened in many towns. Small, independent, family businesses had once been prevalent in towns, and there were many “corner shops” at the end of residential streets, but as new “chain stores” moved in, the smaller shops could not compete and many were forced out of business.

Later, large shopping centres were set-up out of town, mainly catering for people with their own cars (though there were also bus shuttle services), even driving some of the older chain stores out of business.

Later still, online shopping had killed off the once-vibrant high street, Brent had told her.

Then, of course, came the coup; the Beloved Leader’s rise to power; and the rise of the greedy feudal lords of corporate fiefdom.

And, like so many, her own family had been driven not by desire but by sheer necessity to migrate to the cities to find even menial work.

She had wanted to ask Brent, and eventually plucked up the courage:

“Is it just me who has a tendency to bring conversations around to such negative topics?”

He shrugged. “It could be that, we have to admit,” he had told her. “But moreover, it could be that you’re just becoming sensitive to the way things really are – to just how bad things are for us beleaguered human beings – and, like me and so many others, that you’re doubly frustrated at not as yet being in a position to actually do anything constructive about it.”

Then, on a brighter and more vibrant note: “But fear not. We’re going to show them that there’s still life in old dogs, and that we really can be taught new tricks!”



Before the tide rose much higher, Brent advised her that it was time to pack up their things, and they headed along the beach toward a small harbour and houses, still chatting away. She could see that it wasn’t just all the study material that was a bottomless purse that kept filling up the more you took from it, so were they

as human beings, tiny and apparently insignificant in the grand scheme of things as they may be.

They were far more substantial on the inside than they might at first appear on the outside; at least to the casual observer.

“You know, they say that outer space is the final frontier,” Brent remarked when she voiced this possibility, “but I would say – and certainly the studies will back me up – that inner space is equally vast and ultimately unknowable, and perhaps our final, much less explored, and potentially much more fruitful frontier.”

Hermes reliably informed her later that the phrases “Space: the final frontier” and “to boldly go where no man has gone before!” were spoken as part of an introduction to episodes of the original 1966–1969 *Star Trek* science fiction television series. Maybe some day she’d get to watch these old movies and TV shows, if they still had them archived. Wikipedia was great as far as it went, but she wanted to see these things, these bygone eras, in full and moving colour, and up close, for herself.

As they approached the old harbour, which was sadly falling into a state of ruin, and saw what little remained of the formerly many little wooden fishing boats or cobs, as Brent called them,<sup>46</sup> Arielle marvelled at his in-depth knowledge of the area.

“Welcome to sunny Brighthorpe. This is my parents’ home ground,” Brent explained. “And that of our forebears going back at least five generations, before my parents and my elderly, widowed grandmother moved to the city.

“As an aside, many of the locals of bygone times were also involved in smuggling contraband as a sideline to boost their meagre income.

“Anyhow, it was clear to my parents by then that times and circumstances had changed, and that the family’s – indeed, the whole close-knit community’s – traditional lifestyle of fishing for cod and herring; laying traps for crabs and lobsters; mussel and winkle picking; knitting woollen clothes; weaving; pottery, and other craftsmanship was essentially doomed.”

“Oh, Brent,” she sympathised, reaching across and tenderly stroking his arm as they walked: “that is so sad.”

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<sup>46</sup> A small flat-bottomed fishing boat suitable for launching from a beach.

He sighed deeply. "Sad, but true."

Then the young man chirped up. "*And* nevertheless," he beamed. "Had it not been for my parents' taking to the city and bringing me into the world, I would most likely never have found out and become involved with the Resistance movement."

"And you wouldn't have met me," she laughed out loud, then quickly corrected herself in case that came across as vain. "And I wouldn't have met you!"

"And I wouldn't have met you," he nodded earnestly, stroking his stubbly chin. Then, perhaps picking up on a thought that lingered in her mind, as if plucking it out of the ether:

"Please don't conflate the two. Is that the right word? I mean, yes I am deeply dedicated to the Resistance, and to the Work, *and* that doesn't mean that I value your companionship any the less."

"You can't compare apples to oranges," she suggested. "Well, at least beyond the fact that they're both nutritious fruit. Oh, you know what I mean."

Again Brent nodded and hooked his arm in hers once more. "Yes, I know exactly what you mean, Arielle."

Then: "Anyway, that's more than enough about me."

They left the beach at this point and walked up a shallow cobbled slipway from which the smaller boats were once launched, then across an open space and up the main street past a long row of tiny cottages. Then, reaching a junction, they turned right down a narrow cobbled lane and stopped in front of one of the quaint, though weather-beaten and careworn cottages.

"Well, that's it," Brent lamented.

"That's what?"

"My family's ancestral home." Then: "You know, I have this pipe dream; that some day when I draw my retirement pay – assuming I last that long, and they don't start disposing of all the old folk – I'd like to buy the place back and enjoy my last days here. Either that or live by a lakeside."

She took one last look at the cottage as they moved on, thrilled to see the garden at the front of the cottage in full bloom, ill-kept, wild and overgrown as it was.

"You know, that's not such a bad dream, to have, Brent. I can

think of a hundred and one worse ways a person could spend their retirement.”

A little further down the narrow lane, Brent drew her to one side, through an open green doorway and into a small room. A wooden sign hanging above the door on the way in read simply “Aunt Mai’s Tea Room”.

There were four small tables dotted around the room and a bench seat in the bay window, and across the far side there was a counter. As they approached, she could see that the old display cabinets on top of the counter were largely empty, perhaps a remnant of a bygone age when there was more custom.

There was a large, polished brass bell on the top of the counter, and Brent gave it two loud pings. Shortly after, a rather rotund lady with a cheery face and a pink apron came through from another room and appeared behind the counter.

“Yes, my loves. What can I get you?”

“Do you still have sandwiches and cakes?” Brent enquired.

“I can easily make some up fresh,” the lady offered, “though all I have in right now is bacon, iceberg lettuce, and tomatoes. If you don’t mind waiting a few moments while I prepare them, that is.”

“That would be wonderful,” Brent nodded after checking with Arielle. “We’ve got plenty of time.”

“What about drink, Arielle? Tea or coffee?”

“I’m easy,” she replied.

“And so am I,” he smiled, not that this solved the matter. “You choose.”

“A nice, refreshing cup of tea would be fine by me.”

Brent turned back to the lady. “A pot of tea for two, then, please.”

“Certainly, sir; madam,” the lady beamed, bowing her head slightly to each of them in turn, and went off into another room to prepare their order while they took a seat in the sun in the bay window. The windows were open, and they could smell the scent of the nearby flowers on the light breeze that wafted into the small room.

She leant across the table and whispered in Brent’s ear. “And



will this charming cafe still be here if I return on my own?" she asked him.

"Most certainly," Brent nodded reassuringly. "As long as the village can generate sufficient income to make it worthwhile running."

"Again, I can think of worse things to spend time on in later life," she reflected. "Make a helluva change from proofreading and copyediting news reports for the Ministry, or training and monitoring AI."

"It would that," Brent readily agreed.

When the tea and sandwiches arrived, Brent took the lid of the teapot and stirred it, then left it for a while to brew, while he added milk to the cups.

"Well, you learn something new every day," she laughed. "Being an ignoramus, I've always added the milk first and brewed the teabag in my mug."

Brent shook his head. "If you brew the tea in a mug, add the milk last.

"And, anyhow, it's better to *unlearn* something every day."

Brent also pointed out that this was brewed using loose tea leaves, hence the need to pour the tea into the cups using a tea strainer, like a tiny sieve, so that the fine leaves didn't get into the cup.

Pouring a little of the tea into his own cup, and seemingly satisfied, he filled the cups and passed one to her, along with the sugar bowl.

"Ah, a lovely cup of tea, even if I do say so myself," he lilted. "Just what the doctor ordered."

"Snap!" she smiled. "I was just about to remark that that's exactly what my dear mother would say."

"Our parents had good taste, Arielle."

She raised her cup and gently clinked it against Brent's.

"So, we're fit," Brent said, putting down his cup, spreading some salad cream<sup>47</sup> onto his sandwich and tucking into it. As for her, she instead chose tomato ketchup.

"Mmm. Home-baked bread, too, if I'm not mistaken," Brent

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<sup>47</sup> A creamy and cheaper substitute for real mayonnaise.

enthused.

“There’s something wrong with a society, though, where it’s cheaper to ship produce around the world and purchase it in a store than it is for a person to simply buy the raw ingredients and make it themselves.”

“Speaking of which,” she spoke up: “it’s my turn to pay for this delicious meal.”

Brent leant over and whispered in her ear. “You do realise that they won’t take ‘funny money’ here, don’t you?”

“Sure, I worked that one out all by myself, Mister,” she replied impishly. “And it’s still my turn to pick up the tab.”

“There’s another factor that you may not have considered, however, Arielle,” Brent informed her: “As soon as you use your card, your location will be recorded, and that might cause us problems in the future. Trust me; let me pay.”

Well, you sure put your foot in your mouth there, sister, she chided herself. Then another thought occurred to her: “But surely, if you pay, your location will be recorded instead. And that, too, could cause us problems.

Brent winked at her. “Ah, you see. But I have a magical card. It’s in someone else’s name and any transaction I make will appear to have been made at some random cafe or shop back in the city.”

He held his hands up. “Don’t ask me how our friends manage to work such magic. All I know is that it works.”

“And ‘Aunt Mai’ still gets paid?”

“Yes,” he assured her.

Alas, though they had another long chat on the long drive home, punctuated with periods not of awkward silence but rather silent contemplation, Arielle had to bid *au revoir* to Brent.<sup>48</sup>

As they stood, a little hesitantly, on the threshold of her bedsit, she did pluck up the courage to invite him in for coffee, and for a brief moment she thought, and quietly hoped, that Brent would take her up on the offer.

Brent sighed and spread his hands in front of him apologetically. “I’m sorry, Arielle. I would love to come in, but

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<sup>48</sup> From the French: A farewell remark; until seeing one-another again.

it's getting late, I'm back at work tomorrow, and I have a report to prepare for a meeting with the chief in the morning."

She cast her eyes down, momentarily, unable to hide the disappointment that crept across her features, and of course Brent picked up on this immediately.

He reached out his hand and gently lifted her chin.

"Another time, though, Arielle. I promise. Thank you so much for your company."

That perked her up instantly. "Thank you, too, Brent. I haven't had such a wonderful time in many a year, and it's all thanks to you."

Brent stepped forward, clutched her hand and gave her a quick kiss on her cheek.

"The best is yet to come," he smiled, then spun on his heel and strode confidently off down the lane back to his cab, which was still waiting there to drive him back home.

# Scene 12:

## An Evening to Remember

Mid-afternoon the next day, Arielle received a surprise video call. She was more than happy to see that it was Brent, only this time it was he who appeared to be the more hesitant of the two.

“Hi Arielle. It’s me again. If it’s inconvenient, or if you feel I’m pushing too hard, too fast, just let me know: I won’t be offended in the slightest.”

“Hell no, Brent: it’s great to hear from you again. So thank you for your consideration, and please dispel such thoughts from your mind.”

It was a joy to see the apprehension lift from Brent’s face in real time.

“What can I do for you, Brent?” she enquired.

“Look, I know it’s short notice, but I’ve had a stroke of luck. Are you going to be free this evening?” He glanced down, possibly checking the time at the bottom of the screen on his mobi.

“Hang on a moment while I check my social calender ...” she said, then immediately laughed before Brent’s face dropped. “No, seriously: I don’t need to even look to see that my social calendar is currently completely clear for the foreseeable future. Yes, I know that is ‘sad’. I told you that I’ve been living a somewhat sheltered life, but even that is an understatement.”

“Just checking, but was that a ‘yes’ or a ‘no’?” Brent asked her.

“Yes, I’m free this evening,” she assured him.

“That’s excellent, because a friend has just had to pull out of an event and I’ve secured first option on a couple of tickets. But they have to be used this evening. There’s a long waiting list, so it’s something of a coup<sup>49</sup> to get hold of them and gain access.”

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<sup>49</sup> A brilliant and notable success, rather than a sudden and decisive change of

There was a slight glitch in Brent's voice as he told her this and, not that she minded in the least, she did suspect that Brent had already got hold of the tickets, and presumably already purchased them, in the hope that she'd say yes.

Only a manipulator would string a nice guy like him along, though. "That's great, thanks, Brent. What time would you like to meet up, and where?"

"How about seven o'clock at your place?" the man wondered.

"That's fine by me, though I'm open to meeting you anywhere.

"And do I need to get dressed up or anything?"

"No, Arielle. There are no dress restrictions."

"Could you be a little more specific?"

"Smart casual, maybe?"

"Okay, Brent. Smart casual it is, then."

"Brilliant. See you soon. Over and out." And with that, Brent terminated the video call and presumably went back to his work.

~~~~oOo~~~~

Brent was at her door on the dot of seven. Aware that it usually took her a lot longer to get ready than she'd planned, Arielle had made an early start, and for the last twenty minutes she'd been prowling the bedsit like a caged lion, watching for any movement down the lane. So, even before he'd reached out to tap the "bell" (actually a touch-sensitive pad) on the door, she'd opened it and, expecting resistance, he nearly fell inside the room.

"Come in, come in," she laughed, waving him inside; then paused. "Unless we have to get our skates on, that is."

Brent glanced at his watch, perhaps more out of habit than necessity. Chances were, he'd checked the time every five minutes after setting off from his place.

"No, there's no rush," he replied, and so she offered him a seat. Again, chances were that Brent had suggested such an early time to allow for any tardiness on her part. Seems like the man was a good judge of character, too. Or maybe he just knew a little about predictable but stereotypical tendencies among women folk. Guilty as charged, m'lord.

One of the first things she noticed was that, as ever, Brent was wearing a pair of jeans that looked, except on close inspection, just like a pair of black trousers, and a thin, patterned woollen jumper.<sup>50</sup>

Meanwhile, there she was wearing an ankle-length floral dress, with a frilly white blouse underneath, and she was now feeling somewhat overdressed.

She did think about changing – quickly changing – into something more discreet, but thought better of it, otherwise she might really make them late. What changed her mind was Brent standing back, checking her out from head to foot, and describing her as looking “stunning”. That was the kind of compliment that she so needed to hear right now.

At seven fifteen – on the dot, mark you – Brent rose to his feet and said perhaps it was time they were leaving. He was always so punctual, though in no way punctilious, while for her part she was far more vague and happy-go-lucky. “Around quarter past seven” or “seven fifteen-ish” was generally close enough for her. Well, except from the facial recognition clocking her in and out of work, that was. Old “Crusty” always made of point of checking their weekly attendance records. And if you were once late, he would check them every single day for the rest of the week.

“Positive thinking, Arielle Appleyard,” she repeated to herself under her breath as she headed back into the bedsit after a last-minute trip to the loo. “Positive thinking.”

“Ready?” Brent queried, though there wasn’t a trace of impatience or concern in his voice.

“Sure,” she said, pulling on her thin summer coat, picking up her UniPass and heading for the door.

“Sorry to keep you waiting: too much excitement for my bladder,” she added, and then wondered if, perhaps, this was too much information. She dismissed the thought and, when they’d both emerged into the lane, she locked the door behind her. The encoded password in the pass had something like four billion

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<sup>50</sup> A crocheted or knitted garment covering the upper part of the body. A jersey; a sweater.

possible combinations – which she figured was nerdy<sup>51</sup> overkill – and you only got three failed attempts before the system locked down for the next half hour, so it was pretty secure. If burglars had any sense, they’d ignore the doors and windows and instead burrow up through the floor or make a hole in the roof tiles and clamber down.

Again they crossed the city on foot, but this time in approximately the opposite direction to the route to the elusive bistro. It was a fifteen minute walk, so they arrived at the event by around seven thirty. Brent said that would give them time to down a swift drink and make their way to their seats.

Arielle didn’t see any long queues outside, nor more than a couple of dozen patrons inside, like them making last minute refuelling stops at the tiny bar not far from the plush entrance.

“What do they call this place?” she asked Brent as he knocked one shot back and gestured to the bar steward for a refill.

“The Odeum,” he told her.<sup>52</sup> “There used to be a whole chain of cinemas back in the day before colour television took hold and people began to stay at home to watch films, rather than venture out and have to pay. But this particular Odeum is one of a kind,”

“Aha! So we’re here to watch a film. How thrilling!” she enthused.

“A short film, a fifteen minute interval to powder your nose<sup>53</sup> or grab an ice cream, popcorn, or another drink – even all four – then the main feature film,” he explained.

“Which films?” she enquired, finishing her own drink at a more leisurely pace and politely declining a top up. The shot she’d had felt a whole lot more potent than the lager they’d had the other day.

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<sup>51</sup> Nerd: An intelligent but single-minded, perhaps boring or obsessive, student or expert in a particular technical field or profession.

<sup>52</sup> A kind of theatre in ancient Greece or Rome, smaller than the dramatic theatre and roofed over, in which poets and musicians submitted their works to the approval of the public, and contended for prizes; - hence, in modern usage, the name of a hall for musical or dramatic performances. The original chain of cinemas was actually called Odeon, not Odeum.

<sup>53</sup> Visit the rest room to relieve oneself and touch up one’s makeup and hair, with the help of large wall mirrors.

“Let’s wait and see,” Brent said, apparently reluctant to spoil the surprise.

Just to be on the safe side, Arielle visited the rest room, and as soon as she’d returned, they went to take their seats. It was only a tiny cinema, with room for no more than thirty seats, though Brent reliably informed her that there was another, similar auditorium showing another film on the floor above. An older male usher was there to check their tickets as they entered, but there was no real need to show them to their seats, and with only the three rows, arranged in a shallow arc and clearly marked A, B, and C, it took hardly any time at all to find their allotted places.

The first short film was to be an old black-and-white newsreel made by Pathé News for propaganda purposes during the Second World War, the usher informed them, going to stand in front of the screen before returning to start the projector, and it showed many scenes of happy-looking citizens going about their everyday lives in spite of all the bombings, hardship, and the rationing of food and other goods. With narration from a gentleman with a rather refined or posh accent, explaining each of the scenes which focussed on community spirit.

Brent cupped his hand to her ear and whispered something derogatory about the man’s “apper clarse twang”, but she was intent on watching the newsreel at the time and made no response.

So here we saw a milkman on his early morning rounds delivering milk in glass bottles and collecting the empties; a boy on a bicycle posting the morning newspaper through people’s letterboxes before going off to school;<sup>54</sup> the wooden stalls of independent market traders and farmers lining a bustling town square; both men and women working long hours in factories producing essential goods and munitions; neighbours getting together to clean up the debris from damaged houses, once the site had been officially deemed safe; men (but noticeably not women) enjoying a pint of ale in a nearby public house; women waving farewell to their gallant husbands and boyfriends as they caught a steam train taking them off to war. Most of all, she

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<sup>54</sup> Rectangular shuttered holes cut in front doors.



thought, it was a short, morale-boosting newsreel about the many unsung and very ordinary and neighbourly heroes and heroines of the day. People just like you and me.

Oh yes, it was certainly patriarchal and sexist judging by contemporary standards, but thankfully those days were long gone, and it was perhaps more acceptable than nowadays, because people in this bygone era simply didn't know any better.

During the intermission, Brent talked about the woman's suffragette movement at the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, in which they engaged in acts of civil disobedience and more direct action including bombing and arson, in their campaign for votes for women. That heralded the embryonic beginnings of women's liberation, though it wasn't until the 1960s with the burning of bras that women's rights became more mainstream.

And yet, given life as it was these days, under the Beloved Leader's iron fist, and the greedy feudal lords of corporate fiefdom, there was something to be said for life in these earlier and simpler times. Camaraderie,<sup>55</sup> especially, was something that was sadly lacking in this post-postmodern world in which so many people felt trapped, disrespected, alienated or abandoned. Or even all four and more besides.

After a few minutes the film ended, the lights went up, and half the audience made a bee-line for the bar, while she and Brent settled for an ice cream and a large carton of popcorn to share between them, and listened to the classical music being played over the loudspeakers to each side of the drop-down screen. It was only then that Arielle realised that there was a raised stage behind the screen, so perhaps they even hosted lectures and other performances. She'd have to ask Brent about that.

The ice cream already gone, and the carton of popcorn opened and at the ready, people had mostly returned to their seats, and the lights began to dim. The elderly usher stood by the entrance, patiently waiting for the last stragglers to resume their seats. Then, without further ado, he turned the lights down still further and walked across to start the projector.

Arielle had been offered a single page printed brochure as

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<sup>55</sup> The quality of affording easy familiarity and sociability.

they'd entered the auditorium and, glancing down the list of events planned for the month, with one new film and a lecture each week, she saw, much to her dismay that at the top of the list, and now sadly passed, was *The Matrix*. She'd come across that iconic film while searching the old Wikipedia site archived on Hermes, but had avoided reading through the plot, as Brent had warned her that wiki articles about books and films contained many uncensored spoilers. So instead, she'd searched for and read the film company's teasers, which didn't give so much of the game away. And here it was, printed on the month's schedule:

“When a beautiful stranger leads computer hacker Neo to a forbidding underworld, he discovers the shocking truth—the life he knows is the elaborate deception of an evil cyber-intelligence.”

Brent had seen the film no fewer than seven times now (along with the under-rated fourth film after the trilogy, *The Matrix Resurrections*). He had said that he wasn't so thrilled by what he called the “bullet time” – the action sequences – but he was very much taken by the overall concept and by the deep and meaningful philosophy. He qualified that by saying that you shouldn't take the theme too literally, but rather see it as a metaphor or allegory, just like Plato's cave, which she was beginning to understand but couldn't quit “grok”<sup>56</sup> to anything near the extent that Brent evidently could. Indeed, that was one of the main aims – and practical means or skills – of the “Big Game”, as he called it, and it kept them one or two steps ahead of the Opposition, these dogs of war, who were always yapping at the tail of the Resistance.

Arielle had also missed the film *Pleasantville* which had been shown upstairs the same week; not that she could have watched both films at the same time. Again, she was intrigued by the brief description:

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<sup>56</sup> Get the meaning of or understand, but in an intuitive or empathetic way, not through solely formal intellect (the aim being not one-sided but holistic); to establish rapport with. From Robert A. Heinlein's 1961 novel, *Stranger in a Strange Land*.

Two 1990s teenage siblings find themselves transported to a 1950s sitcom where their influence begins to profoundly change that colourless, complacent world.

Scanning down the page, she could see certain common themes emerging: *Virtual Nightmare*; *Equilibrium*; *The Thirteenth Floor*; *The Truman Show*; *They Live* ... All from the late 20<sup>th</sup> to early 21<sup>st</sup> century (though some based on novels from earlier periods), these had clearly been creative times.

“Those H-rated films are just the tip of the iceberg – the most visible and obvious part,” Brent had reliably informed her later, explaining that “H” stood for “heretical”. “There are a great many subversive materials floating around, if you know where to look: films, plays, books, poetry, videos, jokes, underground newssheets and magazines: you name it.”

But anyway, this evening they were here to see another film, *Fahrenheit 451*,<sup>57</sup> and she couldn’t resist the temptation to read the blurb:

In a terrifying care-free future, a young man, Guy Montag, whose job as a fireman is to burn all books, questions his actions after meeting a young woman – and begins to rebel against society.

Clearly, then, all these films – indeed maybe all the events held here at the Odeum – were subversive, and presumably furthered the cause of the Resistance. She quietly ran that past Brent and he said that the main aim was to provide – and exercise – a coherent alternative to the predominant worldview espoused by the Establishment, and by the materialists who believed in a dead and soulless, mechanistic universe where the only things deemed real were those that could be scientifically measured and categorized, or conveniently “pigeonholed”, and eagerly accepted, overlooked or ignored, simply not recognised,

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<sup>57</sup> Based on the 1953 dystopian novel of the same name by American author Ray Bradbury, where it is said that the paper in books burns at a temperature of 451 degrees Fahrenheit.

summarily dismissed, or deemed heretical “woo”.<sup>58</sup>

“Yes,” he said, “in a great many people’s eyes we are nothing but ignorant woo-mongers.”<sup>59</sup>

“I see,” she quietly nodded.

“In other words,” he whispered, “more than further the cause of the Resistance, such materials further the cause of Awakening to the Real; capital A, capital R.

“But anyway: let’s quit the jibber-jabber and watch *Fahrenheit 451*. Describing an orange is not the same as actually possessing, eating, digesting and assimilating the nutrients, Arielle – not to mention enjoying the texture, aroma, and taste. There’s no substitute for direct, personal engagement and experience.”

Then: “Well, I’d better qualify that remark: there are indeed any number of substitutes, but they’re not as worthwhile.”

And at that moment, the lights went down, the film began, and they dug into the popcorn.

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<sup>58</sup> Pseudoscientific, supernatural or emotion-based beliefs with little or no scientific or logical basis.

<sup>59</sup> From monger, meaning someone who purchases and maintains an inventory of goods to be sold. In the same vein as fishmonger; etc, but here the word is combined with -monger in a disapproving manner.

# ACT 3

“Most people are not just comfortable in their ignorance,  
but hostile to anyone who points it out.”

~ Plato, “The Allegory of the Cave”, *The Republic*.

# Scene 13:

## A Walk in the Park

It had been several days since she'd last seen Brent, though they'd exchanged chitchat in a few text messages, and she was missing him.

Brent had had to remind her that it wasn't mere chitchat or idle talk, and that she didn't have to come out with some deep and philosophical idea every time she opened her mouth; nor should she expect that of others. When questioned, however, he did reveal that though he engaged in everyday life in much the same way that others did, at the back of his mind he was quietly alert to higher or deeper possibilities most of the time, if not quite 24/7.<sup>60</sup>

Talking about her ongoing studies, Brent also advised her: "It's not just fact, you know; it's feeling."

When probed further, he said that the process gradually made what was initially unconscious, conscious – and in the early stages that meant dredging up all kinds of ignoble traits that had been lurking in the shadows, unnoticed. However, he emphasized the existence of the Golden Shadow, where we had interred many of our noble qualities, such as creativity, because they were discouraged or simply went against what he called the all-levelling norms of mediocrity. This, then, was the birth, or rebirth, of self-awareness; and, alas, of at times debilitating self-consciousness.

As well as making the unconscious conscious, there came what might be thought of as a later stage, although strictly speaking the two began, and progressed simultaneously, and that was making what was now conscious, unconscious.

She couldn't quite get her head around that, and he provided a couple of illustrations. Illustrations and practicalities always aided her understanding and helped her to assimilate and

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<sup>60</sup> 24 hours a day, seven days a week; pretty much all the time.

remember key concepts.

The examples he chose were learning to ride a bike, and to play the violin.

“When we first begin to learn these skills, we have to consciously concentrate sequentially or mechanically on moving the pedals, turning the handlebars and shifting our balance to the left and right. Or on holding down the right string and adjusting our bow to play the right note; then having to glance at the musical score looking for the next note to play, having to adjust the position of our fingers, and so forth. Every single note requires conscious deliberation and mechanical movement and, overall, nothing as yet flows naturally and smoothly. We’re wobbling on our bike and falling off again and again; we’re hitting the notes off-key, or sounding the right notes at the wrong interval.

“But, of course, with adequate tutelage from someone who has been through this process themselves, and is skilled at riding a bike or playing musical instruments, and with sufficient practice, our skill improves, and after a time, in the case of riding a bike we become proficient not only in that, but in handling real-life situations involving the rules of the road, pedestrians, other traffic, different weather conditions, repairs; and so forth: a whole bundle of interrelated and interconnected skills. And, in the case of learning how to play a violin, we become more and more proficient at playing other musical pieces and different styles of music, or even imagining and composing our own pieces.”

“With you so far,” she nodded eagerly, and she did speculate at that point, noting the elegance of his words, and the ease with which he drew them from his mind, or from the ether, whether he was “winging it” and making it up as he went along. Or whether he’d simply had this conversation with others before her. Or whether something in him, some unconscious part of him, was dictating the words to him, and he was simply the “front man”, the “spokesperson”, or the “mouthpiece” for something higher or deeper.

“Are you sure you’re still with me?” he asked perceptively, and she instantly snapped back into his presence.

“Sorry, I just drifted off into my own thought there,” she replied.

Brent just smiled and nodded knowingly. Then he must have had an inner prompting. “And that’s why neophytes, those who are just beginning to learn in Eastern traditions, are sometimes called ‘grasshopper’ or ‘butterfly’, or the phenomenon is referred to as ‘monkey mind’.”

Yes, she got that and averted her eyes out of sheepishness, but he reached out and gently raised her chin. “Nothing to be sorry about,” he smiled. “Just be here now, as best you are currently able to. They say that ‘Rome wasn’t built in a day.’ And conversely, it can’t be dismantled and rebuilt in a day, either – at least not safely.”

Then he added: “You know, there’s some merit in also taking up a discipline such as a martial art, where you can’t afford to drift off into the catacombs<sup>61</sup> of your mind ...”

He suddenly clapped his hands in front of her face and she nearly jumped out of her skin.

“... not even for a second.”

And in that instance Arielle felt something unusual. But then, just as quickly, it was gone, like an elusive word on the tip of her tongue.

“Okay, back to the bike and the violin.

“So what were once mechanical actions that involve logical thought processes, get shunted out of conscious awareness, which frees up our mind for other things to enter and to develop. What was once sub-conscious is made conscious, and what was once conscious becomes sub-conscious ‘second nature’ (or ‘original nature’, if you prefer). Answers come as if out of the blue, without apparent effort, but the processes are still taking place behind the scenes (though modified by familiarity with the materials), and though the enlightened mystic does not need a rationale, she can provide a rational explanation if that is required by others.

“At first this will reveal itself as sporadic inspiration, which

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<sup>61</sup> Underground tunnels with recesses where bodies were buried (as in ancient Rome).



becomes more and more dependable (given patience and trust) and, having set aside impediments such as vanity and pride, matures into serenity and quiet satisfaction, rising above emotion ('walking on water'), and intellect ('flying through the air')."

Brent laughed and gently slapped her arm. "So, there you have it in a nutshell, kid," he laughed. Then he added: "But take it from me that it's one helluva hard nutshell to crack ... until, like the squirrel, you develop the knack. You see, it's more about 'know-how' than 'know-what'. Know-how is like gold dust, while know-what is ten-a-penny."<sup>62</sup>

"And, then again, Arielle: you have to pan for gold dust or otherwise separate it from the earth, from the dirt, and you need to know where to look; it may need to be made molten and refined; poured into a mould; fashioned into coins or jewellery; and it may involve a change of owner.

"I won't labour the point, because analogies have their elastic limit, beyond which, if you stretch them, they snap.

"But ..." he began.

"... you get my drift," she laughed, completing his sentence.

"Exactly, oh one of bright prospects," Brent replied, and bowed his head a little. "You must be a mind-reader.

"Okay, so read my mind," he suddenly requested, pushing the tips of his fingers against his temples.

"A walk in the park," she laughed.

Brent's jaw dropped and he took on a look of incredulity. "Ho-ly shit!" he gasped. "Well, I'll be damned! How on Earth did you do that? So, let's go. This is most auspicious."

She tickled Brent in the ribs and he began to squirm, knowing full well that he was just kidding her.

He pulled away, unable to take any more, and leapt to his feet. "Seriously, that's a great idea; whenever you're ready. Your wish is my command, oh masterful one."

She'd already grabbed her bag and UniPass and was hovering expectantly by the door like an expectant puppy. All she lacked was an excitedly wagging tail.

Once they were outside, she took hold of Brent's arm as they

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<sup>62</sup> Cheap, like ten sweets or pieces of candy for a penny.

wandered off down the lane.

“So, tell me something, Brent. Where do you get all these curious sayings like ‘oh, one of bright prospects’ and ‘your wish is my command?’”

“As a kid, an old uncle of mine gifted me an ancient and massive copy of *A Treasury of Fairytales*,” he explained. “I’ll lend it to you, some time.”

“You remember things that far back?” she queried. She only had the one recollection from early childhood. She must have been very young at the time, because she recalled going from the kitchen to the living room carrying her potty, and her grandma, who was nearly as strict and hard to please as old “Crusty” had told her in no uncertain terms not to bring the thing, her potty, in there. Maybe events with a negative emotional content tend to be better remembered than other events. Or maybe that was just her own negativity.

“Chance would be a fine thing, Arielle. No, the honest answer to your question is that I’m still reading them. And enjoying them, I might add.”

It was quite a way to the park from Arielle’s bedsit, mostly because the neighbourhood around the park, though once predominantly working class living in low-cost housing, had become “gentrified”. That is, over time, anyone who had any money had bought (or rented-out) property there, driving up the house prices, and stores selling cheap goods had gradually been replaced by up-market boutiques, beauty parlours, and the like, until now only the gentry could afford to live there. The same thing had happened to villages within commuting range of cities, too, and where those who could afford to bought second, or even third, homes, driving out the younger locals who couldn’t get started on even the first rung of the home buying ladder. “Sad but true”, as Brent would say.

Brent snapped his fingers in front of her face.

“What’s up?” she asked, though she had a pretty good idea

“You’re brooding again,” he observed.

“Is it that obvious?” she wanted to know.

“Let’s just say that you had that vacant expression on your

face.”

“*That* vacant expression”, rather than “*a* vacant expression” told her that this certainly wasn’t the first time that he’d noticed.

°Hey, ease up on yourself,° the inner voice advised her, but in the heat of the moment, Arielle chose to ignore it.

“Sorry,” she sighed, stroking Brent’s arm with her left hand.

“No need to be sorry, Arielle,” he smiled as they walked on, stepping into the road to dodge a boisterous class of young schoolkids and their adult escorts heading the other way.

“It could be a lot worse,” he belatedly remarked.

Yes, it could indeed be a lot worse, but then they had the advantage of youth on their side.

“How’s that old conundrum go?” Brent added: “Is it better to be a young fool or an old fool?”

Brent stopped for a moment, his hand held high as if groping for something in the air almost within his grasp. “Ah yes! It was Harold Macmillan, a British statesman, who said: ‘It has been said that there is no fool like an old fool, except a young fool. But the young fool has first to grow up to be an old fool to realize what a damn fool he was when he was a young fool.’”

They both laughed; then, spotting a gap in the traffic, quickly crossed the road toward the stone archway and open wrought-iron gates leading into the park.

Arielle caught sight of someone out of the corner of her eye and, instantly recognising the person, she abruptly turned her face away and tugged at Brent to get him to walk faster as they entered the park.

Brent went along with her, asking her what was up only when they were safely inside.

“Ruddy Millicent Brightwell, that’s who,” she hissed as they continued to walk down the wide metalled path as it curved toward the central lake.

Brent appeared none the wiser. “Do I know her?” he asked, his brow furrowing. “Should I know her?”

Arielle deliberately slowed herself down and slipped into a relaxed stroll. “Just someone from the Ministry,” she replied. “And if you did know her, you *would* know her, and why it is I

was avoiding her.”

“That bad, huh?”

She shrugged her shoulders. “Well, to tell the truth, she’s not such a bad sort, but she is very pally with the departmental gossip. Word soon gets around, and I don’t like having to answer awkward and embarrassing questions, and overhearing rumours about me.”

“So I can imagine,” Brent said in a consoling tone. “Nothing travels faster than light, except gossip.”

For a moment, she had a fit of nervous giggles. “Did you just make that up?”

“I wish I had,” he replied. “It’s from *The Matrix Resurrections*. General Niobe introduces the new arrival, Neo (who has by then become quite famous), to Freya, a lady botanist, saying “I presume our guest needs no introduction”, and Freya replies that “Nothing travels faster than light, except gossip.”

“Ha-ha!” Arielle laughed.

“Tell you what, rather than keep you waiting another six months before the film comes round again at the Odeum, I have *The Matrix* on my laptop. I’ll send you a copy and maybe we could watch it together sometime?”

“Oh, yeah! That would be great, Brent.

“But when?” she probed.

“Any time, Arielle.”

“Any time soon?”

Brent hesitated for a moment, then committed himself: “Would this evening be too soon for you.”

“Not at all. Then it’s a deal?”

“It’s a deal,” Brent nodded, and they exchanged celebratory palm slaps. Then he gently steered her over to a broad area of long, daisy-speckled grass with a central flowerbed full of red, pink, yellow, and white in full bloom. They could spread a blanket and sit down in the shade of one of the small horse chestnut trees for a time and relax.

Spotting that there was a food stall open for business not far away, she checked with Brent, and dashed across to it during a break in custom; returning shortly afterwards with a burger and

cream doughnut each and a couple of small bottles of fizzy lemonade which were wonderfully cool to the touch.

They ate it virtual silence for the next few minutes and, spotting some cream from the doughnuts on Brent's chin, she fetched a paper tissue from her bag and wiped it away.

"Shall I compare thee to a summer's day?" he enquired out of the blue, and peering into her eyes, once they were again settled.

"Say again?"

It was Brent's turn to rummage in his shoulder bag, and he produced an old leather book. "It's a journal in which I've recorded some of the poems I've come across over the years," he told her. "That line was from William Shakespeare's Sonnet 18."

Flipping through the pages of the journal, Brent found it and read it out loud:

Shall I compare thee to a summer's day?  
Thou art more lovely and more temperate:  
Rough winds do shake the darling buds of May,  
And summer's lease hath all too short a date;  
Sometime too hot the eye of heaven shines,  
And often is his gold complexion dimm'd;  
And every fair from fair sometime declines,  
By chance or nature's changing course untrimm'd;  
But thy eternal summer shall not fade,  
Nor lose possession of that fair thou ow'st;  
Nor shall death brag thou wander'st in his shade,  
When in eternal lines to time thou grow'st:  
So long as men can breathe or eyes can see,  
So long lives this, and this gives life to thee.

"That's beautiful," she responded, "though I'm not sure I understand it."

Brent slowly shook his head from side to side. "Don't worry about understanding it right now, Arielle," he advised. "As Doris Lessing once wrote:

"Sufis do not pull apart a tale to find its meaning, but

cite the case of a child who has dismantled a fly and, left with a heap of wings, a head, and legs asks ‘Where is the fly?’”

“Instead, at least for now, quietly enjoy the experience.”

Again, Brent riffled through the pages until he’d found what he was looking for. “Here’s one that you can read out,” he said, and passed the book to her. “The poem on the right-hand page.”

“Oh, gosh,” she said: “Real joined up handwriting.”

“Joined up thinking, too.”

She took too large a swig of lemonade and let out a loud and unladylike burp. “Better out than in,” as my dear mother would say,” she remarked.

“Okay, if you are sitting comfortably, I shall begin,” she laughed. “Stanzas [‘Oh, come to me in dreams, my love!'], by Mary Wollstonecraft Shelley:”<sup>63</sup>

Oh, come to me in dreams, my love!  
I will not ask a dearer bliss;  
Come with the starry beams, my love,  
And press mine eyelids with thy kiss.

’Twas thus, as ancient fables tell,  
Love visited a Grecian maid,  
Till she disturbed the sacred spell,  
And woke to find her hopes betrayed.

But gentle sleep shall veil my sight,  
And Psyche’s lamp shall darkling be,  
When, in the visions of the night,  
Thou dost renew thy vows to me.

Then come to me in dreams, my love,  
I will not ask a dearer bliss;  
Come with the starry beams, my love,

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<sup>63</sup> More famously known for her Gothic novel *Frankenstein*; or, *The Modern Prometheus* (1818). She was married to (and faced scandal with) the English Romantic poet, Percy Bysshe Shelley.

And press mine eyelids with thy kiss.

She was about to pass the book back to Brent, but he held his hand up, palm facing her. "Your turn to pick one for me to read," he requested.

"What about 'Love' by Samuel Taylor Coleridge?" she asked. "Unless you think it's too long."

Brent took the journal from her. "One of the English Romantic poets," he nodded. "No, I'm more than happy with that choice."

He took a small gulp of lemonade and cleared his throat.

All thoughts, all passions, all delights,  
Whatever stirs this mortal frame,  
All are but ministers of Love,  
And feed his sacred flame.

Oft in my waking dreams do I  
Live o'er again that happy hour,  
When midway on the mount I lay,  
Beside the ruin'd tower.

The moonshine, stealing o'er the scene,  
Had blended with the lights of eve;  
And she was there, my hope, my joy,  
My own dear Genevieve!

She lean'd against the armèd man,  
The statue of the armèd Knight;  
She stood and listen'd to my lay,  
Amid the lingering light.

Few sorrows hath she of her own,  
My hope! my joy! my Genevieve!  
She loves me best whene'er I sing  
The songs that make her grieve.  
I play'd a soft and doleful air;

I sang an old and moving story—  
An old rude song, that suited well  
That ruin wild and hoary.

She listen'd with a flitting blush,  
With downcast eyes and modest grace;  
For well she knew I could not choose  
But gaze upon her face.

I told her of the Knight that wore  
Upon his shield a burning brand;  
And that for ten long years he woo'd  
The Lady of the Land.

I told her how he pined: and ah!  
The deep, the low, the pleading tone  
With which I sang another's love,  
Interpreted my own.

She listen'd with a flitting blush,  
With downcast eyes, and modest grace;  
And she forgave me, that I gazed  
Too fondly on her face!

But when I told the cruel scorn  
That crazed that bold and lovely Knight,  
And that he cross'd the mountain-woods,  
Nor rested day nor night;

That sometimes from the savage den,  
And sometimes from the darksome shade,  
And sometimes starting up at once  
In green and sunny glade—

There came and look'd him in the face  
An angel beautiful and bright;  
And that he knew it was a Fiend,



This miserable Knight!

And that, unknowing what he did,  
He leap'd amid a murderous band,  
And saved from outrage worse than death  
The Lady of the Land;—

And how she wept and clasp'd his knees;  
And how she tended him in vain—  
And ever strove to expiate  
The scorn that crazed his brain;—

And that she nursed him in a cave;  
And how his madness went away,  
When on the yellow forest leaves  
A dying man he lay;—

His dying words—but when I reach'd  
That tenderest strain of all the ditty,  
My faltering voice and pausing harp  
Disturb'd her soul with pity!

All impulses of soul and sense  
Had thrill'd my guileless Genevieve;  
The music and the doleful tale,  
The rich and balmy eve;

And hopes, and fears that kindle hope,  
An undistinguishable throng,  
And gentle wishes long subdued,  
Subdued and cherish'd long!

She wept with pity and delight,  
She blush'd with love and virgin shame;  
And like the murmur of a dream,  
I heard her breathe my name.  
Her bosom heaved—she stepp'd aside,

As conscious of my look she stept—  
Then suddenly, with timorous eye  
She fled to me and wept.

She half enclosed me with her arms,  
She press'd me with a meek embrace;  
And bending back her head, look'd up,  
And gazed upon my face.

'Twas partly love, and partly fear,  
And partly 'twas a bashful art,  
That I might rather feel, than see,  
The swelling of her heart.

I calm'd her fears, and she was calm,  
And told her love with virgin pride;  
And so I won my Genevieve,  
My bright and beauteous Bride.

They were both silent for a time after that, and Brent stowed away his book of poetry. Folding up the blanket, and returning it to his shoulder bag, they slowly made a circuit of the lake. They spent some time watching the ducks and the pair of white swans. One of the swans, whether mum or dad, led the way, with a string of signets following in its wake, and the other swan bringing up the rear, presumably keeping a watchful eye out for any stragglers or deviation from the planned course. Then they headed back to the entrance to the park before parting.

"I'll see you at seven," Brent promised as they stood under the stone archway, kissing her on the mouth and causing her heart to skip a beat. She turned away momentarily, then turned back and, her hands on his waist, she returned the kiss to his lips; then nervously broke away and headed straight home. A cold shower might be in order, she joked to herself.

°All thoughts, all passions, all delights, / Whatever stirs this mortal frame, / All are but ministers of Love, / And feed his sacred flame,° her inner voice reminded her.

# Scene 14:

## A Running Commentary

It was fun watching the film with Brent, curled up together on the settee with her head resting against his shoulder. They'd grown closer by now, she was becoming more trusting, and this seemed to be how their relationship should naturally progress. Well, there was no "should" about it: it just did, of its own volition.

Brent was quiet and appeared content to let the characters and the scenes do their own talking, and she was able to suspend her judgement and really get into the film; almost as if she were a part of it.

Brent had told her that they still had television in his mother's early childhood, though even then there was a lot of censorship. His grandfather had watched a lot of crime dramas, and he would provide a running commentary, pointing out all the plot holes and things that the characters had missed, which his mother found especially disconcerting, since this brought their attention back to the real world – well, the everyday world that people incorrectly called the real world, as opposed to fantasy – somewhat spoiling the fun for his mother and her two young siblings.

Brent gently nudged her, perhaps sensing that she, too, had drifted off, and she nuzzled her head against his chest and brought her attention back to the film.

They'd come to the part in the film that Brent had briefly mentioned a while back. Trinity had taken Thomas Anderson, the hacker known as Neo, to a hotel room, and it was here he was to meet the enigmatic character, Morpheus.

At this point, however, the Tiger beer having passed right through their systems, Brent paused the film and they both took a short bathroom break, took the opportunity to refill their glasses, then quickly settling down again, Brent unpaused the film.

This was a pivotal moment in the film, where Morpheus told

Neo about the matrix and about their human plight. Brent must have known the words by heart, because as Morpheus delivered his speech, Brent was silently moving his lips in sync. Well, people said that you learnt things by heart, but as Brent had pointed out to her the other day, this was simply rote learning – memorising facts and quotations by repetition – which involved the brain, rather than the heart.

In a sense, you might say that the target was the heart, all the same, because it was a means by which what was at first conscious and hesitant might be taken onboard and become unconscious, or subconscious, be assimilated, and become second nature.

Morpheus was addressing Neo now:

“The Matrix is everywhere. It is all around us. Even now, in this very room. You can see it when you look out your window or when you turn on your television. You can feel it when you go to work... when you go to church... when you pay your taxes. It is the world that has been pulled over your eyes to blind you from the truth.”

“What truth?” asked Neo.

“That you are a slave, Neo. Like everyone else you were born into bondage. Into a prison that you cannot taste or see or touch. A prison for your mind.”<sup>64</sup>

And then Morpheus offered Neo the choice of two pills, which he could take with a glass of water set on a small table between the armchairs in which they faced one-another.

She’d searched Hermes for mention of this, and according to the old Wikipedia archives, she’d discovered that:

“The red pill and blue pill are metaphorical terms representing a choice between learning an unsettling or life-changing truth by taking the ‘red pill’ or remaining in the contented experience of ordinary reality with the

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<sup>64</sup> *The Matrix* (1999 film).

‘blue pill’.”<sup>65</sup>

“You take the blue pill—the story ends,” Morpheus was saying now, “you wake up in your bed and believe whatever you want to believe. You take the red pill—you stay in Wonderland, and I show you how deep the rabbit hole goes. Remember: all I’m offering is the truth. Nothing more.”<sup>66</sup>

This, then, was the choice that Neo had to make; and – now with a growing realisation of the great risks – it was a choice that she had, perhaps, already decided to take, and with equal hesitancy, though in Neo’s case there could be no going back, whereas in her case, as Brent had reassured her, although later there would come a point of no return, she could still turn back, and go back to leading a supposedly “normal” life in “a mad, mad, mad, mad world”.<sup>67</sup>

In answer to a question about this, Brent had sent her a link to a book, along with a short extract that he’d highlighted in fluorescent yellow:

“[I]f you’re looking to me to give you a Red Pill to magically transport you to the *mundus imaginalis*, I’m afraid you’re out of luck. Red Pills are few and far between.” ... “However, ... what I can suggest is that much the same effect may be obtained by cutting down on one’s intake of Blue Pills, which are in far, far more abundant supply, sadly.”<sup>68</sup>

Brent had emphasised – again and again – that this kind of thing was to be taken as a metaphor, rather than literally; the unredeemed mind having an inveterate predilection for the latter.

“I cannot emphasise this strongly enough,” he’d told her,

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<sup>65</sup> The term “red pill” has been appropriated or hijacked by the politically right wing, alt right, far right, and conspiracy theorists, much to the dismay of the Wachowskis, creators of *The Matrix*.

<sup>66</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>67</sup> Derived from the title of *It’s a Mad, Mad, Mad, Mad World* (1963 comedy film).

<sup>68</sup> Professor Sheila Trelawney in H.M. Forester, *The Imaginal Veil*.

even though she was certain in her own mind, by then, that she'd truly grokked what he meant. And yet, she nevertheless proved him right, two or three times each week; and then that would get her brooding all over again about whether or not she was made of the right material for this lark. Of course, she was joking about the Work, which was of a serious nature; but carefree fooling around it most definitely was not, and she could certainly relate to the old saying that "If I wasn't laughing, I'd cry."

Brent took hold of her hand, instantly breaking her reverie.

"So, where are you at, right now?" he enquired.

She averted her gaze and turned back to the film.

"Sorry. I was just providing my own running commentary," she replied sheepishly. "In my own mind, if not out loud."

°Monkey mind,° piped-up her inner voice.

Okay, okay: I get it, she retorted.

All too soon, the film was over, and Brent stretched his legs and volunteered to make them a coffee – a large, strong coffee to counteract the effects of the beer they'd consumed. He couldn't be seen staggering down the lane from Arielle's bedsit. He knew the risks, and Arielle was getting an inkling of them.

"So, what did you think of the film?" Brent asked after they'd blanked the screen and settled back down to sip their coffee.

"Well, I know you said that you preferred the deeper, philosophical bits a lot more than the 'bullet time', and I enjoyed that, too, especially what Morpheus had to say, though I'm sure I must have missed most of the allusions, due to my ignorance of such things. But I actually quite liked the martial arts action."

He nodded. "I guess I've seen far too many old action films and my sense of taste has become jaded, Arielle," he replied. "I've seen so many films where they have gone overboard with the special effects. In real life, if there's a car crash, more often than not the thing just gets dented, or maybe flames flicker under the bonnet.<sup>69</sup> But in so many action movies, when there's a crash, the car performs somersaults and explodes in a huge ball of fire; sometimes as if they'd detonated a thermonuclear device.

"So, it makes a real change to watch a film with real depth.

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<sup>69</sup> The hood, under which is the car's engine.

*The Lord of the Rings*, too was full of epic battles with thousands upon thousands of participants. I guess that's just 'not my scene, man.' And who's to say that I'm right and other avid fans are wrong? It's more a matter of 'what floats your boat' – whatever suits you, excites you, or makes you happy. We're not a superior species in the Resistance, and we're common-or-garden folk at heart."

Brent was perhaps being deliberately self-deprecating, for her benefit.

"I was thinking of Morpheus being captured ..." she mentioned.

"Yes," Brent nodded, taking her hand. "We are taking great risks, and risks entail grave consequences.

"If we're caught, then we will be interrogated. Not by the local police but by the Ministry of Social Order, the MSO. And, unlike Morpheus who had the strength of mind to resist – or was at least rescued before he cracked – sooner, rather than later, we will end up squealing like frightened rats. We will be willing to say anything, and betray anyone, even family and our closest friends, for the torture to stop.

"Perhaps, in that regard, you might have a read of George Orwell's *1984*." The man paused to scratch the back of his neck at this point, momentarily lost in thought. "But then again, it may cause you to despair. Orwell was a social realist, and his work was not an optimistic one."

"There's an old poem by Longfellow that begins:

Under a spreading chestnut-tree  
The village smithy stands;  
The smith, a mighty man is he,  
With large and sinewy hands,  
And the muscles of his brawny arms  
Are strong as iron bands.

"Orwell's book offers a rather different and tragic verse, which refers to the Chestnut Tree Café, where rebels or lovers meet:

“Under the spreading chestnut tree I sold you and  
you sold me:

There lie they, and here lie we  
Under the spreading chestnut tree.”

That brought a tear to her eye for some inexplicable reason,  
and she quickly brushed it aside.

“Should we take precautions?” she asked Brent at length.  
“And what precautions might we take?”

Brent took a swig of his coffee, and again clasped her hand.  
“Everything thus far has been relatively safe,” he attempted to  
reassure her.

“Well, except for the trip to the bistro; the Odeum; H-  
registered films;<sup>70</sup> and Tiger lager, you mean,” meaning that she  
was not thick.

“Yes, Arielle, I shouldn’t have tried to sugarcoat the truth.  
That was remiss of me.”<sup>71</sup>

Brent held his hands up in front of him. “In fact it was more  
than remiss of me. I guess I strayed from our code of conduct and  
you got carried along with me. You could say it was a dereliction  
of duty on my part.”

A terrible thought came over Arielle at that moment, as if  
she’d just picked-up on something in the atmosphere between  
them. She clutched Brent’s hands.

“Brent? Brent!” she gasped, and she could feel her face  
reddening and her heart thumping away in her chest.

The man looked like he’d come to a decision. “I’m sorry,  
Arielle: there’s no easy way to say this ...”

“That says it all, really,” her inner voice cut in, even before  
that very thought had crossed her mind.

She let go of Brent’s hands and slumped back on the settee.

“You’re saying this is over, aren’t you?” she sighed.

“I’m sorry, Arielle. I should have stuck to the script and not  
allowed myself to get carried away.”

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<sup>70</sup> H stands for Heresy, and such materials are strictly banned.

<sup>71</sup> Coat with something sweet, such as a hard sugar glaze; cause to appear  
more pleasant or appealing.



She sat up straight now.

“But, don’t you see: I want you in my life, Brent, and I want to be a part of the Resistance.

“I know the risks, or at least I’m learning about them, and I’m more than willing to take those risks.

“How’s the idiom go? I’m ready, willing, and able – or at least I will become able, given time and under your expert guidance.”

Brent sank back into the settee. He looked relaxed enough, and his brow wasn’t furrowed with anxiety like hers appeared, but inside perhaps his mind was racing.

After a time, he spoke again. “Okay, Arielle: here’s the deal. I take your word for it that you are committed to aiding the cause, the Resistance. So, for now, keep your head down and work and continue with the study materials. But from now on, I think we should stop meeting out of work hours, and you shouldn’t frequent the usual haunts like the bistro or the Odeum.”

Arielle was devastated. At work, Millicent Brightwell would often talk of being “gutted”<sup>72</sup> if the slightest thing went wrong in her life, like some silly schoolchild. But now, for the first time in her life, Arielle knew what the word really meant.

°And you know something else?° chipped-in her inner voice.

I do, she replied. She knew there and then that a feeling had been creeping up on her, though quietly unacknowledged. She had fallen in love with Brent Messenger.

°There’s no sense in keeping that to yourself,° the inner voice insisted. °You should make a leap of faith and tell him so.°

She shook her head. That would only further complicate matters. Now was not the time.

Brent was already getting to his feet and stopped just briefly to kiss her lightly on the cheek. She was on the brink of throwing her arms around him, but he was already heading for the door.

He stopped hesitantly in the open doorway and turned back.

For a moment, Arielle even thought he’d had a sudden change of heart; only to have her hopes instantly dashed.

“There’s a poem I once read,” Brent said in parting, and he

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<sup>72</sup> Disappointingly unsuccessful; devastated.

tapped his shoulder bag. “I still have it, written down for posterity in my faithful journal.”

“It’s titled ‘The Life That I Have’, and you’ll be able to find it on Hermes.

“If you get yourself in trouble, just type ‘xyzzy:’ and the first line into Hermes and you’ll be offered whatever help you need.”

“And if you can’t do that, message me or mention that you just read a lovely poem, and we’ll know what you mean. And don’t worry, ‘The Life That I Have’ isn’t H-rated, so the authorities will be none the wiser.”

~~~~~oOo~~~~~

The very first thing Arielle did as soon as the door had shut and locked behind Brent was to search through Hermes, and within moments she’d found a whole article on the poem in the Wikipedia archives.

It was a short poem written by Leo Marks and used as a poem code by the British agent Violette Szabo in the Second World War.

The life that I have  
Is all that I have  
And the life that I have  
Is yours.

The love that I have  
Of the life that I have  
Is yours and yours and yours.

A sleep I shall have  
A rest I shall have  
Yet death will be but a pause.

For the peace of my years  
In the long green grass  
Will be yours and yours and yours.

Of course, she clicked on the blue hyperlink to find out more

about Violette Szabo and almost instantly regretted her curiosity. The young woman had led a heroic life behind enemy lines, but she was eventually caught and tragically executed by the German Nazis<sup>73</sup> on 5 February 1945, the year the war in Europe ended, aged only 23.

Well, this did bring home to Arielle just how high the stakes were in the “Big Game”; and perhaps that was precisely what Brent had intended. And she’d better make sure that she memorised the poem, PDQ.<sup>74</sup>

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<sup>73</sup> Nazi is short for National Socialist, but these were not socialists (those on the left politically, communists being further to the left) but part of a murderous, if “patriotic”, far-right nationalist regime.

<sup>74</sup> Pretty damn quick; more urgent than “as soon as possible (ASAP).”

# Scene 15:

## Dark Clouds

The next day, Arielle still felt terrible, and that had nothing to do with the two bottles of Tiger lager that she'd consumed the previous evening.

If such a thing were possible, her grey and green cubicle looked even more drab and dismal and claustrophobic that day, mirroring her own depressed mood.

She had to brighten herself up, or the whole office would soon know that something was amiss; and, in any case, Brent would not have wished this dark cloud on her. She wouldn't wish it on her worst enemies. Well, except for "Crusty" Henderson, perhaps.

She'd just settled into her chair and logged into her terminal when – confound it all! – as if to add insult to injury, her screen went blank, and when she checked the power indicator on the wall socket, she noticed that the power was off, too.

A murmur went round the office and Millicent Brightwell popped her head over the top of the adjoining cubicle. "Power cut," she informed Arielle.

They were meant to have batteries that were switched in instantly, to cover any glitches, and generators that were meant to start up within a minute, but clearly both of these backup facilities had failed to kick-in.

Arielle stood up and walked to the aisle. There was "Frosty" Robinson, the supervisor, waving everybody out, and those nearest the entrance were already filing out. She and Millicent followed.

"Safety regulations," the office gossip, Martha Heppinstall, told them as they made their way outside. They used the stairs, since the elevators were not to be used in the case of fire or events such as this.

“Make sure everyone is accounted for, Mizz Heppinstall,” the supervisor called after them, deputising her as he donned his yellow hard hat and fluorescent green and yellow jacket, and went down each row of cubicles, checking that everyone was out and all was in order. It was a pretty pointless task, Arielle thought. Then again, the delegated safety officers had to stick to the agreed procedures, and perhaps one day it might save someone’s life.

They waited outside in the square at the front of the building for what seemed like an age. It was a decent enough day, with just sufficient wispy cloud and light breeze to make the bright sunshine comfortable, but while she and Millicent stood slightly apart from the others, she could hear grumblings of discontent.

“I need to get back to my work,” said one. That would be Janis who always worked through her lunch break so that she could get off early at the end of her shift to care for her mother, who was old, frail, and suffering the first stages of pre-frontal dementia. She was on medications, of course, but they didn’t seem to be helping her, only slowing her deterioration.

“Aye, and ‘Frosty’ will have us working late to catch up, I bet. You know what Mister Henderson is like if we don’t meet our quota, come hell or high water.”

“If we’re out here any longer, I think the suits could at least provide us with drinks. I’m feeling parched already,” grumbled Bert.

“Well, they won’t allow anyone inside the building,” another chipped-in. “And anyhow, the power’s off.”

“You don’t need the power on for cold water,” Bert countered. “And there’s a refreshment station right there in the lobby. I mean, it’s only a power cut, not a ruddy earthquake.”

Just then, Mister Robinson broke away from the suits who were huddled in a group nearer the entrance. He waved his arms in the air to suggest despair as he approached Martha Heppinstall and the others. She and Millicent moved closer, to see if he had any news.

“Major blowout in a local substation, and that will take another four to six hours to fix,” he informed them. “Meanwhile, a crew are on their way to see if they can fathom why the

batteries and generator didn't kick in, and try to get the generator back online so that work can safely resume."

"Frosty" looked furtively around him, and in hushed tones he confided that the suits had been told it was deliberate sabotage, and so the whole building would have to be searched from the basement to the roof – indeed, a bomb disposal team would arrive any minute – but to keep this information to themselves.

Seeing the glint in Martha Heppinstall's eyes, though, it wouldn't be long before everyone in the Ministry was privy to this juicy morsel of news, and word would soon cross the city on the grapevine.<sup>75</sup> The regime may have killed off the free press, but they could never hope to even scratch the surface of such informal and ad hoc conduits.

Arielle wondered what Brent would have to say once he heard about the attack, and she would have loved to let him know, but after last night's conversation she realised that would be a really foolish thing to do. Whether it was the work of the Resistance, or some other disaffected or dissident group, she had no idea, other than her common sense suggesting that it must have required a good deal of forethought, organisation, knowledge, and access to whatever means had been used to damage or disable the electrical systems. This wasn't the work of a group of spotty-faced oiks.

Half an hour later, having rejoined the suits in their huddle, Mister Robinson reappeared and gave them the news: the repair crew wouldn't be able to make it that day, due to unforeseen circumstances, so they were all to go home and be back at work on the dot the following morning. Or earlier, if they could at all manage it.

What the supervisor hadn't said, but which became clear later that afternoon when she turned on the television to catch the news, was that similar and simultaneous attacks had taken place across the city, and across other major centres, too. Indeed, so bad was it that the Beloved Leader herself was on air with a statement on behalf of the regime. The Leader seldom appeared in public, except at military parades (which though nominally in honour of

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<sup>75</sup> Gossip spread by spoken communication.

the nation, were considered by most to be in her honour), so for her to speak at length, flanked by the Minister for Order, Missus Carlisle, and two generals, they must be taking this matter very seriously indeed.

The crimes, which had been designated acts of domestic terrorism, would be meticulously investigated using the latest forensic technology, the Beloved Leader assured them; the perpetrators of these crimes would be identified and hunted down; and they would be speedily prosecuted with the full force of the law.

As for the forensic technology, Brent had mentioned to her only the other day that not only could they obtain DNA samples from carpets, given a gun they could tell whether the shooter had scratched his balls earlier that day.

The Beloved Leader left it to one of her generals to deliver the worst news: beginning the following day there would be a curfew between the hours of eight in the evening and six in the morning. There would, of course, be a dispensation for those carrying out essential shift work or working for any of the emergency or security services.

To which was added: anyone found in the streets during the curfew without a valid reason could face arrest and imprisonment; and anyone attempting to avoid or resist arrest, or engaged in looting, was liable to be shot on sight.

In answer to a question from one of the reporters, the general said that offenders would be given a verbal warning, if circumstances allowed, before shots were fired. It was totally at the discretion of the officers involved.

You say officers. Could you please clarify which services would enforce the curfew?

This would be a joint operation between the police and the army, the general confirmed.

Would this mean tanks on the streets?

I see no call for that, since we're not talking of widespread civil unrest, the general replied, though there may well be roadblocks and checkpoints. That will be for our senior officers on the ground to decide on a case-by-case basis.

Is this then, a civil or a military curfew?

This is under Section 5c of the Homeland Security Emergency Powers Act. So, yes, you could say it is a military curfew.

Then: But in your reporting, please emphasise that these are measures designed to ensure the safety of our citizens and the security of our civilian and governmental infrastructure, and most certainly *not* a dictatorial whim – in spite of what uninformed opinion may have to incorrectly say about this, and in spite of what malicious disinformation may be spread by agitators and other ne'er-do-wells.

As to being “prosecuted with the full force of the law”, the general confirmed that those found guilty of acts of terrorism, or abetting those acts, would face a military firing squad. Those able or willing to provide information about the culprits could contact a dedicated anonymous helpline, and all such leads would be most welcome.

And what if any of those who abetted these crimes were able to offer information?

Well, I can't speak for the prosecutors or the judiciary, but it's possible that they might be shown some leniency, the general replied. Then, thanking them, and taking no more questions, the Beloved Leader, Minister, and generals left the podium, and the journalists scurried off to file their reports.

Quite how these would be vetted, with her department temporarily out of action, though, Arielle did not know. And another thing: in this age of advanced technology and under this regime, could there really be such a thing as an anonymous helpline?

It was only later that Arielle realised that the curfew would also affect places like the bistro and the Odeum – well, a whole heap of innocent businesses, too. Unless they came up with workarounds like allowing their patrons to bed-down on the premises overnight. But, of course, she couldn't run such ideas past Brent, who would have the low-down<sup>76</sup> on such things.

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<sup>76</sup> Inside information.



Damn and blast it! She felt so out of the loop,<sup>77</sup> at the very time she most needed to be involved.

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<sup>77</sup> Not informed; not included in the process or in the discussion.

# Scene 16:

## Funny Ha-ha

### and Funny Peculiar

At least someone still had a sense of humour. Arielle had been feeling down and she turned to Hermes and asked him to provide her with something to cheer her up, and up popped a page with a single comic strip on it, with just two panels.

It was a cartoon of a white dog, Snoopy,<sup>78</sup> an anthropomorphic beagle with floppy black ears and a small black patch on its back, sitting on top of the pointed roof of a red dog kennel, typing away on a manual typewriter. In the first strip, he had written: “Dear Mom, I remember when I was born.” and in the next, which she found out was the dog’s signature tune as he repeatedly tried to find inspiration for his uncompleted novel, was written: “It was a dark and stormy night.” That’s as far as the budding author, Snoopy, ever got.

Of course, she had the urge to forward the cartoon to Brent, and then realised that wasn’t such a good idea. He’d told her they had to stop seeing one-another; he’d given her the poem, “The Life That I Have”, for use in emergencies, and told her to keep her head down and work on the studies; so, though he hadn’t specifically mentioned exchanging messages – even though they could do that securely via Hermes – it just didn’t seem like a good idea to keep contacting him. The less they knew about one-another, and the less they interacted, the better. At least for now, presumably. What’s more: if she did send Brent a message, and he either ignored her or actually told her to stop it, then she would be doubly gutted and feel utterly abandoned.

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<sup>78</sup> Conceived, authored, and drawn by the legendary Charles M. Schulz. Part of a long-running series, “Peanuts, featuring ‘Good ol’ Charlie Brown’.”

Then again, Arielle wondered: how could he have abandoned her like this in her hour of need?

At this, her inner voice answered her: °You know, sister from another mother, there's an old saying that covers what you're going through right now: 'I complained that I had no shoes until I met a man who had no feet.'<sup>79</sup>

She thought about that for a few moments. Sure: I'm facing a first world problem.<sup>80</sup>

°That's it. You got my meaning, sis'. °

And I'm a big whinger, she added.<sup>81</sup> She laughed: In my case, a big ginger whinger!

°Well, you said that, not me. But as they also say: admitting to a shortcoming (or addiction) is halfway to a cure.

You mean I'm still in with a chance?

°Sure you are, Arielle: don't let anyone put you down and, above all, don't put yourself down. You don't want an inferiority complex to add to your long list of troubles. °

Long list of troubles, huh! What else do you know that you're not telling me?

°I'm merely jesting, sis'. Don't take it to heart. °

Many a true word is spoken in jest.

°Okay, hands up: you got me there. °

~~~~~oOo~~~~~

Later in the morning, two days later, Arielle finished off a piece of work, got up and went to see her colleague John in his cubicle further down the row. She was surprised to see John's seat empty when she got there.

"Anything wrong?" asked Rachel Meadows, standing up and looking at Arielle over the top of the cubicle.

"Oh, John wanted a second pair of eyes on a news report about the recent terrorist attacks, and I expected to find him here."

"You mean you haven't heard?" Rachel asked.

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<sup>79</sup> A proverb (perhaps Persian or Indian).

<sup>80</sup> A trivial issue faced by someone privileged in the developed world, in sharp contrast to the major issues and horrors faced by those in undeveloped countries in the third world.

<sup>81</sup> A person given to excessive complaints and crying and whining.

“Heard what, and why should I?”

Rachel looked around furtively. “Well – and don’t go spreading this around ...”

“You know me, Rachel, I’m quiet and studious; not the gossip type.”

“Well, he was found on the streets by the police during curfew hours.”

“Oh dear. Where was this?”

Millicent Brightwell had evidently heard them talking, too, and she had poked her up above the parapet on the other side. In fact she’d left her own cubicle and was heading to John’s. That’s all Arielle needed right now.

Rachel beckoned her closer. “The thing is, he was found on Grape Lane – you know, that derelict row of terraced houses off Sycamore Street.”

Arielle was just on the point of saying “No, sorry, I don’t know that place,” when Millicent scurried into the cubicle, so she had to think fast.

“Ah, yes,” Arielle nodded, hoping that Rachel would move the conversation swiftly on.

“That’s that place I saw you a few weeks back, isn’t it?” Millicent chimed in.

“So, what happened?” Arielle asked, hoping that Millicent wouldn’t notice that her question had been ignored.

“Well, get this: this is the crazy part.”

“I’m all ears.”

“The police found him banging away on the front door of one of the empty houses, begging to be let in.”

Arielle took this in, in a flash. It had to be the bistro, and she could feel the blood leaving her face.

“Anything wrong, Arielle?” Rachel enquired, a concerned look on her own face.

Arielle earnestly hoped that Rachel wouldn’t say anything along the lines of “You look like you’ve seen a ghost” or “did someone just walk over your grave?”<sup>82</sup>

She pulled herself together. “No, no. It’s just a shock to find

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<sup>82</sup> Said when someone shivers or shudders for no apparent reason.

out something happened to John. I'm quite fond of the guy, that's all."

Millicent broke in at that moment. "Better not let on to your fancy man, then," she cackled.

"My fancy man?" Arielle retorted indignantly.

"The guy from AI. The one with the blond hair, blue eyes, designer stubble, a strong jaw, remember, and smelly aftershave? Has that jogged your memory?"

Arielle was already leaving the cubicle.

"We met, we talked, I'll admit that," she replied as she headed back to the safety of her own space. "And that's as far as it went."

Millicent was coming after her now. "Why, I saw you and that guy – whatever his name is – going for a walk in the park just the other day."

She turned to face Millicent, swinging round so sharply that the woman nearly banged into her.

"As I said, we have a platonic relationship, and nothing more."

"A platonic relationship? What's that when it's at home."

"An innocent friendship," she replied, turning away from Millicent and dashing across her cubicle to sit down at her work station.

The woman was still hovering in the entrance to the cubicle. "And that Grape Lane – is that the grubby old row that I saw you coming out of the other day? You said you'd gone down there to take a short cut."

What could she say?

"Mmm," she nodded, hoping against hope that the woman wouldn't take this any further, and would bugger off back to her own damn cubicle, and mind her own damn business.

Arielle was absolutely seething inside, and struggling to restrain herself: to either turn on the woman and start screaming obscenities, or to turn away and break down in tears.

Fortunately, "Frosty" Robinson came to her rescue in that critical moment. He stood in the entrance with his hands on his hips, shaking his head and, without him having to say a word,

Millicent was scurrying back to her own cubicle.

“You know, you’re a diligent and valued worker, Mizz Appleyard – a real blessing for the department who truly deserves promotion, in my view – and you shouldn’t allow the likes of Mizz Brightwell to disturb you.”

“Yes, Mister Robinson,” she replied, trying not to look surprised at Frosty’s unexpected compliment, and turned back to her work and unblanked the dormant screen. “I’ll try to be more assertive with her in future.”

# Scene 17:

## Worries

Arielle had been thinking of poor old John, and wondering what had become of him, when she suddenly remembered that strange Latin phrase he'd come out with one day when he'd sought her advice on some edits he'd made.

What was it now? Ah yes: "*Illegitimi non carborundum*".

Making sure the coast was clear, she brought out her mobi, woke up Hermes, and entered the phrase. And – lo and behold! – up popped an answer.

The phrase was actually fake Latin, and it might be loosely translated as: "Don't let the bastards down."

As soon as she'd heard what Rachel Meadows had to say about John's reported behaviour in Grape Lane, she was pretty sure that he must be involved in the dissidence, or the Underground, if not the Resistance itself. And this discovery tended to confirm that earlier realisation. Yet who would have thought that the good-natured and bumbling John Rispin would have strayed from the straight and narrow path? Well, if that was his "cover", then it certainly had her fooled.

Oh dear, though. Whatever had happened to poor old John? Chances were, he was languishing in a spartan cell in a cold, dark basement somewhere in the city. Or perhaps at Gravesend Prison, on the outskirts. She'd once heard that's where they sent political dissidents.

And, worst of all, she was reminded of what Brent had warned her on their last evening together: if caught, "sooner, rather than later, we will end up squealing like frightened rats." Those had been his very words.

It was unlikely that John knew anything about her own involvement with Brent, thankfully – though if word got round

about their trysts,<sup>83</sup> and the authorities put two and two together (to make four, or even five), it's conceivable that she might be hauled in for questioning, and eventually blab.<sup>84</sup> And that would be the end of Brent, too. They'd come down on him like a ton of bricks, as her father would sometimes threaten her, though her father had usually been more bark than bite.

Arielle hastily closed down Hermes, stowed her mobi in her bag, and pulled up another report to edit, but she was deeply worried. So much so that she was anxiously biting her fingernails.

°And you can quit that right now,° her inner voice warned her, bringing this nervous habit to her conscious attention. It was a habit she'd once had as a young child, and which her mother had eventually cured by dipping Arielle's fingers in some nauseating and sharp-tasting brown liquid that she'd boiled up in a small cauldron on the stove.

The question uppermost in her mind right now, and clearly playing on her mind, was: am I in imminent danger? And juxtaposed to that was the terrible thought that if she made any wrong moves, she might foolishly and inadvertently draw attention to herself and bring about the very trouble that she was now in fear of. Hence, Brent's earlier advice to keep her head down.

°Breathe,° her inner voice advised her.

Of course.

Brent had suggested a slow, breathing exercise for just this sort of situation, and though she was certainly no expert in the use of this mind-stilling technique, she did find that after a time it worked wonders.

"What a beautiful day to be alive. Am I right?" as he was wont to say from time to time.

Thank you, Brent: you're a lifesaver.

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<sup>83</sup> Secret rendezvous (especially between lovers).

<sup>84</sup> Divulge secret or confidential information; spill the beans.



# Scene 18:

## Vance

Arielle had just got up and was heading for the office entrance to use the restroom when someone came up beside her and gently took her arm.

“Don’t turn round, Arielle,” the figure warned her, and she instantly recognised the voice of Martha Heppinstall.

“Just keep walking, and don’t ask any questions,” the woman hissed, as she bundled Arielle out through the swinging doors.

They stopped briefly as the doors were still swinging-to behind them.

“There’s a car out back waiting for you, a silver-grey Cougar. Just tell the driver that Leo sent you, and follow his instructions to the letter.”

“Leo?” She’d heard that name before.

“For the peace of my years, go now, and be smart about it,” Martha advised her, giving her a little push to send her on her way, and then Martha turned on her heel and headed straight back into the office.

Arielle’s heart was pounding now, but she began her breathing exercises and turned to her left toward the stairs that led down to the nearest back entrance.

She had instantly recognised that line from the poem given to Violette Szabo and passed on to her by Brent. And then it struck her, as she opened the door and began to descend the stairs, that she had been so wrong about Martha Heppinstall. All this time, the woman must have been working under deep cover – and that meant that she must be a real master of the art.

She took each turn in the flights of stairs with growing trepidation, fearful that someone might emerge from one of the other floors and accost her, wanting to know what she was doing there. The best she could come up with was that she was suffering

a panic attack, feeling claustrophobic, and needed to get some fresh air. That would also cover for her very real anxiety.

But thankfully, very few people used the stairs except in emergencies, even though an ever-growing number of these couch potatoes could have seriously used the exercise.

Finally, she was down, and she tapped her ID card against the wall to open the door and made a hasty exit.

Scanning the car park, she caught sight of a silver-grey car coming toward her. Not being a driver herself, and not having much of an interest in cars at all, she wouldn't have known a Cougar from a house and cart, but the driver had his window down, and he was already waving to her as he approached.

Arielle took a series of slow, deep breaths. Seeing the passenger door sliding open, she dashed across, clambered in, and they drove off, even before she'd found the end of the safety harness to get it secured.

"Leo sent me," she told the driver belatedly and breathlessly, once she'd managed to get buckled up.

"I know," he replied, barely glancing at her; adding: "Make sure you turn off your mobi."

She rummaged in her bag and instantly complied.

"And don't worry: the car's tracking has been disabled," he informed her, anticipating the next question forming in her mind.

He was a stocky looking man with quite a swarthy complexion, and a mass of curly black hair. He maybe had dark brown eyes, but she'd had such a brief glimpse of his features that she couldn't be sure. When she got nervous she was oblivious to such things.

They came to the entrance to the car park, and he had to stop. The barrier was lowered and he had to tap his card against a nearby pillar before the barrier would lift and they could pass.

The driver looked intent on distancing them from the Ministry and said nothing as he criss-crossed the city, apparently well-acquainted with the many shortcuts that Arielle would never have dreamed of taking.

There were nervous moments whenever they hit a red light and had to stop, but he seemed to have his speed just right so that

they could pass through a string of green lights, as they changed in sequence. Whoever had designed this system was to be congratulated.

Finally, though, they were out of the city centre, through the nearby towns that had since been swallowed up and into the suburbs. Only now did the man visibly relax and reduce his speed.

“You can call me Vance, if you like,” the man told her, reaching across with his free hand and claspings hers in an iron grip. “It’s not my real name, but the less we know about one-another, the better.”

Arielle searched for a suitable name.

°Violette,° she was prompted.

“And you can call me Violette,” she returned, and for the first time they exchanged glances, and the man’s poker face broke into a broad smile.

“Yes, that’s quite appropriate,” he nodded, before returning his attention to the road ahead. He put the car into auto-cruise and could have taken his hands off the wheel and relaxed, but maybe like her he didn’t trust such newfangled devices, and chose to drive himself. It’s said that their safety had improved, but a few years back, following a software glitch, there had been a huge number of accidents, and quite a few fatalities.

Of course, the manufacturer should have been prosecuted by the authorities and sued by the victims, to her mind at least, but these days it was nigh-impossible to take the large corporations to court, for – thanks to the deep pockets of lobbyists and the greed of corrupt officials – they had become a law unto themselves.

“Same old, same old,” as her father used to say.<sup>85</sup>

“Why did I have to leave in such a hurry?” she asked Vance at length.

“All I was told was they’d been warned that the security forces were on their way to arrest you later this morning,” he shrugged. “As I say, the least I know, the better.”

Then: “Must have a friendly mole in there, though, if you ask

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<sup>85</sup> Something all-too familiar and predictable; unfortunately the same as ever. Used here in a dismal and derogatory manner.

me.”

“Oh, gosh ...” She was about to add to her reply, but the shock of this news hit her hard, and her voice trailed off.

The man reached over and fist-bumped her arm. “But don’t worry, we’re in the clear and halfway home.”

“Can you at least tell me where we’re heading?” she asked.

“Best wait until we’re there, and you can see for yourself,” he replied, which was all she could realistically expect.

“But what about all my things?”

Vance turned his head slightly and nodded toward the back seat.

“Few things in there to keep you going,” he told her. “I didn’t get a good look, but seems to be a fresh set of clothes and outdoor gear. But don’t go worrying unnecessarily: you can be sure that your friends have thought things through. And if they haven’t, then they have resources they can call upon.”

She was about to ask who these “friends” might be, but she already knew what Vance’s response would have been.

°Better to remain silent and be thought a fool than to speak and to remove all doubt,° her inner voice cackled.

She sighed, though noting that as ever, he was right on the money.<sup>86</sup>

As they turned off one narrow road and Arielle looked ahead, she could see the wide plain into which they were now descending, and she already had an idea as to where they might be heading.

“Well,” she said after a time, as they began to cross the plain, I guess my days in high society are over – I’m joking of course.”

Vance glanced at her face in the rear-view mirror, but otherwise kept his eyes on the road, which was narrow and winding, with no road signs to indicate that they were approaching sharper bends.

“Well, I’m not an expert in such matters,” the man replied, “but it seems to me that the days of being able to change your hairstyle, dye your hair, and take to wearing spectacles and a fake moustache are long gone, what with facial recognition and

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<sup>86</sup> Correct; accurate.

especially the advent of biometrics and DNA sniffers. The regime's domestic security is tighter than a Japanese wrestler's jockstrap.<sup>87</sup>

"The steps we take; every time we pick up a mobi; or pay for goods and services; or cross the street; or swipe into a public restroom, we're being tracked. No, the days of living incognito are long gone."

"So, I'm going to have to keep my head down for the rest of my days," she sighed, and the enormity of it all pressed heavily on her.

"Well, unless they can get you out of the country," Vance mused. "Though strikes me that one country is as bad as the others, these days."

°Six of one, half a dozen of the other,° she was prompted.

Yes, sadly that sounded about right. Not much of a choice, eh?

Maybe this is why Brent had blamed Donald Trump, one of the former American presidents for initially setting light to the system, kindling the first wildfires of despotic right-wing popularism that had grown over the years and by now engulfed most of the globe. Or, at least if the man didn't start it, then he was certainly riding the first waves of the shit-stirring mobs; playing on alienation, prejudice, hatred and anger, and stoking deep division.

Perhaps the man noticed her rather subdued state of mind, and he reached to turn on the car radio.

She'd been expecting rousing classical music or a news report, but instead they were regaled by a very swell song. And listening to the risqué lyrics, she was simply agog.

"Good grief," she gasped: "I'm surprised that they're allowed to air this."

Vance beamed. "Violette, this is Radio Free World, and the authorities don't even know it exists. You see, all the new radios can only pick up the newfangled digital packet signals."

He affectionately stroked the car's dashboard. "But this little

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<sup>87</sup> A saying still current among the older generation, though nobody knew what it meant any longer.

beauty picks up archaic, analogue signals on what was once called the ‘medium wave’.

“And even if the authorities did know about RFW, there’s not a whole lot they can do about it, because it’s said to be broadcast from several different locations hundreds of miles away, and it’s a very powerful signal.”

“Do they just broadcast music, then?” she eagerly wanted to know.

Vance shook his head. “It’s early days as yet, but they also provide an alternative news service, by which I mean real news, not the fake news that the regime pumps out – no disrespect; I’m sure you did a good job at the Ministry – and in the near future they hope to offer educational programming.”

Arielle was amazed. “Oh, wow!” she replied. “I do believe that you’ve restored my faith in human nature. This is wonderful news, and a cause for celebration. There’s hope for us yet.”

Vance’s eyes lit up. “And, speaking of celebration, if you just have a look in that glove compartment in front of you, you’ll find a couple of cans of beer in a cooler bag.”

“Even better!” she enthused.

“One of your friends said to make sure I brought the cans along with me.”

Of course, she didn’t ask Vance who that might be, but seeing the cans of Tiger beer, she had a pretty good idea.

She cracked open a can for Vance and handed it to him, then opened her own.

“To the Friends,” Vance proposed.

Arielle wasn’t sure how to respond, so she simply echoed: “To the Friends,” and they clunked their cans together.

Then she asked: “But if you can’t pick up the old-fashioned radio signals on modern gear, then how do people get to listen to it?”

Vance tapped the side of his nose. “They’re working on it,” he replied. “And, what’s more, ‘There’s an app for that’, as they say.”

“Wow, and double wow!”

“Oh yes,” Vance nodded. “As one of the old songs goes, the

times, they are a-changin', at long last."<sup>88</sup>

"And not a moment too soon," she agreed. "I'd quite like to hear that song."

"It'll be on sooner or later," Vance told her. "They play that song at least once a day. People just can't get enough of it."

Then: "Of course, the authorities will cotton on eventually, and they'll probably start jamming the signals."

"This is why we can't have nice things," Arielle sighed, borrowing the phrase from Brent.

Vance took another swig of his beer. "You worry too much. Violette," he replied once he'd swallowed the amber liquid. "I heard that they're already working on a channel-hopping system. If they can do that, it will leave the authorities attempting to play 'whack-a-mole'."

"However, if it was up to me, I'd keep the technology as simple as possible, and easily repairable, like in the old days. Once upon a time, or so I'm told, people used to build their own simple radio sets. It needs to be readily accessible," Vance added. "That's the problem with modern technology. These days, people couldn't even make their own toilet paper to wipe their ruddy arses. That's 'progress' for you."

"Whack-a-mole?"

Seeing her puzzled expression, the man did his best to explain this old arcade game. "It's like a board at waist height," he told her, "and it's got rows of holes. A mole pops its head out of one of these holes. You never know which one it's going to pop up from, and you've got to hit the mole on the head with a paddle before it bobs back down again and pops out of one of the other holes."

Ah, I get the analogy now," she nodded, finishing off her beer.

"Stick the empty can back in the cooler-bag, and I'll get rid of them later," Vance advised.

Arielle realised then, of course, that after dropping her off, and she was "home free", Vance would have to go back to the

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<sup>88</sup> "The Times They Are A\_changin'" was a folk song released in 1964 by the singer-songwriter and guitarist, Bob Dylan.

city, the daily grind,<sup>89</sup> and any attendant worries. He didn't look like the worrying type, but maybe he had just grown used to hiding any fears.

Vance pulled the car in at the entrance to the car park; the very same one that she and Brent had used a while back.

"Well, this is as far as I go, sadly," the man announced, opening her passenger door and gripping her hand. "Head down the road and look out for Aunt Mai's Tea Room, up a narrow lane to the left, and someone will meet you there. I think you'll find it signposted, but don't be afraid to ask the locals for directions: they're a pretty friendly bunch."

"Thank you so much, Vance," she smiled.

"You're most welcome, Violette. Thank you for your company."

Then she had a terrible thought: "But surely, Vance, the surveillance cameras will have picked up on you entering the car park, picking me up, and us leaving together."

Vance held up his hand reassuringly. "I'm told that friends in the right places froze all the cameras in the whole neighbourhood. Don't ask me how they did that: let's just say that those wizards worked their magic."

Then: "You must be a pretty important lady."

Arielle shook her head: "No, my guess is that I am just someone who knows too much about important friends, that's all."

Another thought occurred to her. "And the pass that you used at the exit barrier?"

Vance laughed. "That was somebody else's cloned card."

Satisfied, Arielle stepped from the car, and Vance decided to take the opportunity to stretch his legs and water the weeds by the edge of the road.

She gave Vance one last wave. Once she was on her way, he turned the car round and headed straight back up the road toward the city.

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<sup>89</sup> His everyday occupation.



# Scene 19:

## Incognito

Arielle found the cafe easily enough, and she was glad it was open that day, because the lager had long since passed through her system into her bladder and she really did need to use the rest room.

Of course, she recognised the cheery-faced lady straight away, and she in turn was remembered and welcomed back.

“Call me Mai,” the lady smiled.

Arielle hesitated for a moment, wondering whether she dare use her own name. Perhaps not.

“And please call me Violette.” Then: “I’m waiting for someone, so we’ll probably order later, But if it’s not too much trouble, could I use your rest room? Or could you at least point me in the direction of one?”

The lady looked puzzled for a moment, then realisation dawned on her. “Oh, you mean the toilet. Or as my better half would have said: the throne room. Certainly, my dear,” and she pointed to a door behind Arielle, clearly marked, for all to see, with a white rectangular sign labelled appropriately enough “Toilet”.

Arielle could have kicked herself, but right now she had to make a beeline for the porcelain throne.

Once that was out of the way, much to her relief, she took a seat in the bay window. She hadn’t had a non-alcoholic drink since early in the morning and by now she was gagging for a coffee. Indeed, she was just about to get up and place an order when she realised that if she paid with her card, the authorities would instantly know here whereabouts; indeed, they may have already frozen her account. Well, unless for now they were content to play along, while they gathered yet more data.

Just as she was sitting down again, someone else entered the tea room – a young lady wearing a loose brown top and stretchy khaki leggings – and, spotting Arielle there, she came over to the table. The lady made a show of greeting her, her arms spread side, so she stood and went along with the embrace.

“So good to see you again ...” the lady began, and Arielle hastily whispered “Violette” in her ear; and, catching on in a flash, the lady whispered back “Sarah”. But, in any case, Aunt Mai had left the counter and gone back to her own room, perhaps to continue her knitting, or reading, or whatever she did when not serving customers.

Of course, Arielle had been more than half hoping that Brent would show up, but she was happy to see any other sentient human being.

Sarah was still standing there, but Arielle sat back down again, explaining that she’d told the proprietor, Aunt Mai that she was waiting for someone and would order later. Apart from keeping up appearances, it seemed the right thing to do.

“That’s fine by me, and we’re not in a rush,” Sarah readily agreed, heading for the counter to see what was on offer, at which point, Aunt Mai came back behind the counter to see if they were ready to order. So they settled on two large frothy coffees (the cafe only had tea, plain or frothy coffee, and still lemonade), two ham and pickle sandwiches, and two slices of home-baked fruitcake.

By the time Aunt Mai returned, Arielle had had a chance to tell Sarah that she wouldn’t be able to pay using her card, but fortunately that was no problem for Sarah, which saved a whole heap of potential embarrassment and apology. Arielle had visions of having to spend the rest of the afternoon helping Aunt Mai in the kitchen to pay off the outstanding debt. Call her paranoid if you like, but these things do happen.

“How much do you know?” Sarah asked her when Aunt Mai had gone back to her room.

“Very little, Sarah” she confessed, “and it really depends on how much you feel able to tell me. The guy who drove me here

said that the less we knew about one-another, the better.”

“Brent briefed me before I set off,” Sarah replied, between mouthfuls of sandwich.

Her heart leapt. “Then Brent’s okay?” she asked, though she’d already had her question answered.

“Yes, he’s at a safe house now,” Sarah nodded. “So, you can either wait a while and hear it from him, if you like, or I can fill you in with some of the details now.”

She took a bite of her own sandwich and thought for a moment. “I think I’d rather know now,” she replied at length. “I have so many unanswered questions, and little mind demons running around in my head right now, and I won’t be settled until I have things roughly sketched out.”

“Okay, Violette. Hang on while I find my notes.” The lady brought out her mobi and scrolled through her screens. “A guy who worked in your office, John Rispin, was arrested by the police.”

“Yes, I worked quite closely with John,” she nodded.

“Well, I don’t know the background, but he had some sort of psychotic episode, and he was found late at night pounding on the door of the Secret Garden, a bistro on Grape Lane in the east of the city, begging to be let in.”

“Yes, Brent took me there once before they enforced the curfew.”

Then, just about to take a bite of her sandwich, she asked: “Out of idle curiosity, why was it called the Secret Garden?”

“Well, it’s named after an old novel by Frances Hodgson Burnett. A story dear to our own heart, it’s about a young girl who discovers an old abandoned garden and with the help of another boy they bring life back to the garden again, and also restore the health of a second young boy who has been confined to his bed for years with some mysterious affliction. It was a time before the advent of modern medicine.

“There’s a mystical element to ‘secret gardens’ as well, though. Ask Brent and he’ll regale you with all manner of arcane lore. Or ask Hermes, if you have access.

“Anyhow, behind the row of terraces near the bistro is a wide

square that's been turned into a wonderful hidden garden. You really would like it there. It is so peaceful and relaxing: the perfect place to still your mind. We call that sakina or Shekinah (serenity, stillness, peace, indwelling presence)."

Arielle apologised. "I'm sorry, you were telling me about John, and I waylaid you. Please carry on."

"That's right. Well, the police initially arrested him for breaking the curfew, but given his mental health condition it was decided not to press charges, and he was instead admitted to the psychiatric ward at Barlow Street Hospital for a formal diagnosis and treatment.

"However, the staff there soon realised, from the man's delirious and unfiltered ramblings, that he must be involved with the Resistance in some way, and so they contacted the police. And, to cut a long story short, as soon as the medication had kicked-in and the man's condition had been sufficiently well stabilised, he was released back into police custody. Then, after an initial interrogation, the security services were informed, they took over, and the man was transferred into their custody."

"And was John Rispin involved in the Resistance?" Arielle enquired.

"No. He certainly held heretical views, and you could call him a dissident – which was sufficient for the security services to hold and interrogate him – but he wasn't actually associated in any way with the Resistance, and certainly not the paramilitary wing."

Arielle's ears pricked up. "It's by the way, but were they the ones who carried out the recent attacks?"

Sarah had a gulp of her coffee and shook her head. "No, I'm reliably informed that the attacks were not carried out by the Resistance, nor by the paramilitary wing, nor by any of the other dissident groups that we know of. And of course these attacks required a lot of planning and coordination: these were not random acts by individuals."

"Are you suggesting ..."

"Oh, I'm more than suggesting, Violette: these were false flag attacks from within the regime. If not by the military, then by

mercenary contractors not necessitating or resulting in a curfew, but rather in order to justify the imposition of a curfew and – sooner or later – leading to the imposition of martial law.”

Arielle was shocked, and yet she was not really that surprised anymore.

“So, Sarah: how does John’s arrest relate to me, other than the fact that we worked in the same office?”

“According to one of our operatives who works inside the security services, they simply passed everything they knew through Sherlock, their AI system, and it spat out a list of other people who might be worth questioning.”

“Go on.”

“One of the people near the head of the list was Rachel Meadows.”

“Well, she’s a decent enough person,” Arielle replied in the woman’s defence. “They wouldn’t have got much from her.”

Sarah finished off her last sandwich before replying.

“While working at the Ministry, Rachel Meadows had been caught for some minor crime and given a suspended sentence, on the condition that if she discovered any illegal activities or anything untoward, she was to report it to her handlers. She was, therefore, their eyes and ears in the Ministry.

“And so when they came to interview Rachel Meadows, they fed her information into the AI system, and since the woman had mentioned that Millicent Brightwell worked at the cubicle nearest to John, her name now popped up near the top of the list, too.

“And then it was only a matter of time before your assisting John Rispin with his work and your clandestine liaison with Brent Messenger, and yet another mention of Grape Lane, came out and were fed into the AI system, which crunched the data and spat out correlations and probabilities.”

“Ho-ly shit,” Arielle gasped, and she could feel the hot blood rushing to her face and her ears.

“As soon as our inside man saw your name at the top of the list and Brent’s just beneath it, he realised the grave danger you were both in, and immediately contacted us; we set our plan in motion; and here you are.”

“Here we are, indeed,” Arielle whistled. Then it hit her hard.

“Oh, god. I’m so sorry to have caused you all this trouble. You know I had a hunch that eventually the authorities would put two and two together, and I was dreading that moment.”

Sarah spread her hands wide. “You’re not the first, Violette, and you’ll certainly not be the last. I’ve been through a lot worse, so don’t kick yourself too hard. You weren’t to know, and you certainly couldn’t be expected to know.”

All the same, Arielle didn’t know quite what to say.

Sarah took a bite of her fruitcake. “Now that is good. But, you know what? It really needs some crumbly white cheese to go with it.”

“I wasn’t to know, perhaps,” Arielle dared to venture, “but my guess is that Brent should have known.”

Sarah polished off the last of her fruitcake and washed it down with the remainder of her coffee.

“Please don’t worry about that, Violette. Only our inside man, Brent, you, and I know about these details, and I aim to keep it that way. To my mind, Brent’s lost his job and – like you – much of his freedom, and he’s already suffered enough. And the last thing he needs – the last thing any of us need – is for the top brass to find out and give him a good kicking.

“Rest assured that the secret is safe with us.”

Arielle finished the last of her coffee and collected the crockery to return to the counter. “Thanks a lot, Mai,” she called through the open door.

“Thank *you*,” Mai returned, “and do call again.”

“Ready for the off?” Sarah prompted her.

“Ready as I’ll ever be,” she nodded, and so they headed back to the main road where Sarah had parked her car.

“I’ll tell you what, though,” Arielle remarked as they clambered in the car. “I’d never have guessed that Martha Heppinstall would save my bacon one day. I had her down as the office gossip, and how wrong could I be?”

“Oh, she’s good at what she does. She’s one of the very best,” Sarah agreed. She drove the car down to the end of the road and negotiated a three point turn there, then drove back up the hill and

back out into the countryside.

Presumably they were heading for the safe house where Brent was, but Sarah didn't say. Boy, she could hardly wait to see his handsome, rugged face again.

# ACT 4

“It is the task of the enlightened not only to ascend to learning and to see the good but to be willing to descend again to those prisoners and to share their troubles and their honors, whether they are worth having or not. And this they must do, even with the prospect of death.”

~ Plato, “The Allegory of the Cave”, *The Republic*.



# Scene 20:

## Merrymede Hall

They'd been driving at a fair pace for around an hour when they approached another small village and slowed down. A plaque by the side of the road read "Little Watling".

"Not far now, Violette," Sarah informed her, and she flipped her right indicators on and slowed down still further, allowing another car, travelling in the opposite direction, to pass them before turning onto a narrower, winding lane lined with tall green hedgerows and mature trees. That was only the third car they'd seen in all this way.

"Actually, it's Arielle," she replied, though she was not sure if that was the right thing to do.

"Arielle it is, then," Sarah smiled. "Sarah Hampton." Then: "It's okay, you're with friends and you're out of the woods now."

"Arielle Appleyard," she reciprocated.

Sarah answered the question which was on the tip of Arielle's tongue.

"The difficulties are over, and you're out of danger."

"That's such a relief," she replied, and her thoughts again turned to her being reunited with Brent.

Further down the twisting lane, Sarah again slowed the car to a crawl and, passing by a high stone wall to the left, they approached a rather magnificent set of wrought iron gates. A polished brass plaque on the nearest gate post read "Merrymede Hall".

Sarah stopped the car and stepped out to wave at a camera mounted on the top of one of the sturdy stone gate posts, but they must have seen her coming, because the gates were already swinging open.

Getting back in, she drove them down a long driveway of compacted gravel, past lush and colourful gardens and long grass

lawns despeckled with daisies, dandelions, and all around the wide grounds of the estate was natural woodland. That was quite distant, but there was no mistaking the luxuriant carpet of bluebells in the woods.

They were approaching a majestic building now; a very old building that had the look of a castle about it, with a wide central entrance with three tall stone pillars each side of large wooden doors, topped with a central tower; and a wide wing either side, which again terminated in towers, though not as tall as that in the centre.

To the left, Sarah explained, was the west wing; to the right, the east wing.

The driveway branched here. One way, it swept in an arc at the front of the building, while the other swung to the left, and that's the drive that Sarah took, around the side of the building and round the back. There was an area reserved for parking there, and half a dozen cars, a couple of large vans, and a tractor and detached trailer.

Finding a spot, Sarah parked the car and they got out, and Sarah opened the boot and brought out some bags of provisions that she had with her. Since Arielle only had the one bag of clothes with her, she shared the load with Sarah.

"Well, here we are," said Sarah as they approached a third wing of the huge mansion, half way down the left wing and at right angles to it. Among other things it housed the kitchen and dining hall, workshops, and storerooms. Apparently there was a similar wing half way down the right wing, so that if you had a drone and could see the stately home from above and from the rear, it would have formed a pi-shaped figure: two "I"s with a horizontal bar running across the top of them.

Between these last two wings there was also a covered walkway, forming the fourth side of a central quadrangle, so that they could easily walk between the classrooms and library in the fourth wing and the dining hall in the third. And, further away from the building, there were also the old stable blocks and farm machinery. Arielle's mind boggled at these minor revelations.

Sarah approached a doorway in the third wing and put one of

her bags down to open a door. Arielle could see the steam coming from a vent to their left, and she caught the unmistakable aroma of baking, so this must be the kitchen.

Sarah stood aside and let Arielle enter first. “Welcome home,” she beamed. “Well, if not home, then certainly a welcome home away from home.

“Just put the provisions down here,” Sarah requested, heading for one of the tables near the door. “Evening, Patrick,” she called to a man who had just taken two large trays of baking out of an oven over the other side of the kitchen.

“Evening, Sarah. Be with you in a jiffy,”<sup>90</sup> the man replied, heading back to the oven to move two more trays further up in the oven and fit two more into the oven further down.

Once that task was accomplished, the man came over to them and Sarah introduced Arielle and Patrick. He had short, wispy brown hair, a round, red, welcoming face, and though quite slight and tall in stature, he had quite a large belly. Here was a man then who enjoyed his food, or perhaps his ale.

“Lovely to meet you.” The man touched the tip of his baker’s hat and bowed. “And I’m guessing that you could both do with a drink after your travels.”

Sarah was already on it, and had checked the water in a nearby kettle and was fetching three large mugs. “Tea or coffee? Or something chilled, if you’d prefer.”

They settled on white coffee, with one lump of sugar for Sarah, two for herself, and no fewer than three for Patrick. “Got to keep up my energy levels,” he chortled, revealing a set of decaying teeth, and headed over to the cupboards, returning with two large tins full of home-made buns and biscuits.<sup>91</sup>

Sarah glanced at her. “I’ve just realised that you’re probably famished after your travels today, Arielle. The dining room is only open for breakfast and lunch (that’s when we have our main meal); and the cafeteria is only open until 8 o’clock ...”

“I’m sure Emily wouldn’t mind rustling you something up,” Patrick chipped-in.

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<sup>90</sup> In a very short time.

<sup>91</sup> Cookies.

Sarah shook her head vigorously. “No, no. The poor girl’s probably been on her feet for most of the day. I’ll get you settled in a room near the dorms,<sup>92</sup> Arielle, and after you’ve freshened up, we’ll be back and I’ll cook us something. Maybe a second breakfast with bacon, eggs, fried potatoes and mushrooms. Suit you?”

“That would go down a treat, if it’s not too much trouble. Thanks a lot.”

“In fact, Arielle, I’m sure you can have one of the guest rooms until they get you sorted out with your own space. I’ll have a word with Matron and the Director while you’re freshening up. You’ll be glad to hear that the guest rooms have en-suite bathrooms. We have all the mod cons here.”<sup>93</sup>

“I’m easy,” Arielle replied. “Whatever’s best for you. I don’t want to put anybody out.”

Sarah patted her on the shoulder. “You’re causing us no trouble, Arielle. No trouble at all.”

Then: “You’ll be able to get a good night’s rest, and in the morning I’ll give you the grand tour and one of the others will give you a formal induction, sort out any paperwork, and take you to meet Matron and the Director. And after that you have the introductory week to look forward to.”

And Brent? As yet there was no mention of him, but she didn’t like to ask right now.

°First things first,° she was advised.

Sure. First things first.

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<sup>92</sup> Dormitories, in this case consisting of semi-private booths each containing a bed and a desk and chair for a private study area.

<sup>93</sup> Modern convenience; the appliances and conveniences characteristic of a modern house.

# Scene 21:

## Settling In

Sarah led Arielle through the building, under the covered walkway along one side of the central quadrangle. There were quite a few others there, laying in the long grass, sitting chatting on wooden benches, or strolling around the fountain, and presumably a pond, in the centre. Some of them were quite young and still in short trousers, while there were other young adults – men and women her own age – and more than a few mature people, too, including two elderly gentlemen sitting at seats made out of old beer kegs, playing chess.

They entered the other wing and took a couple of flights of marble-treaded stairs up toward the dorms, and a short way down a narrow cork-tiled corridor.

Sarah stopped outside one of the rooms, which bore a rosewood sign reading “Guest room 2”, opened the door and ushered her inside. It was a pleasant enough room, though by no means palatial. In the corner to her left, in an alcove, was a built-in wooden wardrobe and a bed fairly close-by, ample for one and yet still wide enough for two; and ahead of her was a large curtained window, under which was a wooden chair and table with an attached mirror, that would do for both dressing or study.

She put her bags down beside the bed, and stepped across to the window to peer out. Down below there were what looked like vegetable gardens, and beyond that there were many bluebells and a wide expanse of woodland.

“I’ll leave you to it, then, Arielle,” Sarah said, hovering in the doorway. “You’ll find fresh towels and other things in the bathroom, and if there’s anything else you need, let us know. I just have to pop along to see Matron and the Director, but I’ll be down in the quadrangle when you’re done.”

Sarah looked at her smartwatch and she checked her own.

“It’s fifteen past the hour. Let’s say you give me twenty to thirty minutes and I’ll see you outside. You shouldn’t get lost: all the corridors, the stairs and the entrances are clearly signposted.

“If I’m late, just hang around in the quad, and accept my apologies in advance.”

And with that, Sarah left the room, pulling the door to behind her.

Arielle noticed that though there were old keyholes in the wooden doors, there appeared to be no locks. Things were already looking very different here from life in the city. And another thing, too: whereas virtually everything in the shitty city was made of coloured plastic, here most things were made of wood, and oiled or varnished to show the natural grain. The doors; the bed frame; the table and chair; the window frame and sill: all were made of natural-looking polished hardwood. And heading to the bathroom she discovered that even the side covering of the bath and the loo seat were made of smooth, polished wood. Most likely they’d even been hand-crafted.

“Ah!” she noted, as she left the bathroom to check what other clothes and essentials they might have provided in the bag she’d been given. At least there was a retractable bolt on that door.

Thirty minutes later, she was sorted and left the building to stand in the quad. Sarah was already there, chatting away to the two old gentlemen playing chess. Arielle wasn’t up to too many introductions that day, though, so she waved and, seeing her, after a few more brief words with the men, Sarah came across to meet her.

“No need to be shy,” Sarah said perceptively as they wandered down the covered walkway back toward the kitchen. “That’s Dennis with the mop of long, snow-white hair and he teaches English language and literature. You would like him, and you’d become quick friends.

“The tubby guy with him is Leonard, and he teaches woodwork. You can learn quite a few of the old trades and crafts here: woodwork; metalwork; stone masonry; drystone walling; building, carpentry and roofing; pottery; sculpture; stained glass; leather and textiles; printing; design – you name it.

“Over there is Yvette, talking to some of her students. She teaches history and knows more about ancient history than almost anyone in the country. In fact, if there’s a gap in our knowledge, it’s more likely to be what happened around the time of the Beloved Leader’s first coup, than any other time. That’s when the arts – the humanities – were largely dropped from school and college curricula, funding was removed from the arts, and so many essential community hubs like libraries and independent charities ended up shutting down. Such a tragic loss.

“The lady with the blond hair walking toward them is Tiffany, and she teaches geology and archaeology, but she is anything but an old fossil: she has a lively wit and in her younger years it’s said she was a party animal.

“Hector, over there in the ‘naughty corner’ smoking a pipe, teaches politics, and with him is Samuel, the coach, who is rather more fit than dear old Hector. He and his able deputies will be taking you off on long forced marches, cross-country runs, and have you playing hockey on the fields, and doing press-ups in the gym. And Gwyn, who isn’t here right now, will be teaching you outdoor and urban survival skills.”

Now that *did* sound ominous. If there was one thing Arielle was no good at – even quietly despised – it was sports.

“And the guy just joining them, Dara, will be introducing you to martial arts.”

°Ha-ha! Piped-up her inner voice, °once a chronic worrier, you will be taught to become a noble warrior!°

She didn’t want to hear that right now. Shush!

“Science, home economy, art, poetry, drama, film-making: we have it all here,” Sarah smiled, holding the door open for her.

Once back in the kitchen, the lady rustled them up something to eat and they sat quietly at one of the tables there to eat their meal. Arielle had a lot to take in, and a thousand and one questions on her mind, but what she needed right now was peace of mind.

One thing she did want to ask about, though: “What about my studies with Athena?”

Well, that’s up to the Director to decide, but I’m 99% certain

that you should carry on with those studies. And you'll receive extra tuition from the Director himself, and his Deputy, Safia."

"Does the Director have a name?"

°Ask a dumb question, get a dumb answer,° her inner voice smirked.

Okay, okay. So she was getting tired after a long and eventful day.

"His full name is Barnaby Albert Ziegler. In public he's always addressed as Director, but in private he much prefers staff and mature students to simply call him Baz.

"As for Matron: Matron is always and everywhere addressed as Matron – with the sole exceptions of her husband, Wilfred, who looks after the grounds and other odd jobs, and her sister, Janine, who works in the laundry. Matron may appear to be a dry old stick, but she has a heart of gold. As do many of the staff and students here."

Anyhow, the meal over, Arielle helped with the washing up and drying, then they headed outside to have a stroll around the gardens before it began to get dark. She drank in the tranquil atmosphere, and practised her breathing exercise, and that helped enormously, because up until this point, her mind had been racing.

And then, alas, it was time for bed. As for dear Brent, he would have to wait until the next day. In fact, it was probably better that way. She wanted to be fresh and awake – bright eyed and bushy tailed, as her mother would say – when she met up with Brent.



# Scene 22:

## Induction

The next day, after getting showered and dressed, and having had a surprisingly satisfying night's sleep, there came a knock on the door.

"Come in," she called, emerging from the bathroom and wiping off any stray toothpaste with a tissue. It was Sarah.

"Hi there," the lady beamed as she entered.

"So, what's the itinerary for today?" Arielle wanted to know.

"First, we can grab some breakfast in the dining room. I presume you eat breakfast – and even if you don't, Matron would strongly advise it. In her words, 'a full and healthy breakfast is the most important meal of the day.'"

"Sounds good to me," she readily agreed.

After a hearty meal, Sarah handed her a laminated floor plan with all the rooms marked on it and gave her a grand tour, taking her past the laundry and other utility rooms near the dining room where students could do their own laundry, ironing and shoe polishing; round the quadrangle; peering into classrooms, well-stocked library, private study booths, and gymnasium – the prospect of the latter causing Arielle to suck in her breath, though she said nothing to Sarah; peering out over the well-maintained playing fields at the back of the hall; passing the stairs leading up to the dorms and mentioning that there were bathrooms and individual shower cubicles at each end of that wing; pointing out the common rooms for junior students, mature students, and staff, where they could relax and socialise; and finally the main hall that was used for hosting talks, drama, musical recitals, and other major events. There was a lot for Arielle to take in and, perhaps knowing this from first-hand experience, thankfully Sarah didn't go into any great detail.

Then they ended back near the main entrance in the central

building where all the offices were. It struck Arielle that while Sarah was fine making general chit-chat, she deflected more serious issues, especially politics. Or maybe it was just that she avoided any subjects that might degenerate into negativity.

The first port of call was the front office, where one of the clerks sat at a computer, asking her general questions like her full name, date of birth, gender, last previous address, next of kin, medical history and special dietary requirements, employment record, academic achievements, skills, hobbies and interests; that kind of thing. She couldn't remember all of the details, since she'd had to abandon all her things in her bedsit, but information still on her phone helped fill in the gaps. Anyhow, the clerk didn't appear at all concerned.

One thing she did notice was that there was no network signal here, but when she mentioned it to Sarah, the lady had assured her that this was quite deliberate, for security reasons. She took out her own mobi and brought a QCode up on screen, Arielle scanned it, and she now had instant access to their local system.

Their next port of call was Matron's office. Here, a nurse first had her strip down to her underwear and gave her a physical examination. The nurse jocularly referred to it an "MOT"<sup>94</sup>. Arielle was relieved to know that she'd passed with flying colours, although she was advised that she could do with putting on a little weight; the exact opposite of what many people these days would have been advised.

Then she was asked to take a seat for a minute or two before being called into Matron's office. She was a little anxious about this meeting, although she had no real reason for feeling this way. It was perhaps merely the fact that she was going to be interviewed by someone in authority.

She needn't have worried, though. She was warmly welcomed, and though asked about what had brought her to Merrymede Hall, she wasn't made to answer any probing questions. And as she listened to Matron outline the scope of her own work here, Arielle relaxed. It was Matron's job to deal with

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<sup>94</sup> Named after an old compulsory annual Ministry of Transport test of motor vehicles for safety and exhaust fumes; a thorough inspection.

students' health and safety, meaning health, diet, illnesses, medical and dental appointments, and miscellaneous minor problems; housekeeping, laundry and mending; emotional support; supervision, such as maintaining an adult presence out of hours and at night; and other tasks such as lost property, and supervision at break times, during the lunch hour, and bedtimes; and, in the case of younger students, communication with parents and other parties.

So, happy that Arielle was in good physical health, she asked a few gentle questions about any mental health concerns, such as anxiety, and Arielle was able to assure her that all was well on that score; though she did concede that she sometimes had issues with general negativity.

"Oh, that's perfectly understandable and quite natural given the crazy and messed up world we live in, Miss Appleyard," Matron smiled. "And we'll soon have that sorted out, please rest assured of that. That's not all we're here for, but it's a good part of it."

Matron stood up and she followed suit. "Well, it's been lovely to meet you, Miss Appleyard," the woman said, shaking her hand firmly. "And if you need advice or assistance at any time, please remember that my door and the Director's door are always open."

Arielle thanked her and left, gently closing the door behind her; thanked the nurse again, too, and rejoined Sarah who had been patiently waiting on one of the chairs outside.

"Heart of gold," Arielle confirmed.

"Not meaning to pry, but how did it go?"

"Passed with flying colours, thanks."

"Excellent news. "Next stop the Director's office, then."

That was conveniently right next door to Matron's.

"I'm sorry to put you through all this waiting, Sarah," she remarked as she hovered outside the door.

"No problems: I've got quite a bit of reading and replying to do on my mobi, and the chairs here are as good as any, so I'm not worried in the least. Don't worry, Arielle: I'd let you know if anything were amiss or untoward."

Arielle had her hand raised and was on the point of knocking

when the door opened and the Director appeared. She had a fright, but the man didn't even blink an eye.

"Ah," he said, taking the situation in a flash. "And you must be Arielle Appleyard, if I'm not mistaken. What a delightful name. Welcome."

Arielle took a couple of steps back and the Director popped his head out of the door. "And good morning to you, too, Sarah."

"Hi," Arielle replied nervously. He was a tall, slim gentleman in the early stages of middle age and with sharp brown eyes, a thin nose, wide smile, goaty beard, and a mop of unruly brown hair. His hairline was beginning to recede, but he was still in the prime of his life, and not having yet begun to go to seed.

"Glad to meet you, sir," she added belatedly.

The Director glanced at his watch. Not, mind you, a smartwatch but a shiny silver antique pocket watch, fastened to his black jacket by a sturdy silver chain. He had matching black trousers, and light brown shoes, but what most caught Arielle's eye were the very brightly coloured patterns on his woollen jumper. She was told later that the Director always wore something made of wool, even at the height of summer, though this jumper was admittedly quite thin.

Was the man already watching the time, even before their interview had begun? Surely not.

The Director put the pocket watch away in his right-hand jacket pocket and stroked his beard thoughtfully for a few moments.

"I hate to inconvenience you, dear ladies, but I do think that a change of plans is in order."

Arielle was perplexed, but tried not to show it.

"It's around eleven now. How's about you come back at twelve, before lunch?"

"You, too, Sarah, if you can make it. You'd be most welcome, and let's just say that I don't think that you will be disappointed."

Arielle wasn't quite sure what was going on, but Sarah seemed perfectly okay with the new arrangement, and so they headed for the quad to have a sit down in the sun. "Hope you don't mind, Arielle," Sarah said, "but I still have a few messages

that I must answer.”

For her part, Arielle was happy enough just sitting there and enjoying the sun. Autumn would be coming soon, along with cooler and more unsettled weather, and she was intent on making the most of the sunshine while it lasted.

As it was, though they arrived back at the Director’s office just before the strike of twelve, he was already there in the corridor waiting for them, and he was sporting an old-fashioned hat with a brim and a dent in the crown of the hat. She wondered if she should point this out to him, but was glad she had not when Sarah later told her that this style was called a trilby and that the crease in the top was intentional.

“Ready for the off, then?” the Director asked, and they all headed in the direction of the front entrance.

Since there was no traffic on the lane, they walked three abreast in the middle of the road, and chatted away as they walked. At first the Director had Sarah give him a brief update on the latest news, but there was nothing much to report, really: the curfew was still in force in all the major cities and towns. Not only were people’s IDs being scrutinised at the growing number of checkpoints, the police and security services had a greater presence on the streets and were making random checks.

It came as no great surprise to Arielle to learn that her photo and Brent’s had been plastered all over the media and in shop windows and, of course, citizens were encouraged to report any sightings, but warned not to approach as the pair were considered dangerous. The authorities were also concerned about possible links between the disappearances of the two and the spate of recent terrorist attacks.

Well, let them think what they like.

What hit Arielle the hardest, though, was one last item of news that Sarah had to reveal: John Rispin, Arielle’s former colleague, had been shot at dawn that day by military firing squad. In a statement issued by the authorities, he was said to have been engaged in terrorist activities, but they all knew that was a blatant falsehood.

Urgent business out of the way, the director turned his

attention to Arielle, officially welcoming her to their happy home, albeit under such adverse and distressing circumstances. Fortunately, he didn't probe deeply into the circumstances of her exodus, so she didn't have to be economical with the truth. Clearly a rather astute gentleman, the less said about the matter, the better.

After enquiring about how she was feeling, and her giving him some biographical details, the Director went on to outline the reasons that the centre had been set up and its primary functions: to provide a broad, liberal education and outreach – more for the Romantic, Idealist heart than the head – and to promote free and critical thinking skills; to counter the many untruths and censorship, and to better equip them for life under the regime; and in addition to the physical and mental discipline of martial arts, perhaps most of all to provide training in more esoteric or spiritual subjects.

“As the psychologist Robert Ornstein once pointed out,” the Director told her:

“There will be no further biological evolution without human ‘conscious evolution’.”

Arielle had only just come across that in her studies, so perhaps the Director had devised much of the curriculum.

“I can't emphasise strongly enough just how dire our human predicament is, and just how urgent is the need for more enlightened intervention. And that, hopefully, along with many other workers, is where we come in.”

They'd come a long way down the lane by now, and ahead of them she could see cottages, and it looked like that's where they were heading.

“And the Resistance?” Arielle queried, after a time, having heard no mention of it.

The Director laughed. “This *is* the Resistance.

“As the late, great Mahatma Gandhi advised:

“We but mirror the world. All the tendencies present in the outer world are to be found in the world of our body. If we could change ourselves, the tendencies in the world would also change. As a man changes his own nature, so does the attitude of the world change towards him. This is the divine mystery supreme.”

“A shorter and less accurate rendition, but one which suits our purposes, would be ‘if you want to change the world, change yourself’ or ‘be the change you want to see in the world’.

Then he added: “And I should point out that though you may understand these words at an intellectual level, or even have a feel for them at an intuitive level, you still don’t really Know what I mean.

“Have you seen the film, *The Matrix*?”

She nodded.

“Well, there’s a scene there where Morpheus says to Neo: ‘There’s a difference between knowing the path and walking the path.’ A whole world of difference.

“Let me repeat that. There’s a difference between knowing the path and walking the path. A whole world of difference.”

“I think I see,” she nodded.

“You’re beginning to see, let’s put it that way,” he suggested.

“In fact, let me say that for a third time, so that your Angel takes heed: There’s a difference between knowing the path and walking the path. A whole world of difference.”

“And since we are, as they say, on a roll, let me add one last tasty morsel for you to consider, Arielle: ‘Knowledge is not gained, it is there all the time. It is the “veils” which have to be dissolved in the mind.’”<sup>95</sup>

Another quote she’d recently come across. That was deep, but maybe time to get back on track. “Who was this guy, again?” she queried. “The one with the foreign sounding name, I mean.”

°For heaven’s sake, ‘sis,° her inner voice hissed at her. °The

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<sup>95</sup> Idries Shah, *Neglected Aspects of Sufi Study*.

Director will know exactly what you mean, and it probably didn't pass by him unnoticed that you've changed the subject. Trust me, that man can read you like an open book.<sup>o</sup>

"Mahatma Gandhi, a political and spiritual leader who sought independence for India from British rule, and was imprisoned many times. He advocated civil disobedience, but stressed the need for peaceful resistance."

"So, what are your views on non-peaceful resistance?" she wanted to know.

The Director waved his hands in the air.

"Blowing up governmental infrastructure or facilities used to transport or supply the security forces or the military – as did the French Resistance, fighting against the far-right Nazi regime during the Second World War – I would not call acts of terrorism, though I hasten to add that the recent attacks on our own soil were not carried out by any of us, not even by the so-called paramilitary wing, but by the regime itself, in furtherance of their own nefarious agenda.

"But harming, killing or terrorising civilians – ordinary men, women, and children – even severely demoralising them through artillery or aerial bombardment, let's say, would not be something I could ever condone.

"I could not, for example, condone the atomic bombing of Hiroshima and Nagasaki in Japan at the end of the Second World War – even if we discount the possibility that these were also used as part of a macabre scientific experiment, and even though this forced the Japanese authorities to capitulate and shortened the war."

The Director anticipated her very next question: "As for the paramilitary wing, they are actually a splinter group – a breakaway group – and as such their activities are outside our remit and outside our jurisdiction. They have their own ideas, whatever you may think of them, and they will no doubt have to search their own consciences very deeply."

They'd reached the small village now, and they were walking past a row of detached cottages.

"Isn't that just delightful!" the Director enthused, abruptly



changing the subject and marvelling at the profusion of brightly flowering plants and shrubs in the gardens, which looked like they were bursting at the seams. Even the ground cover, with its tiny little pink and lilac flowers had found a home in the cracks between pavement and garden wall.

“But, in any case,” the Director advised, stopping briefly near the door of a public house, The Prancing Pony: “Try not to allow these things to take root in your mind and grow in profusion like weeds. Instead, cultivate a garden.”

She cast her eyes down, feeling distinctly uncomfortable at having been unmasked.

The Director smiled and gently guided her inside. “But please don’t worry, Arielle, and especially don’t worry unnecessarily. Because that is precisely what we are here for.”

Sarah was already inside and at the bar, making sure she beat the Director to it, and ordering drinks for herself and the Director, and then asking Arielle what she was drinking.

They ordered food, too, but here the Director asserted his authority and insisted on paying for the food.

“Did you know all along that this is where we were heading?” Arielle asked her as she and Sarah carried the drinks to a nearby table in a quiet niche or “cosy” overlooking the beer garden.

Sarah laughed and nodded. “When I saw him wink at me, I had a pretty good idea.”

“And does he always bring the new girls here,” she replied, jokingly.

Sarah raised her eyebrows. “Good grief, no. He’s a very honourable man.”

Arielle blushed. “I’m sorry, I shouldn’t have said that. I don’t know what came over me.”

They’d just sat down, with Sarah and her sitting facing the garden and the Director against the window facing them, when the Director turned to Sarah. “But you only got three drinks, Sarah. What about our friend here?”

Arielle spun round on her stool, nearly knocking her own tankard over.

Her heart leapt as she saw Brent heading for the bar.

“It’s alright,” Sarah chirped-up. “I paid for four and told the landlord that Brent would be in later.”

Arielle was agog. “So, you knew that we’d be meeting up with Brent, as well.”

Sarah laughed and winked at the Director. “It was our little secret, wasn’t it, Baz.”

“Thank you, Director,” Arielle smiled, wiping away a stray tear.

“Please call me Baz,” the man suggested. “And anyway, aren’t you going to say hello to your friend?”

Arielle needed no further encouragement and, getting up, she dashed across the lounge, grabbed Brent’s hand and dragged him outside for a minute or two’s privacy. She might now be on first name terms with the Director, but the last thing she wanted was an audience when she flung her arms around Brent’s neck and kissed him passionately. As for words and explanations, even though these were all bubbling up inside her, they could damn well wait their turn, too.

# Scene 23:

## Making the Most of It

It was Sunday, and the next day Arielle was due to start her introductory week, so she and Brent were intent on making the most of it.

Both of them has set alarms on their mobis to wake them at 6am, but Arielle had hit the “snooze” button one too many times and woke with a start to find she’d slept in. So she leapt out of bed, dashed through to the bathroom and had a very quick shower. Then, dressing as fast as she could, she grabbed her things and hurried down the corridor to knock on Brent’s door. They were still in the guest rooms and wouldn’t be moving to the dorms until the evening.

She needn’t have worried. Brent had been slow to rise, too, and he’d been outside to have a roll-up to help him wake up. Both of them were still sleepy and neither of them said very much, though they did enjoy a lovely early morning hug, then they grabbed their bags and wandered down to the kitchens. Some of the other staff were already up and about, but the dining room wasn’t open yet, so they grabbed a bowl of cereal, brewed a coffee, and ate in the empty adjacent cafeteria.

Finally the strong coffee worked its magic, and they began to wake up.

“I feel like a Neanderthal and probably look the part,” she remarked.

Brent, however, had studied his pre-history, if such a thing were possible. “I reckon the Neanderthals get a bad press, and that it was the *Homo sapiens* who were the club-wielding brutes.”

Not that the supposed experts could easily prove it one way or the other.

“They do say that most people have a small percentage of DNA in their genomes,” he added.

“Well, I think I must have more than my fair share,” she replied, and she already had her mobi fired up, carrying out her own research.

“Looks like you’re wrong there, sweetheart,” she replied, pushing her mobi across the table so he could read the contents of the screen for himself: “Studies of Neanderthal skulls have shown that their brains had larger vision- and movement-processing areas, which would have left them with a social cognition deficit.”

Brent wasn’t convinced, and pushed the mobi back in her direction. “I’m sure I read somewhere that Neanderthal brains were at least as large, if not larger.”

Arielle laughed and put her phone away. “Listen to us: we’re like an old bickering couple. Who really knows, since though they may have the skulls, they don’t have the actual brains. All the evidence is indirect. Well, I guess there’s other evidence like jewellery, weapons, and cracked skulls. But at the end of the day does it even matter whether we’re right or wrong?”

“I quite agree, and I also think what we really need is another coffee,” he nodded, kissing her lightly on the forehead, taking their mugs and heading back to the kitchen for a refill.

Oh dear, she thought: that wasn’t a very auspicious start to the day. You and your big mouth, Arielle Appleyard. Well, she’d have to be careful not to let that happen again.

°It’s okay, ‘sis,° her inner voice advised her. °Every relationship has its wrinkles. And remember what you learnt in your training about how groups evolve: forming, storming, norming, performing and reforming.°

Or disbanding, she corrected her.

°Oh ye of little faith,° she was reminded. °Just remember that you’re in safe hands now.°

I’ll give it my best shot, she whispered back. I promise you that.

°It’s not a shot, Arielle, it’s a commitment.°

It was an off the cuff remark. You know what I mean.

Thankfully, after that initial hiccup, the rest of the day went smoothly. Hand in hand, they took a circuitous stroll through the

vegetable and herb gardens round the side of the building, through the rose gardens across the front, and on along a winding path lined with soft chips that looked like cork, through the bluebell-strewn woods. The path was quite narrow here, so they walked in single file.

After a time, they began to descend and they emerged into a wooded glen with a gently running stream flowing through it, and they turned to their left to walk up a wide path beside the stream. She saw that every so often, there were rocks laid across the stream, so that shallow pools formed behind the rocks and the water tumbled over these miniature waterfalls.

They followed the glen all the way to the top, as it gracefully curved first one way and then the other.

At the top, the stream disappeared into a dark tunnel, and she was surprised to find a wide square here, surrounded by low pillars topped by stone lintels, and covered with rectangular paving stones. In the centre of the square there was a wide octagonal pool with a low wall where they could sit and relax, and she could see now that there were many white lilies floating on the surface of the still water and bright orange ornamental fish swimming around; and, in pride of place in the centre of the pond, the green-bronze, life-sized statue of a figure wearing a hat with wings attached to it, winged sandals, and carrying a long staff that had something curled around it and two more wings.

Brent had probably seen her staring at the figure and he pointed to it. "That's the ancient Greek messenger of the gods, Hermes," he told her. "The Romans called him Mercurius, or we would say Mercury."

"And the staff he's carrying?" she asked.

"That's a caduceus," he replied. "with two intertwined serpents and, as you can see, two wings. It represents Hermes and is a symbol of medicine with which he is also associated."

"It looks pretty ancient," she noted.

"This was an old estate long before the Friends came into possession of the Hall," Brent told her. "But who owned and managed the estate in days gone by, I have no idea."

"Would Hermes or Athena be able to tell me?" She was about

to fish her mobi out of her pocket, then decided against it.

“I doubt it, Arielle, but they may have information about the old estate in the library. Or Yvette Carder who teaches history might know: she’s a rich mine of rejected and lost knowledge. And Baz knows his onions, too.”

“Knows his onions?”

“I mean he has a lot of knowledge and experience. You’d be surprised what the Director can locate in the labyrinthian depths of what he calls his ‘Miscellaneous Information Department’. And very often, if he doesn’t know something himself, then he can point you in the direction of someone else who might.”

Arielle shuffled closer to him and leant her head against his shoulder. “You’re quite a mine of information yourself, Brent Messenger.”

Brent gently stroked her hair. “I’m still a novice, Arielle. But stick around and you’ll find that there’s something about this place and its people that slowly but surely rubs off on you.”

“Good things, I hope.”

“That goes without saying. Or at least, given time and when you know the Friends better, it will.”

She raised her head and peered into his bright blue eyes. “Sometimes you speak of the Friends, as if with a capital ‘F’ and sometimes you speak of the Resistance, capital ‘R’. So, what’s what or which is which?”

“Some would say that the Friends are the educational or mystical wing of the Resistance,” he told her, rising to his feet and helping her up. “But I would say that the Resistance are a wing, or an outreach movement, for the Friends.”

“It’s not some weird cult, is it?”

“Heaven forbid it should ever become one,” he replied as they headed for a steep flight of stone stairs that led out of the glen. “That’s the day we do a runner.

“No, if anything is a cult then it is the Beloved Leader’s regime; the materialist and consumerist culture, and fundamentalist scientism. Well, a whole heap of historical and contemporary ‘isms’.”<sup>96</sup>

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<sup>96</sup> Ism: A belief (or system of beliefs) accepted as authoritative by some group

“Not there’s any place safe to run to, these days,” Brent lamented. “Except perhaps the more remote areas of the Himalayas.”<sup>97</sup>

Arielle had considered herself pretty fit, but by the time they reached the top of the steps her calves were burning. Taking a breather, she became all too aware that the physical activities she’s have to undergo at Merrymede Hall would be no walk in the park.

There was another lane at the top of the glen, branching left and back perhaps toward the hall; carrying on to the right in the direction of the coast, and straight ahead to who knows where. She could, of course, have checked on her mobi, but she had made a deliberate decision to cut down on her screen time, not least to keep herself clear-headed.

They walked straight ahead down the tree-lined lane and then on a long sweeping arc that eventually brought them back full circle through the village and back to the hall.

It was a long and welcome walk, but like all good things, at last it came to an end.

Once back, since they’d missed lunch and hadn’t thought to take anything more than a snack bar and water with them, they headed for the cafeteria. Since they’d earned a minor concession, they both settled on a less-than-healthy cheeseburger, chips<sup>98</sup> and baked beans in tomato sauce. Well, at least all the food was prepared from raw ingredients and cooked by the staff, rather than coming out of a plastic can.

That out of the way, they had to report to one of the domestic staff, since they were being moved from the guest rooms into the dorms. Fortunately, the mature students had their own sleeping quarters, sharing a small room with just one other person of the same sex. Alas for Arielle and Brent, that meant being allocated rooms at opposite ends of the wing, but she could live with that for now. Matron was old-fashioned in that respect – and probably rightly so.

They spent some time together in the mature students’

or school.

<sup>97</sup> A vast Asian mountain range.

<sup>98</sup> Like French fries, but much thicker.

common room that evening, Brent and a couple of the others teaching her how to play a murder mystery game called Cluedo.

All too soon, however, it was time for bed, and she had her big day ahead of her.



## Scene 24:

### Arielle's Big Day

Since Arielle was not part of the usual annual intake of younger and mature students, the introductory week followed a rather different and ad-hoc pattern. There was only one other newbie or fresher that week: a young lad who'd been evacuated like her when his mother, a lone parent, had been arrested. His name was Arthur and he was a typical scrawny-looking and rather nerdy boy of eleven, in the early stages of hormonal change and the facial acne that sometimes engendered. And he stared at her a lot.

As for Brent, he'd been through all this before, and while she was being inducted into the school, he and the Director would be discussing his own future, both in the short term and the longer term, in view of his exile. It was possible that Brent might join the staff at Merrymede Hall, but as yet, the cards were, as he said, still "up in the air", and he couldn't be sure how they'd fall.

First up, one of the staff took them along to the computer room, where they were logged into the system and presented with the first of several lengthy and detailed on-screen questionnaires.

The first questionnaire ran them through their educational attainments, even though she'd provided some detail when she'd first arrived at the hall. It also asked about future career choices and goals. Given her current situation – being *persona non grata*, was that the correct term for her exile? – those final questions gave her much pause for thought.

The second questionnaire was far more thorough and involved rating a long list of personal interests on a scale of 0 to 5, 0 meaning "hatred" and 5 meaning "fanatical interest", and they were also invited to rate their level of knowledge and experience in each interest, from "none whatsoever" to "professional", no matter how they'd rated that interest. Additional spaces were provided for them to enter any interests

that were not specified.

Then came the third questionnaire which listed all of the courses that were on offer at the hall. Though they could only take between five and ten courses at an ordinary level, between one and four subjects at an advanced level, and up to three online modules at a time, they had to rate their interest in each of the many courses available, again on a scale of 0 to 7. Presumably the system had been programmed to take into account their prior education and experience.

Arielle marvelled at the skill it must take to arrange all the students' timetables and avoid any clashes.

As well as all the subjects that Sarah had told her about in the quadrangle, Arielle saw many more, some of which required classroom teaching, some to be studied as lesser online modules, and some a mixture of both; many were offered as video presentations; some involving theory, some practicals, and again some a mixture of the two.

The list was ginormous.

Alternative lifestyles and counterculture; appropriate and alternative technology; animal care; art, design, and aesthetics; astronomy; business studies; catering and hospitality; child and adult literacy; child and elder care and special needs; civic and social activism; computing; communications and propaganda; complex problem solving; cooperative and peace studies; counselling and advocacy; current affairs; ecology and horticulture; economics; eldership and mentoring; entertainment; farming and agriculture;<sup>99</sup> general and interdisciplinary studies; geography; mathematics and accounting; media studies; meditation and mindfulness; modern and ancient languages; music and singing; mythology, legend, folklore and magic; needlework; online literacy and safety; outdoor activities; parental guidance; philosophy; physical, mental and emotional health; pigeon fancying;<sup>100</sup> psychology and sociology; public service; public speaking and debate; repair, recycling, and

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<sup>99</sup> Some of these courses were offered on other, nearby sites.

<sup>100</sup> Yes, seriously. Keeping and breeding pigeon's was the idea of Wilfred, the Matron's husband and groundskeeper.

reuse;<sup>101</sup> Romantic idealism and renaissance; science and technology; sex education; spirituality, mysticism and religion; soul and cosmos; thinking skills; traditional crafts; Western esotericism; women's, gender and minority studies;<sup>102</sup> and working in groups<sup>103</sup> (to name those not already mentioned).

Ho-ly mo-ly! They covered just about every subject – and pushed all the buttons – that the regime would hate; and must have been working on this curriculum for years. She was staggered by the amount of work, and thought, involved. And all carried out under the regime's radar, without that other “Cyber-Matron” constantly butting in.

There were so many more subjects on offer than she could ever find time for, though admittedly many offered tasters or were shorter modules, and she could only hope that human intelligence, augmented by AI and by common sense could steer her to the most suitable, sensible, and enjoyable choices.

The Director had emphasised at their informal meeting that the aim of the school was to provide a rich and broad, soulful education in the liberal arts as much, if not more, than train them for specialised careers or as cannon fodder. That latter, narrow-minded form of training was already prevalent in society, and he reminded them that the original root meaning of the term *educare* meant “to lead out or bring forth” capabilities, talents, skills – not least joy and a sense of wonder – and definitely not to cram facts and figures into skulls that would be regurgitated – still half-digested – and scored, at some later date.

Crikey, where was Baz when she was struggling, like so many of her peers, at the city school?

Each subject you took, or module you studied, earned you so many credits toward a final diploma which was graded according to your performance. Coursework was continually and interactively assessed, so there would be no end of year examinations, which pleased Arielle no end, because she always

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<sup>101</sup> A course often referred to as the “6 Rs”: Reduce, Reuse, Recycle, Refuse, Rethink, and Repair.

<sup>102</sup> Yes, even in these supposedly enlightened times; indeed, especially in such times.

<sup>103</sup> Including group dynamics.

got the jitters in exams, her brain turned to mush, and she grossly underperformed.

Well, Arielle thought as she hit [Return] one last time and sank back in her comfy swivel chair: That's that. As for young Arthur, perhaps having fewer nervous choices to make than her, he'd completed the task ages ago, and gone off to hang out at the library or whatever young nerdy people got up to.

So that was it for the day. Now she had to wait anxiously while AI crunched the data and presented the Director, or one of his team, with a list of bullet-pointed suggestions and recommendations. In a place like this, real life human beans would surely make all the important, final decisions.

Anyhow, time to quit worrying and go to see how her better half, Brent, was getting on.

## Scene 25:

### “Bring Me Sunshine”

Brent was already there in the cafeteria when Arielle happened by, on the off chance.

One of the other mature students had his laptop out, and he was playing an old YouTube video, and they were all crowded round the table watching it. Seeing her enter, he hit the rewind button so she could see the whole of the video,<sup>104</sup> and she came forward to stand close to Brent.

The video started off in black-and-white, cutting from one depressing scene to another, with news reports full of doom and gloom, and workers who were watching or listening to these reports all looked glum, depressed or anxious.

Then in walked a guy with a ukulele and started to sing and play “Bring Me Sunshine”; a backing band, The Jive Aces, joined in; people started cheering up and dancing, and slowly but surely, the scenes and the people began to change from black-and-white to vibrant colour.

Brent had suggested the film *Pleasantville*, and though sadly unable to watch it with him, she’d watched it herself, and she could certainly see the resemblance; perhaps the deliberate allusion to the film. Yes, as the Director had suggested, this really *is* what the Resistance was about. Though, having said that, they couldn’t afford to be complacent and emulate ostriches, with their heads buried in the sand.

“Hello, Sunshine,” Brent properly greeted Arielle, giving her a sloppy kiss on the cheek, as they walked over to the counter to order a couple of coffees.

“Hiya, Sweetheart,” she reciprocated.

Once they had their drinks and were seated, she broached the

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<sup>104</sup> The Jive Aces present “Bring Me Sunshine” (a Morecambe & Wise theme song). Source: YouTube.

subject.

“How’d your meeting with the Director go?” she asked him.

“You first.”

“No, you first.”

“No, you first,” Brent laughed. “How did your induction go?”

“Pretty well,” she replied. “Filling in my educational history; rating lists of interests and courses – I mean, really, really long lists.”

“Ah,” Brent nodded. “I remember that all-too well.”

“I found it surprisingly stressful.”

“Well, don’t worry: it’s just AI building a profile on you; they’re not judging you by your choices or lack of choices.”

“You’re okay with the AI input, then?”

“Sure. I’m not beholden to AI, and I’m aware of some of its weaknesses and potential use and abuse, but I was heavily involved in the development of the system here, and I’m aware of areas in which AI can be used to real advantage. And – touch wood – it hasn’t let us down.”

She laughed: “And real wood for you to touch!”

“Oh yes, the Friends use only the best materials.”

She cast her eyes down. “Well, in my case that remains to be seen.”

“Bring me sunshine, remember,” he gently chided her, raising her chin a little. “And anyway, Baz gets the final say, and rest assured that he and his team will find work for you that fits you like second skin.”

“Okay, let me segue<sup>105</sup> neatly into the conversation here,” she beamed. “Speaking of work: how did your day go?”

It was Brent’s turn to beam a little ray of sunshine back at her. “Better than I’d hoped,” he said, “though Matron may perhaps not think so.”

Arielle was puzzled.

“Well, she had one of the housekeepers sort out a room for me only last night, and now she’s going to have to move me again, though I’ll try to catch the housekeeper and save them the

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<sup>105</sup> The act of changing smoothly from one state or situation to another; a term used in music, for instance.

job of changing and laundering the bedclothes, since they're still clean and I can take my own bedding with me and change it myself."

"I'm still puzzled, though I admire your thoughtfulness, Brent," she replied.

"What I'm saying, in a round about way is that I'll be moving to the staff quarters, and I'll even get a whole room to myself."

Her eyes lit up.

"Which is another way of saying that Baz offered me a position on the staff. Mary Woodhouse will be leaving us at the end of the autumn term – she's starting a job at a new centre in the south – and so I'll be shadowing her for a few weeks, then taking over her many information technology-related classes, and helping manage some of the hall's systems. And I also get to contribute to some of the more esoteric stuff here.

"But of course that's *sub rosa*," he laughed.<sup>106</sup>

She reached across the table and clasped Brent's hands tightly. "Oh, wow. That's excellent news, Sweetheart. I'm thrilled for you."

"I'm thrilled for us," he gallantly replied, and she wished that she'd thought of that herself, though aware that she'd have been too shy to say such a thing.

"Well, you certainly have brought us sunshine today," she laughed, drumming the table excitedly with her outstretched palms.

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<sup>106</sup> It literally means "under the rose". Something done in secret or covertly.

# Scene 26:

## The Day of Judgement

Arielle arrived at the Director's office on the dot of ten o'clock the next day, as requested, and as she reached to knock on the door, she just knew that he would appear. And so he did, right on cue.

"A-ha!" the man smiled broadly, opening the door wide and gracefully waving her in. "I thought I sensed your presence. Do come in and make yourself comfortable."

He closed the door and strolled back across the office to stand in front of Arielle.

"I'm going to have a pot of tea. Would you care to join me? Or coffee? Lemonade, if you prefer?"

"Or perhaps something stronger."

Arielle shot him a glance, and again he smiled.

"I thought so," the Director nodded, and he crossed the room to a fine rosewood cabinet with a door that swung down to make a working surface. "And if I'm not mistaken, I think you'll enjoy this."

The man took out two large crystal glasses with short stems and large semi-spherical bowls, uncorked a green-coloured bottle, and poured out two liberal measures of amber liquid. She was too far away to read the label on the bottle, but she was willing to take the Director's word for it.

The Director came back across the office, handed Arielle her drink, pulled up an occasional table, and then sat down beside her.

"Thank you, Director," she smiled, and she put the glass to her nose to check the fragrance. She was no connoisseur but it smelt like a strong liquor with a floral and perhaps honey-like bouquet to it. And, without question, it was alcoholic.

"It's called *chungari*," the Director reliably informed her, and the recipe originated all the way from the Hindu Kush in



Afghanistan. Way over in the mountains of central Asia.

“And it means ‘herb of enlightenment’”, he added, anticipating the next question that was still forming in her mind.

The man took a little sip of the amber elixir, then another, and laid his glass down, and Arielle followed suit. It was certainly strong, though quite warm and pleasant, but she was glad that she hadn’t taken a large swig and choked or otherwise made a fool of herself.

“I have a proposition to make, Arielle – if I may call you that. If it’s too familiar, then please do let me know. And please do call me Baz. Or Director if you prefer.”

Calling the man Baz felt a little premature for Arielle, since she was a new and quite junior student, but she guessed she’d just have to get used to it.

“Arielle would be fine by me,” she agreed, yet still hesitated. “Thank you, Baz.”

“If you’ll forgive me,” the Director said again, picking up his glass and taking another couple of sips, “I’ve noticed that you often think in sentence structures using ‘but’ as a conjunction. ‘Baz seems rather informal, *but* I’ll get used to it.’ And don’t worry: with practice you’ll soon learn to substitute your ‘buts’ with ‘ands’.”

Arielle suddenly felt quite hot as the blood rushed to her face and ears, and she automatically reached for her drink and was about to take a good swig of it, then collected her wits and took two more genteel sips.

“Must be a mind-reader,” she was prompted, and she simply allowed herself to voice that possibility.

“Are you a mind-reader?” she asked, less confidently than her inner voice.

The Director raised his eyebrows, but perhaps more out of good humour than surprise or shock.

“My dear Arielle, if I am a mind-reader or receiver, if you like, then you are a mind-giver or transmitter.”

“Gosh. Am I really that transparent? I always considered myself to be guarded, and actually quite good at it,” she replied. “Baz.”

“Oh, it’s a good sign, I can assure you; and nothing at all to feel bad about. Some people are capable of both receiving and transmitting subtle psychic messages. I believe that radio engineers would call that a transceiver.”

Then, quite out of the blue, the Director asked her: “Tell me, do you hear voices, or do you simply ‘feel’ that you have something that you must say?”

“Oh, gosh.” She didn’t know quite what to say in answer to that question. “You mean, do I hear voices like crazy people do?”

The Director remained silent and attentive, as if waiting for her to say more; to further incriminate herself. Well, there could be no going back now.

°In for a penny, in for a pound.°

“I guess I should finish what I’ve started,” she admitted to the Director, “even if it is difficult or expensive.”

“In for a penny, in for a pound?” the man enquired.

She caught herself freezing with open jaw and reached for her drink.

The Director reached his hand out and touched it to her shoulder for just a moment. “I can’t read your thoughts directly, Arielle, but I sometimes sense things or a symbol or metaphor will spring to mind, or something will resonate in me. Sometimes these things miss, and sometimes they land right on target.”

Arielle downed the rest of her drink and was about to begin, but the Director excused himself momentarily and went to refill their glasses.

“You were saying,” he prompted her.

“In answer to your question, yes I hear an inner voice. I used to hear many voices and thought of them as my ‘mind demons’ but looking back, I think those were just full of other people’s ideas: my parents and other authority figures that I’d internalised.

“These days, though, it’s always the same voice and it provides benign and apparently quite wise advice and feedback. Whether it’s just a part of myself, somewhere deep down inside, or some supernatural, metaphysical entity, I don’t know. I’ve tried to get a name out of him – and it does feel like a him – but to no avail.”

“And how do you converse?” the director wanted to know as they both took another couple of sips of their drink.

“Sometimes images and symbols will flash into my mind, especially as I’m falling asleep or just prior to awakening. I once awoke, or thought I’d awoken, to a brilliant emerald design, like a bright wallpaper made up of beautiful interconnected and repeating geometrical designs. And I remember thinking ‘Wow! I could never make up something as intricate and wonderful like this.’

“I’m a writer, though, and I’ve read a lot, even more so recently. So the communications mostly come through metaphor and word play. Most recently, however, I’ve found that I can hold informal dialogues with this inner being. It’s just like chatting to my best friend, except this inner companion more often than not tells me what I *need* to hear, not what I *want* to hear or what they want me to hear.”

“A tutelary spirit, then.”

“Yes, you could say that, though I’m getting the impression that it’s to do with soul rather than directly with spirit; like this is an intermediary.

“Intuition, I guess some people call it, yet a lot more than that. Inner-tuition would be closer to the truth. I’m being told right now that we have learnt one-another’s language.

“I think that things changed up a gear when I’d become more patient and trusting of these inner resources; especially once I was able to take onboard what was said to me and make leaps of faith, even if at first the contact was only sporadic and could sometimes be embarrassingly astray. How can I put it? At first the signal was faint and there was a lot of noise, a lot of interference; but gradually the signal, or my reception of the signal, strengthened and became much clearer. By noise I mean my own noisy mental processes, prejudices and the like.”

“Your own impediments.”

“Yes, that’s what I mean. And I’m being told that there is such a thing as external interference.”

The Director nodded as if in agreement, and took another sip of his drink.

“Yes,” he said: “I’m not into devils and demons, but there really *are* dark forces in this world that are especially active when people are first beginning to awaken.”

“Spiritually, you mean?”

“Spiritually in particular; developmentally more generally speaking.”

“Gosh, and all this time I thought that was just me being paranoid.”

The Director laughed and feigned a strange accent: “Just because you’re paranoid, that don’t mean they’re not out to git you.

“And of course this is no laughing matter. Many of the Friends have suffered immense difficulties and hardships along the way. For anyone with even half a heart, this comes with the territory.”

The man abruptly changed tack.

“This is fascinating, Arielle. Thank you for sharing it with me; and thank you for finding the courage to share it. It’s much appreciated.”

They paused to take another sip of their drink.

“Anyway, as I mentioned, I have a proposition to make, Arielle.”

“Oh, I’m sorry, I interrupted you,” she said, and she took another two more sips of her drink.

“Not at all, Arielle,” the Director smiled. “It was a perfectly natural, rewarding and pertinent conversation and we simply went with the flow.”

“A proposition?” she echoed.

The director got up briefly to retrieve a file of loose papers from his desk. “I’m old-fashioned and I much prefer hard copies,” he admitted. “Drives my secretary and the other staff round the twist.”<sup>107</sup>

The man came to sit back down and studied the papers for a few moments. “What I had in mind, and much confirmed by our chat, I suggest the following courses for you, though you’re free to veto any or all of these recommendations:

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<sup>107</sup> Drives them crazy.

“Communications and propaganda; counselling and advocacy; psychology and sociology; Romantic idealism and renaissance; and spirituality, mysticism and religion.”

“Five subjects?” she queried.

He counted them himself. “Correct.”

“But ...” She corrected herself mid-sentence. “I thought there’d be more. Not that I disagree with any of the choices. That sounds like a good combination to me.”

“Ah, but you see, I haven’t as yet completed my proposition, Arielle,” the Director said, raising his index finger in the air.

“There’s more?” she queried, which was pretty dumb of her, of course.

“These studies will take up no more than two and a half days of the school week. Tuesdays, Wednesday mornings, and Fridays to be precise, assuming I’m correct in my calculations. But I am still open to adding more courses, if you’d rather do that.”

The Director didn’t leave her time to answer that, but pressed on.

“And that would leave Mondays, Wednesday afternoons, and Thursdays for other activities.

“Such as?”

Such as joining our staff in a part-time capacity.”

Arielle could feel her heart pumping away heavily in her chest. She hadn’t expected this at all.

“In what capacity?” she asked at length, finishing off her second drink.

“Utilising your journalistic and writing skills to help develop our official written materials and communications, including those online; mentoring students, especially those contributing to the Hall’s monthly magazine ...”

“And?”

“And teaching communications and propaganda part-time, to assist Henry Goldstein with his workload.”

“Well, I’m extremely grateful, and I haven’t as yet seen the syllabus, but I’m not sure that I know my way round a subject like communications or propaganda, Director. Baz.”

“As Aristotle wrote in his *Nichomachean Ethics*, ‘The things

we have to learn before we can do them, we learn by doing them.”

“Well, that answers that question,” Arielle laughed.

“Is it a deal?” the Director asked her. “You can, of course, have time to consider what we’ve discussed, and you can change your mind.”

“Sure. What the hell? Why not.”

“And you’re really sure this is what you want? You’re not just saying this to please me.”

Arielle held out her hand. “Baz, I’m as sure as I’ll ever be. I’m sure I’m sure. And thank you once again. Gosh, you have brightened up my day.”

The Director took her hand and shook it firmly and vigorously.

“Then it’s a deal.”

“So, when do I make a start,” she wanted to know. “Would tomorrow be soon enough?”

“I don’t aim to pressure you, Arielle, but how’s about you conduct initial reconnaissance this week and begin in earnest next week? Your first classes would be next Thursday morning and Thursday afternoon.”

“That’s not much time,” she remarked.

“For the first year, all you have to do is prepare the two classes one week ahead, and you’ll find that, preparing for any unexpected eventuality, we have classes throughout the year uploaded in the cloud, with the archives widely distributed.”

“But what if I get asked awkward questions? Isn’t it convention to teach subjects for which you have a more advanced level of knowledge?”

“Don’t worry, Arielle: These are not advanced classes, and I have far more confidence in your abilities than you are willing to give yourself credit for. I’m sure you’ll be able to ‘wing it’ as they say.”<sup>108</sup>

“I’m a planner rather than a pantsier,”<sup>109</sup> she insisted.

The Director gave her a wink and stood up. She followed

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<sup>108</sup> Improvise, without full preparation or rehearsal. Play it by ear.

<sup>109</sup> Fly by the seat of your pants. Improvise (as above).

suit. “Well, my dear: now is as good a time as any to learn these new skills. It’s all about infallible intuition and spontaneity, you see. Or at least so you will soon come to see. You’re naturally gifted and have already made a good start.

“And I’m sure that Brent would be only too happy to assist you. He was a good student and he’s a good man. One of the finest.”

“Okay, you’ve won me over,” she smiled. “I’ll make sure I’m well prepared and well presented.”

Then: “Out of curiosity, did Brent have a hand in this?” she queried.”

The Director raised his eyebrows momentarily. “We were discussing matters of staffing, and your name was put forward, yes. And, I hasten to add, I was in full agreement. It wasn’t an idle whim: it really did feel right to both of us and to Henry. Providing, that was, that it suited you.

“You’re happy with the arrangement?” the Director asked again. “You can still change your mind if you want to, or have further time to consider the matter.”

“No, that’s absolutely fine with me, Baz. I’m over the moon, in fact, and I’m not just saying that.”

So with that they bade each other farewell, and Arielle went off in search of Brent to let him know the doubly good news. “Bring Me Sunshine”, indeed!

# Scene 27:

## A Short Break

It had been a busy three weeks for Arielle since the Director had offered her the post. The preparation required had taken quite some time and she'd put more than a little thought into it, anxious to get off to a flying start. And before that came what she termed "preparing to prepare" – gathering together all the resources she'd need, or thought she might need, and arranging them as best she could – which was even more frenetic.

Not least, she had to gather her wits together, though thankfully Brent was a great help on that score. She'd cut down on her online study with Athena to forty five minutes on an evening, and then the two of them would head off to one of the "quiet rooms" near the gym to spend another thirty minutes in silent meditation, and when they were out and about during the day, he encouraged her to switch off and engage in silent contemplation. One thing she didn't switch off, however, was her inner voice. The dialogue they had was quite relaxed, comforting, and an additional source of strength for her. Whoever or whatever he was, he was a good friend and ally.

And now she and Brent were taking a short weekend break at Brighthorpe, staying overnight at the Ship Inn and returning on Sunday afternoon.

It was a wonderful opportunity for them both to unwind, and they enjoyed exploring the marine creatures in the rock pools, quietly walking along the cliff tops, and meditating.

Not least, their romance was blossoming, which really warmed the cockles of her heart, and Arielle deeply yearned for more – not only in heart and mind; her body yearned to be close to him, too; and closer still, if he would surrender to such intimacy.

There was no longer any such thing as too close or too



intimate: she couldn't get close enough to him. When they kissed, every fibre in her body cried out for more.

But sadly their weekend mini-break was all too short.

## ACT 5

“He will require to grow accustomed to the sight of the upper world. And first he will see the shadows best, next the reflections of men and other objects in the water, and then the objects themselves; then he will gaze upon the light of the moon and the stars and the spangled heaven; and he will see the sky and the stars by night better than the sun or the light of the sun by day?”

~ Plato, “The Allegory of the Cave”, *The Republic*.

## Scene 28:

# Thinking on His Feet

Wilfred caught sight of the figures as they crept across an open area of lawn near the vegetable gardens. They were still some way distant, but he knew by their all-black attire and their black helmets that these were either police or military. There was little difference between the two these days.

He was up on a flat roof, tending to his pigeons, and it was only by chance – or perhaps a strange sense of foreboding – that he happened to step across the roof and look out. The roof afforded a clear view of the grounds to the west.

Wilfred fumbled in his grubby work jacket for his mobile phone, and cursed when he couldn't find it; then realised that he must have left it in the kitchen when he'd grabbed an early morning cup of tea. He sometimes had trouble sleeping and was always the first one up, and there was nobody else around.

Knowing that he had to act fast, and tossing aside the bag of birdseed that he had been clutching, he scurried across the roof toward the central tower. It was only a few yards, but it was as if time had slowed down – perhaps to give him time to think – and it seemed to take an awfully long time. Then he spent ages trying to find the right key to unlock the door into the tower, a door which probably hadn't been used in years and which few of the staff would even know about.

Finally he found a key that fitted, turned the key in the lock, and tugged on the door. It wouldn't budge, so he pulled with all his might and, having apparently found a source of renewed strength, the door gave and he took the wooden steps up into the tower two at a time.

Not getting any younger, he was breathless by the time he reached even half way up. There was no time to waste, however, so he ran through to the little room where they sometimes rang

the bells on days when they held events.

He went to click the light switch, but the lamp did not come on, though he flipped the old switch back and forth several times. The ruddy bulb must have blown. Still, there was just sufficient light from the tiny window for him to see.

Pull yourself together, man, he chided himself and dashed across the room, grabbed hold of one of the ropes, and heaved on the rope to sound the bell, over and over until he got into a rhythm. And boy, did that big bell ring out its warning. It nearly deafened him.

Only then did Wilfred realise, as he searched his pockets for his asthma inhaler, that he had his phone in his jacket pocket after all, and he pulled it out and tried to call the Director's number.

At this point he realised that he had no signal.

Lights out; no phones; troopers creeping across the lawns – they were in big trouble, with a capital “Sh”. And something told him – nagged at him – that he had to do something fast.

Wilfred dashed back to his pigeon loft, huffing and puffing. Dear lord, he was certainly not getting any younger, but he told himself that he could not afford to collapse in a nervous heap right now.

He went across to the cage where he and the other guys kept their guests; the three birds were fresh and would have been released on Wednesday morning. But he had something else to do first. Picking up a rusty old green tobacco tin that he'd found among his grandfather's things when the old man had passed away, he took out three small aluminium tubes. Thirty years these tags must have lain here, waiting patiently for a desperate time such as this.

Wilfred tagged the first bird's leg, gathered it up, hurried outside onto the flat roof and tossed it into the air, then returned for the second bird and released that, too.

He was just about to release the third pigeon when a shot rang out. He felt the excruciatingly sharp sting in his left arm and only heard the sound of the gunshot after, and only then did he realise that he'd been shot.

Wilfred tossed the bird into the air.

“That’s it, my beauty, fly away home,” he called after the bird.

He was just about to dash for cover, away from the edge of the flat roof, when a second shot rang out. Even before he heard the shot, his head was jerked back, he was thrown backward by the force of the bullet, and fell to the ground.

The lights went out, and that was the last Wilfred knew. The darkness came so suddenly and was so utterly complete, that he didn’t even know that he no longer knew.

# Scene 29:

## A Restless Night

Arielle hadn't slept very well that night, for some unexplained reason. She sat up in bed and realised by the lack of light filtering in through the thick curtains, it must still be very early. She checked her dormant mobi and this confirmed it.

Something was playing on her mind, though what that was she couldn't say.

Arielle lay back down for a while, but realising that she probably wouldn't go back to sleep, or if she did that she might end up sleeping late, she pushed herself up, stepped out of bed and pulled on her clothes. A shower would have to wait until later.

Grabbing her bag and stowing away her phone, she left the room and crept off down the corridor and the stairs, heading for the kitchens. Even the cafeteria would be closed at this ungodly hour, and she couldn't abide the coffee machine, which had been installed against Matron's better judgement at the behest of younger and rather vocal representatives of the students.

Instead, Arielle went further down the corridor toward the kitchens to make a proper mug of coffee. Well, okay, she'd make it with instant coffee granules if not real ground or filter coffee.

Just then, she glimpsed someone coming down the corridor in the other direction and ducked into a nearby doorway.

She knew that there was nothing wrong with members of staff wandering around the Hall even in the middle of the night. Old Hector often got up, like her, and would sit in the kitchen puffing away at his long, curved pipe. Occasionally they chatted away before going back to bed for a "second sleep" as the man called it. Apparently this was a practice many people performed, back in the olden days before clocks came into common use.

But something had almost dragged her into the shadows. Something was amiss. Arielle could feel it like a knot in her gut.

The figure had come closer now, but the night lights were low and she couldn't make out who it was, except that this was a slightly-build person, so it certainly wouldn't be Hector.

The figure turned off the corridor to enter the kitchen, just as Arielle was about to step out of the shadows and confront them. But something held her back; then just as quickly her mind was made up for her, as if she had no say in the matter, and she hurried off down the corridor to see what this person was up to. Perhaps it was one of the younger students raiding the larder for a midnight feast? Except it was the middle of the night.

Arielle was in the doorway to the kitchen now, and she could see the person, though only from behind. Yes, it was one of the younger students, they were fully dressed and wearing a bright red woollen hat on their head. But what's more, they had a key in their hand, and they were heading for the back door.

The person spun round now. Arielle had been as quiet as a cat stalking a mouse, but he'd seen her, or must have sensed her presence.

"Arthur!" she involuntarily called out. "What are you doing here?"

She was surprised to see the student, the nerdy-looking young lad who'd been with her in the computer room on their first day.

Arthur turned back round abruptly, dashed to the door, and fumbled to fit the key into the lock. The keyhole was slightly misaligned and it was always a bit of a hit-and-miss affair. Maybe some day Wilfred would get round to fixing it when he was doing his odd jobs.

Just then, Arielle heard the unmistakable sound of the large tenor bell ringing out from the tower above the main entrance. Not one ring, nor three, nor five to mark the hour, but a whole, slow succession of them. And then the ringing abruptly stopped.

This could mean only one thing: trouble.

The sound of alarm had caused Arthur to freeze momentarily, but he'd quickly recovered, and now he had the key in the lock.

Arielle had the urge to attempt to stop the lad, but a deeper

urge compelled her to flee.

°Run girl, run!° she was strongly and urgently advised, and she spun on her heel and dashed down the corridor and through the west wing toward the offices near the front entrance. Surely, that was where the others would gather in times of emergency, or outside at the front in a case of fire.

As she ran, she pulled her phone out, intending to make an urgent call to Brent, but she saw that she had no network signal. Not even a single bar.

The night lights were still on, but as she dashed down the corridor trying to flip on the main lights, she found that they were dead. Presumably the night lights were on another electrical circuit. Well, some light was better than no light at all.

By the time she reached the offices, the Director, Matron, and the two ancillary staff on night duty were clustered near the main entrance. It was clear by their worried looks and body language that they were not only worried, but hadn't as yet fathomed what was going on.

Arielle took this in, in a flash.

Just then, Brent appeared, dashing down the corridor from the staff quarters.

“Oh, thank lord you're okay,” she called out, running over to meet him. There was no time, nor even thought of hugs and kisses. “Do you know what's happening?”

“Long story short: I think we're under assault,” he replied in a clearly agitated tone.

“So what do we do?” she wanted to know, turning toward the Director in the hope that he would issue instructions. None were forthcoming.

Then a sudden dread came over, and an urge. An urge an order of magnitude greater than her earlier urges.

“We have to go,” she called loudly in the Director's direction, and he turned and nodded. Whether he knew what was in her mind, not that she even knew as yet, she couldn't tell.

“Godspeed,” the man called back to her.

Brent was uncharacteristically dithering at that moment, so she grabbed hold of his hand and tugged him into the Director's



office, across the room, and through his private lounge and bedroom. At the far end there were large French windows, glass panels that reached the floor and could be opened like doors.

Unfastening the catch, she swung one of the doors open and stepped outside. Brent followed her out and pulled the door-to-behind them.

Outside the windows was a garden, and tall shrubbery screened the garden from view, but all the same they kept their heads down.

“Got your keys?” she queried in a hushed tone. He nodded, and she could see now that Brent had had the presence of mind to grab his shoulder bag.

They crept along the narrow path near the building and in front of the gardens, stopping every now and again to listen. They could hear voices now, further back somewhere around the third wing, so they’d have to be really quiet and careful.

Ahead of them now, between the garden and the car, was an open space of gravel, and Arielle realised that there was no way of crossing that open space without being seen and, above all, even supposing they were not seen, then the rapid scrunch, scrunch, scrunch of their feet would be heard.

Just then, they heard the unmistakable sound of the tractor starting up, further back near the playing fields, and as the tractor began to gather speed, lowering the front digger as it went, Brent tugged at Arielle’s arm, and they broke cover, running as fast as they could. Finally, Brent’s remote was in range and the doors of the car unlocked with a beep as they ran.

Caught off guard, the speeding tractor tossed or ran over a group of six assailants and the rest scattered. All attention, and live fire, was on the tractor now. Bullets had shattered the windscreen, and blood was splattered throughout the cab, but still the tractor drove on.

They’d reached the car now and Brent was already inside. He tapped his card on the dashboard, started the engine, and as Arielle was still climbing in, door still partly open, he pulled out in an arc and drove off.

They’d been seen now, and one bullet had clipped the left

wing, not far from her passenger door, but for now at least, they were clear, and distancing themselves from the gunfire.

Ahead of them, Arielle could see now that the front gates were still closed, and there was nobody in the office monitoring the cameras to open the gates for them. In fact, if the power had been cut, then she wasn't sure they could even get the gates open. And there was always the chance that the assailants' vehicles might be blocking the lane leading up to the Hall.

Perhaps for a brief second, Brent was weighing up whether he could crash the gates without causing too much damage. He glanced at her and, again perhaps realising that in their rush they hadn't buckled up their safety harnesses, he turned the car in a wide arc and headed across the tall grass between the gardens of the east wing and the woods.

What lay in wait for them over that side of the building she didn't know, but presumably Brent had no other option.

Brent drove as fast as he could, though the car was slithering this way and that quite a lot, the tyres skidding in the long dew-laden grass.

A flurry of shots rang out now, and one bullet just nicked the metalwork on the driver's side next to the front windscreen, not far from Brent's head, but at last they were clear of the building.

Brent drove on, smashing straight through a low wooden fence and on across the playing fields. Then, sweeping left toward another wooden gate at the far end of the fields, he stopped the car briefly and she clambered out to open the gate. He drove through and turned the car left onto a narrow lane, and waited until she'd climbed back in the car and was safely buckled up.

"Where now?" she asked at length, the first time either of them had opened their mouths to do anything but curse, since they'd set out.

"There's a safe house I know of between here and the city," he replied, and she noticed the anxious quiver in his voice. They were both feeling shaken by recent events, and her heart was still thumping heavily in her chest.

"We'll rest there for a short time while we regroup. Well, at least while we gather our wits together and find out what's been

going on.”

“There was a mole in our midst,” she informed Brent at length. “A young, nerdy-looking lad who joined us the same day I was inducted.”

“You mean Arthur?” he queried. “Smart, studious and courteous kid. He took one of my classes. Sheesh, I never would have had him down as a mole.

“You’re sure of this?”

“Sure as sure can be, Brent. I couldn’t sleep, as something was incessantly tap, tap, tapping away in my skull trying to gain my attention. So I went to the kitchens to make myself a drink and clear my head. That’s where I caught the lad. He must have ‘borrowed’ a key from somewhere and I caught him opening the back door. I have no proof of this, but I have a hunch – well, far more than a hunch, maybe a certainty – that he was opening the door to let the attackers inside.”

“And that means that they’ve been watching us for some time, infiltrated the centre, then carried out a coordinated attack.”

“Heaven knows what’s happening to the staff and students at the Hall right now,” she sighed, a lump coming up in her throat.

“Best not worry about that right now. We need to get to safety ourselves, first. And later we’ll see what can be done to help them.”

“What *can* be done, you mean, Brent? Or *if* anything can be done.”

Of course he meant the latter.

“Best not to dwell on that right now, Arielle,” he replied, then momentarily reached out to clutch her shaking hand.

“And I know that is extremely difficult. But this is where your training and self-discipline needs to kick in.”

# Scene 30:

## A Safe House

Even twenty miles away, they still couldn't get a secure network signal, and they dare not chance the public networks. The authorities must have thought about this long and hard, and somehow taken down their entire comms system. She hoped that they hadn't infiltrated and compromised the integrity of the entire Resistance movement. And, of course, people like the Director knew so much – way too much – though thankfully most of the Resistance worked in isolated cells, taking their orders from anonymous coordinators and intermediaries.

Dear lord, this was a major breach. More than that, of course, it was a colossal tragedy for all the good folk who had been caught up in it. You could fix infrastructure; but you couldn't undo pain and suffering, let alone death.

And that meant they couldn't let anybody know about the attack; nor even phone ahead to let the others at the safe house know that they'd soon be arriving.

Arielle snapped herself out of her gloom before Brent had the chance to again remind her, and she tried to think what their logical next moves should be. Whatever they chose to do, they'd better act with the utmost urgency.

Arielle stilled her mind as best she could, and she silently prayed for guidance.

°There's a difference between knowing the path and walking the path. A whole world of difference,° her inner voice reminded her, using the Director's exact words.

Quite where that might fit in with the more pressing need for "boots on the ground" was beyond her, though she would certainly bear those words in mind.

°I see you've swapped your old "buts" for "thoughts". Same difference.°

Thank you, she quietly replied. Now was not the time to quibble over inconsequential remarks.

°You're in two minds,° the voice added, *and* she made no reply, *and* she heeded his words of wisdom.

Satisfied now? she couldn't help but respond after a while. No comeback that time. What was it they said? "Silence is also an answer to a fool."

Only later did she stop for a moment to consider Morpheus's words, relayed to her by the Director. They came moments after Morpheus had told Trinity: "He is the One", meaning Neo. Morpheus had at last become doubly-convinced of this. She mentally blanked the caveat "*though* he could have been wrong." Not that she'd ever considered – nor even had the audacity to consider – herself to be in any way "chosen" or privileged. She was just another grunt<sup>110</sup> on the ground. As for the Director and Brent: they had to be the Real McCoy.

It was at this point, her inner voice spoke up again. She had been expecting some choice remark about her musings, *and* instead of that, he provided a piece of information that she'd been searching her mind for since late childhood.

°You can call me Griff,° her inner voice confided, adding °and perhaps it would be more appropriate to say that you have searching your *soul*.°

So, why didn't you ever tell me that? she wanted to know. You've kept me waiting all these years.

°It's only recently that I've been able to really get through to you, Arielle,° Griff replied. And she also wondered if that was his real name or if it was just a moniker that would suffice for the time being. She'd read somewhere that if you found out the real name of folk in the Otherworld, then you had power over them.

She was somewhat amused to find out later that a griff meant a piece of factually correct information or inside information, so maybe she should take his word for it.

~~~~~oOo~~~~~

They eventually reached the safe house, if you could call it either safe or, indeed, a house. Brent explained that the tumble-

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<sup>110</sup> An unskilled or low-ranking foot soldier or other worker.

down workers' cottage was originally adjacent to a small farm that had since been swallowed up by a new factory farm. She didn't need Brent to tell her that it was a pig farm, because she'd smelt nothing else but stinky slurry since they had turned down the dirt track leading to the cottage. Still, city slickers shouldn't complain about the country smells if they chose to live out in the countryside near farms.

Adam and Yvette, whom her other half joking referred to as Eve, lived beside the cottage in an old and rusty-white caravan. They'd only recently bought the cottage, together with a patch of adjacent land, and moved onto the site. The aim was to plant vegetables, raise chickens, and eventually restore the cottage. And, of course, operate a safe house.

Invited into the caravan for a cup of tea, Arielle immediately saw that there would be no room for four people to sleep in these cramped, if spotlessly clean, conditions, so it looked like she and Brent would be sleeping in the car that night, him in the back where there was more room to spread his long legs, and her in the front, no doubt.

The couple had expressed concerns over the sudden loss of secure network coverage, though it hadn't bothered them too badly, as they weren't expecting any visitors or guests in the next few months while they got themselves settled.

So, it came as a great shock and upset to the couple when Brent told them about the raid at Merrymede Hall. They'd both been mature students there and knew the staff well. It was there that they had met, fallen in love, and moved to the city. Finally deciding they couldn't take much more, given the authoritarian regime, they had invested their life's savings in buying the cottage. It was a big risk for them, but one they were glad to take.

The drink and the company was most welcome, but Brent reluctantly decided that they should press on. So Yvette made them up some sandwiches to take with them, and they filled their water bottles.

Brent had been hoping that the couple might have public network coverage or fibre at the cottage, but with the nearest village six miles away, alas they did not. However, they could

always try at the Bull and Bush in the village or, failing that, they were sure to have coverage in the market town, Thornton, twenty miles down the road as the crow flies. Judging by the way the road turned this way and that at every undulation or waterway, that probably meant at least twenty five miles away.

They thanked the couple for their company and hospitality and headed back to the car. Checking the charge level, Brent decided that maybe they'd better stop off in the town. The last thing they needed was to run out of juice. He said that though you could have walked and bought a can of petrol, you could not buy a can full of electrical charge; and, of course, they had no network coverage to call for roadside assistance, even had they dared to do such a thing. If they ran out of juice or broke down, they would simply have to resort to Shanks's pony. That is, they would have to walk on their own two legs.

# Scene 31:

## Thornton

Whereas the safe house had smelt of the countryside, shall we say, Thornton smelt like a brewery: an unmistakable aroma of mashing grains, boiling wort, and hydrogen sulphide.

The only unfortunate thing was that the licenced breweries extracted the alcohol for industrial use, adding a disgusting chemical to the spirit to deter human consumption; not that this deterred the most chronic alcoholics.

Brent looked around for a place to park and recharge, and nodded in the direction of one of the security cameras atop a high pole overlooking the car park. Hopefully that was just there to ensure that drivers paid for the parking, which Brent dutifully did, using a forged card.

Rooting around in the back of the car he emerged with two broad-rimmed hats that would not look that out of place on a hot and sunny day like that day, and they each fished sunglasses out of their bags.

“Where next?” she wanted to know.

Brent scanned the high street and, taking her hand, he led her across the street to the Pig and Whistle, a public house. Brewery town or not, they would not be getting drunk that day. They would, however, have access to the local public network. There was still no secure network signal.

They ordered two pints of fake “real ale”, and went through the pub to the beer garden, which was partly shielded from the direct sun and secluded.

Sitting down side by side, she watched as Brent scanned the bar code at the bottom of one of the menus, and connected to the network using his mobi.

He tapped one of the apps on his phone and entered what she presumed was a password, then checked Hermes. It offered him



no access: just a line across the screen that read “Service unavailable”.

“Someone’s taken out all of our servers,” he groaned.

“Oh well, I’ll have to go through regular channels and access the peer-to-peer network that way. There’s no way they could take out a distributed system like that,” he decided. “Or at least that’s the theory.”

This time he managed to connect, and he provided another access code.

“We’re in!” he gleefully but quietly whispered in her ear.

“They can’t keep a good man down,” she replied, gently holding his left arm.

“I don’t know if any Friends use these old boards anymore,” Brent confided, “but given the current outage,<sup>111</sup> maybe one of the old-school guys will think of doing so.”

Brent scanned the list of a couple of boards, and she could see by the title of recent conversation threads that there was no mention of the network outages, nor servers being down, let alone news of the attack on Merry Mede Hall.

“Oh well, I’ll see if I can craft a message bringing people up to date. It will have to be cryptic and apparently innocuous, though. Anybody could be reading in.

“Okay, first of all, I need to log in with a moniker. Fortunately, these old boards allow anonymous access, so I don’t have to confirm with a text message, biometrics, or any of that two-factor crap.”

Brent typed in “Sequoia” which she recognised as the name of the operator onboard the hovercraft *Mnemosyne* in *The Matrix Resurrections* whom most people called Seq; then he created a new password. That was it: Sequoia was registered and could start using the board straight away.

Okay, so that was a semi-hidden allusion to H-rated material.

Brent tapped on a button marked “New thread” and pondered for some time, pausing to have a good swig of ale, before typing in a thread title.

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<sup>111</sup> A temporary suspension of operation (as of computers). The servers are down right now.

“Has to be something about the raid on Merrymede Hall that only a Friend would understand,” he told her.

“I was thinking maybe you could say something about shit going down at so-and-so’s place”.

“Yep,” Brent nodded eagerly. That’s the sort of wording I’m looking for.

“I’m guessing too many people know the Director as Baz, and Zieg might be too easy for the authorities to work out.”

Brent was in agreement.

“Does the Director have a codename?” she was prompted to ask.

“He certainly does,” Brent replied. “The Friends call him Heinz. Don’t ask me why: maybe because the name Ziegler is Germanic.

“Thanks,” Brent acknowledged, typing “Shit going down at Heinz’s place” and moved on to the message content.

“Power outage. Hermes down. Pongos over-running the place. Code red.”

“Who are the pongos?” she asked quite innocently.

“Enlisted men and women in the infantry,” he told her. “Where the army goes, the pong goes. The reason being that personal hygiene was somewhat lacking, all the more so on the battlefield, in the olden days before people started to wash daily and to use deodorant.”

“If the authorities are monitoring these old boards, they’re going to think the message suspect,” she observed.

“Sure they are, but we’ll just have to chance it,” he replied, tapping the [Send] icon.

“What now?” she enquired. “Do we wait for a reply?”

“We could be waiting all day,” he shrugged. “I think the safest thing to do would be to rapidly move on. We’ll find another cafe or pub somewhere along the route, and we can check then.”

“And what route would that be?” she enquired.

“The route to the city,” he told her, and he mimicked the look of horror on her face.

“But we can’t go anywhere near the city,” she said, though that must have been pretty obvious to both of them.

Since he couldn't edit his previous message, he tapped out a quick reply: "Can I cadge a crafty lift to Winston's", and again hit [Send].

"Winston's?" she queried.

"The place Winston Smith lived in in the novel, *1984*. It's our code for the city. And cadge a crafty lift means we need smuggling in.

"I just hope that one of oldtimers gets to read the messages. If not, then as Seq says: we're all fucked. Insert badly timed bleep<sup>112</sup> here."

And on that strained note, they finished off their beers and moved on.

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<sup>112</sup> A short high tone used to cover over profanities in films.

# Scene 32:

## Next Port of Call

It was late afternoon by the time they made the next town, Wycliffe, perhaps twenty miles from the city, and much busier than Thornton.

There was a police presence on the streets here, too.

Fortunately there were no checkpoints or roadblocks, yet Arielle was fully aware that all it would take was one nosey copper top<sup>113</sup> to notice their regional number plate and decide to ask questions or run a stop and search on them.

Brent had her go into the glove compartment in front of the passenger seat. “Pass me that green thing, would you.”

As she lifted out the green linen material, she noticed that it was unexpectedly heavy, and she realised straight away that this must be a weapon. In all the time she’d known him, Brent’d never once mentioned weapons or even hinted that he might own a gun.

Nevertheless, she passed the bundle over to Brent, and he unwrapped the snub-nosed pistol with his free left hand and, changing hands, he slid it into his right-hand jacket pocket.

“That would be a capital offence,” she remarked, exchanging a worried glance with him.

“Chances are, we’re already facing a capital offence,” was his reply. Brent didn’t shrug it off, but he appeared to be a lot less concerned about the matter than she was.

Anyhow, they found a quiet side street, parked the car, and strolled back to a cafe they’d spotted just a few yards back.

She had thrust her right hand into her own jacket pocket because she’d noticed that her fingers had developed a nervous twitch. It was to be hoped that she could lift a coffee cup without having to grasp it firmly with both hands.

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<sup>113</sup> An allusion from the *Matrix* films to a brand of battery that has a copper-coloured top half.

Her heart sank when she saw the sign in the cafe window, and she pointed it out to Brent. It read, in bold block capitals: "Sorry, no wifi."

Brent checked his phone. "Don't worry," he said. "Looks like we're close enough to use the wifi of the pub on the corner. It's not secured, though I'll probably have to enter a throwaway email address. Many of these places use free wifi not only to entice people inside, but also so they can spam people's inboxes, and sell the email addresses on to others."

The cafe looked quite busy inside, so Brent had her reserve the small table outside on the pavement<sup>114</sup> while he went inside to order and also use the loo. And when he came back outside, she had to dash to the loo herself.

"Any luck?" she enquired when she came back outside again. She was sitting opposite Brent, so she couldn't see his screen.

"Oh, yes!" he enthused. "Had one obvious crank replying to the message, but we made contact with a guy using the moniker 'Albatross'.<sup>115</sup> He's been online waiting for a reply from us, and I've just exchanged several private messages with him. They're encrypted, but you never know whether the authorities have a backdoor key, so we had to use a lot of metaphors and code numbers."

"So, what's the plan?"

"Well, Albatross warned the Friends in the city about the attack, and they're convening an emergency meeting."

"But what can they do?" she queried, then corrected herself: "*And* what are they going to do?"

"Well, the paramilitary wing has been invited, so I'm guessing all options are on the table, as police chiefs and politicians like to say."

"And so what are we going to do?"

Brent checked his smartwatch, though the time would have clearly displayed on his mobi. Or maybe not if he was still in the private messages screen. "A lift has been arranged, and it will be arriving here in around an hour. Then we abandon the car and go

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<sup>114</sup> The sidewalk.

<sup>115</sup> A large web-footed bird.

with them. Today's verbal challenge is 'Nice weather for August' and the correct response is 'But not as nice as June.'"

"But they won't be able to take us right into the city, will they? Assuming we're hidden, they'll have CO<sup>2</sup> sniffers and heat-sensitive devices, for sure."

"No, we'll be taken to the outskirts, and then alternative means will be devised to get us into one of the Resistance-run premises in the heart of the city. They're working on that as we speak."

# Scene 33:

## Nice Weather for August

They sat outside the cafe for a good few minutes, but the place was quite busy, so she didn't want to hog the seats outside. Normally, Arielle would have been a good customer and returned their empty cups to the counter inside, but the last thing she wanted was to draw unnecessary attention to herself.

Instead, they went back to the car and rapidly devoured the cheese and pickle sandwiches that Yvette had prepared for them, then they just sat there listening to the car radio. Brent flipped the channel when the news came on, probably because it might only depress them further, then perhaps decided maybe they'd better hear the news after all. Fortunately, neither the raid on Merrymede Hall nor the Resistance got a mention.

It looked like the only other radio station available in that area played rousing classical music; and, since neither of them could stomach that at the moment, he switched off the radio and for a time they sat in silent meditation.

Noticing the radio did jog her memory, however, and she explained what the guy who'd driven her out of the city had in his car, and about the illegal station, Radio Free World.

Brent was quite excited by that and he told her about the old pirate radio stations back in the mid-20<sup>th</sup> century, that were eventually closed down by the government. The curtailment of freedoms had been around a lot longer than the Beloved Leaders' regimes. They'd just gone the whole nine yards.<sup>116</sup>

Just then, a police officer turned the corner of the road and began walking toward them.

Steady, girl. Steady! Arielle mentally intoned.

"Good job that bullet didn't crack the windscreen," she whispered to Brent, not that there was any chance of being

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<sup>116</sup> All the way; everything; the whole lot; completely.

overheard.

“Yes,” he agreed. “That would have been a big giveaway and we’d have had to abandon the car.”

The police officer stopped in the doorway of the cafe and Arielle thought perhaps he might go inside. Go in, damn it!

Brent had spotted the guy, too, and he was about to start the car engine.

Arielle made balls of her fists in her lap and willed the man to turn back and enter the cafe, and he did, indeed, appear to hesitate for a few moments.

But after peering in through the glass in the cafe door, apparently satisfied, the police officer turned and walked on. And not only had they seen him; he, too, had seen them.

He was definitely heading their way now, and he drew alongside and tapped on the passenger window. Arielle dutifully rolled it down.

“Could I see your ID please, sir?” the officer requested.

She saw that Brent had his hand in his right jacket pocket and knew that he was about to pull out his gun, and she deliberately turned toward Brent and got in between the two. “I’ll pass it to the officer, sweetheart,” she cooed, holding out her hand.

“Huh?” For a moment, Brent didn’t seem to know quite what was happening, so she snatched the ID card from his hand, then turned gracefully round and handed it to the officer through the open window.

As the officer began to examine the card, and made sure that the mug shot matched Brent’s own manly mug, Arielle said. “Everything’s in order.”

For a moment the officer just stood there, on the very point of scanning it with his hand-held device.

Arielle couldn’t be sure whether the ID Brent carried would pass muster, and her heart was thumping away.

“Yes, the ID’s in order,” she emphasised, and she was eyeballing the man, as if trying to burrow into his skull.

“Yes, the ID is in order, thank you, sir,” the officer responded at this point, as if half waking from a trance.

Then the man was back in the land of the living, if the



everyday reality of this mortal coil could rightly be called such. And he'd decided to make further checks.

"Would you mind unlocking the boot and stepping out of the vehicle please, sir; you too, madam," he requested, standing back to allow her to open her car door and at the same time keeping an eye on Brent.

And then the strangest thing began to happen, as she clambered out.

The car appeared to be dissolving around her, and instead of emerging from the car, she now found herself standing in front of the man.

His helmet, police uniform, and shiny black boots had faded away, too, and he was standing there in his boxer shorts, looking somewhat perplexed. The paving slabs on the pavement were gone, too, and they were standing in the long, speckled grass of a wildflower meadow. And she found herself relaxing and sinking into the earth: not physically sinking, but in her mind.

At this point, she heard Brent say something and she saw him moving around the side of the car, and it broke the spell. It was like she'd been out of her body on the end of a long silven cord, the cord had twanged like elastic, and she was propelled back into the everyday. In an instant she was back in the street facing the police officer, and Brent was coming around the side of the vehicle. And she knew exactly what he had in mind.

She cut between him and the police officer.

Arielle caught hold of Brent's right forearm, tugged hard, and his hand came out of his pocket minus the gun.

The police officer had just begun to walk away, much to Arielle's relief, then turned yet again, apparently having changed his mind.

The man went round the back of the car and began to rummage around in the boot.

Brent had crept closer to the back of the car at this point and, lunging forward, he grabbed hold of the open top of the boot<sup>117</sup> and slammed it down and up again, crushing the officer's neck, and the man slid to the ground behind the car.

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<sup>117</sup> The trunk.

Arielle was shocked. The police officer wouldn't have found anything incriminating in the boot, and he was sure to walk away.

"Give me a hand here, Arielle," Brent called to her, and together they heaved the man into the boot, arranging him in a fetal position, with his knees tucked up against his chest, Brent slammed the boot down, and they went to sit in the car and wait.

"Did you have to do that?" she wanted to know, more than a little annoyed and highly unnerved.

Brent took hold of her right hand, which was visibly shaking. "My dearest Lotus Blossom," he replied, reaching across and kissing her lightly on the cheek. "I'm sorry, but I had to do what I have been trained to do; I did what I simply had to do.

"When I looked into his mind, I saw things – shocking things. I saw you in a police cell, your clothes stripped from your body and with that animal astride you. And, being chained to the cell wall, I could do nothing but watch helplessly as this happened.

"As soon as he was around the next corner, that man – that animal – was going to radio into his headquarters and our ploy would have been discovered."

Arielle was silent for a time while she processed what Brent had just told her. "And I'm sorry, too, for having doubted you, Brent Messenger. Will you forgive me?"

They sat there for another minute or two, just cradling one-another in their arms.

Then they heard an affected cough just by the open passenger window and again Brent was reaching for his gun.

"Sorry to, um, interrupt you two lovebirds," the young man spoke, doffing his flat cap. "Nice weather for August," he prompted.

"But not as nice as June," she replied, much relieved.

"Follow me," the young man motioned. "We have a wagon waiting for you. And the name's Azo."

"What about the car?" Arielle wondered.

"Oh, just leave it where it is. One of our lasses will shift it later."

"There's a body in the boot," Brent pointed out. "Sorry about that: it was unavoidable."

The young man didn't blink an eye. "Oh, that's alright: comes with the territory. We'll dump the body; if necessary burn the car to destroy any DNA. I'll have a word with the gaffer<sup>118</sup> about that.

"Tell you what, though, you're lucky Old George asked me to check the bulletin boards when our comms went out," the young man chatted as they headed down the side street. "Well, doubly lucky, because though I could tell your message was in some kind of code, I couldn't make anything of it. Anyhow, I showed it to George and he got your meaning right away."

"Is that who I was exchanging messages with earlier?" Brent wanted to know.

"Yes, that was old George, alright. He was in his element.

"Mind you, another strange message came through before yours, but via a rather different route: a blooming carrier pigeon, would you believe. Old George said they used them in the olden days to carry messages behind enemy lines; and as soon as he saw the little metal tube attached to the bird's leg, he knew. 'Raid at Merrymede' it said, which I couldn't quite fathom.

"I did get the reference to Seq. Watched *The Matrix* films a few times. And old George got Winston's right away.

"But when he saw your mention of Heinz's place, we were puzzled. George asked around and found out it was Barnaby Ziegler who was in trouble at one of our places up north, Merrymede Hall. So, big thanks to both of you, whoever the other guy was."

"That must have been Wilfred, the groundskeeper at the Hall," Brent nodded. "Bit of a pigeon fancier in his spare time. Well, I'll be darned. And all this time, staff and students used to make fun of his hobby. He was a keen ornithologist, too. Birdbrain of Britain, they used to call him. Well I never."

"Of course, the paramilitary are really fired up," the lad told them. "Chomping at the bit<sup>119</sup> to be off and doing something, George says. And who can blame them. Fight fire with fire, I say."

Under normal circumstances, Arielle would have been

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<sup>118</sup> Supervisor or boss; whoever's in charge of workers.

<sup>119</sup> Like a horse eager to be off; impatient to be doing something.

dismayed at – even repulsed by – the prospect of violent resistance. She much preferred the idea of fighting fire with water – hence today’s earlier episode. Yet right now she could feel herself nodding along with Azo. Maybe it was time they confronted the regime at their own level; a level which they understood?

°There’s a difference between knowing the path and walking the path. A whole world of difference,° Griff reminded her.

Yes, there was that, and she’d perhaps had a glimpse of that. And yet Brent had seen more deeply into the police officer’s mind, and that was something that rightly humbled her.

°At this stage,° the inner voice added hopefully.

Yes: where I am right now, she agreed.

Right now she had that old song in her head: The Waterboys playing “The Whole of the Moon”. She could really relate to those deep lyrics.

Turning the corner in the road, they saw a large white van with the words “George Johnson Removals” crudely painted on the side of it in dark green lettering.

“Your transport awaits, Madame et Monsieur,” Azo announced, waving at the van. An older man, who they later found out was old George himself, was already at the back of the van with one of the double doors wide open.

“Climb in the back and lay down in the pine wardrobe, then I’ll close the lid.” Then: “If it gets stuffy in there, just lift or waggle the lid.”

Crikey, Arielle thought: it was like stepping into your own pine box, meaning a coffin. And as soon as the doors were closed behind them, it was also very dark and claustrophobic.

She couldn’t help but lay there cuddling Brent, though she wished this could have been under happier and more convivial circumstances. After a time, she got used to it, though, and she enjoyed this close contact with Brent.

George had been right about the stuffiness though, so Brent opened the wardrobe door wide to let some relatively fresh air in, so that they didn’t suffocate. There were sufficient gaps in the van itself to let plenty of air in. There might even have been a vent.

And they could always close the door whenever the van stopped.

One thing George had thought about: he'd lined the floor of the wardrobe (what would have been its back), with a thick duvet, which took the edge off the van's frequent bumps.

After around an hour, according to her back-lit smartwatch, the van stopped for one final time, they heard the back doors open, then the wardrobe lid opened, and they were invited out. Fortunately, it was growing dark outside by this time, so their eyesight soon adjusted.

They appeared to be in some sort of industrial complex, presumably on the outskirts of the city.

As soon as they were out, and having passed round a very welcome pewter flask of brandy, George introduced them to their new handlers, Dave and Pete, who had been awaiting their arrival, and they finally bade George and Azo farewell.

Arielle has hoped that they'd be getting some sleep that night, as they'd been so uncomfortable in the back of the van that they could barely doze. But this was not to be.

"Here, put these on," Dave, the taller and skinnier of the two brothers said to her, holding out a pair of long, fluorescent yellow waders, while Pete helped Brent. She pushed her legs down into the waders and pulled the elasticated braces over her shoulders. Well, her feet certainly had a lot of wiggle room, but they were better than nothing.

She had an awful feeling about what might come next, and this was largely confirmed when the brothers handed them hard hats with built-in headlamps, which they now switched on, and got suited up themselves. She noted that both Dave and Pete had laminated maps hung around their necks. And her suspicions were doubly confirmed when Pete led them to a large manhole cover,<sup>120</sup> lifted it with a long metal rod, pushed the cover aside and clambered down. Dave motioned to them to follow, and he brought up the rear and slid and closed the manhole cover behind them.

Mile after stinking mile they trudged that night. Fortunately

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<sup>120</sup> A personnel access cover, usually found on streets and pavements, for access to sewers; etc.

for them, the water levels were currently quite low, so they were able to walk along a relatively dry and level path to one side of the main gully. The sight of so many brown turds, clumps of toilet paper and other sanitary products, and the smell of stale urine, however, really turned Arielle's stomach. And every now and again, spiders the size of coasters,<sup>121</sup> and long-tailed sewer rats almost the size of small cats would stand there defiantly, as if wondering if they could muster a few more comrades, attack, and feast like kings that night. Fortunately, they usually backed down and scurried away into the darkness.

Every so often, Pete would consult his map, and maybe go back and talk to Dave, and they'd take one of the turnings to left or right, and walk on.

Finally, however, and none too soon, Pete came to a stout steel ladder and began to ascend. Dave asked them to remain where they were until Pete signalled that they were at the right location and that the coast was clear.

"Come on up," Pete called down to them, having pushed the manhole cover up, slid it to one side, and climbed out of the hole.

By now it was dark outside, but with sufficient moon riding high in the sky for them to see around them. There were orange-tinted, high pressure sodium street lamps here and there, too, giving them a little more light, but those were more distant. Once they were up, Pete quickly extinguished their headlamps and led them into the shadows where they could ditch the waders.

"Stay here and you'll be met in a few minutes," Pete advised them. Having been in the sewers, they didn't shake hands, and certainly didn't exchange kisses, but the brothers did wish them Godspeed.<sup>122</sup>

Another van, a grey one this time, pulled up now, and Pete and Dave clambered into the back of the van and left. And they were, quite literally, left in the dark.

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<sup>121</sup> Rectangular or circular beer mats to rest cups, mugs, and glasses on.

<sup>122</sup> Have a safe and successful journey.

## Scene 34:

### Sorry, it's Not the Ritz

It was early in the morning when they were met, and they were acutely aware that they were out after curfew and might well be shot if they attempted to evade arrest.

They had one close call when a police car cruised slowly through the buildings where they were. It had bright lights mounted on its roof, pointing ahead and angled to point either side. But they held their breath and clung to the shadows, and fortunately went unnoticed. Had it been a dog patrol, they would have been discovered almost immediately, and there would have been no hope of escape.

Not long after the police had cruised by, a lone figure had approached them. They hadn't thought to arrange code signals, and when the woman introduced herself and asked them to quickly follow her, they could do no more than place their trust in her, and for her to place her trust in them, though like them, she did not reveal her name.

The woman led them down a dirty, narrow, rubbish-infested alley between the houses. At the end, the woman paused and casually looked up and down the street before waving them on across a narrow side street and on down a second alleyway.

Finally, the woman stopped at an unmarked grey-green door and rapped three times in short succession, then three times but more slowly, and within moments they heard metal bolts being drawn, the door was opened and she ushered them inside.

They followed her down a narrow corridor, and into a small kitchen, or at least into a room that was now used as a kitchen. There were just discreet tables and cupboards against the walls, and a larger table and chairs set in the middle of the room.

"Sorry about that, I get the jitters going out at night," the woman said at length, having taken off her coat and gone over to

what had once been a bathroom sink, to fill a kettle with water.

“Fancy a cuppa?” she asked, clicking the kettle on and coming over to them as they stood there, hovering in the doorway. “Please, take off your coats, sling them on the backs of the chairs, and take the weight off your feet. Looks like you’ve had a long and tiring journey.”

First of all, at Arielle’s prompting she and Brent quickly washed their hands and wet their faces in the sink.

The lady came forward now, took off her woolly hat to reveal shoulder length, very curly brown hair and deep blue eyes, and held out her hand. “The name’s Maureen,” she told them, “though my friends call me Mo.”

“Thanks for you help, Mo,” Brent said, introducing himself and Arielle.

“Pleased to meet you, Mo,” Arielle smiled, shaking the lady’s hand and taking a seat.

“I hear you crossed half the city in the sewers,” Mo offered. “Begging your pardon, but rather you than me. If I came across a sewer rat, I’d faint on the spot.”

Then Mo laughed: “Mind you, this city is full of damn sewer rats. They’ve just chosen to live above ground, that’s all. Human race? More like a rat race, if you ask me.”

Mo reached for a cigarette packet on the table. “Smoke?” she asked, offering them the open packet. Arielle politely declined, but Brent eagerly accepted, and soon the two of them were puffing away and filling the kitchen with clouds of blue-grey smoke. Mo blew a couple of smoke rings, too, then she went to drop a couple of teabags in the teapot and half fill it with boiling water.

“I didn’t know you smoked,” Arielle addressed Brent.

“I don’t usually. Now it’s an occasional guilty pleasure. I think, given the horrendous events earlier today, and what we’ve been through to get here, that you can maybe forgive me this minor lapse.”

“Yes, we heard about the raid up north. You were there?”

Arielle nodded. “We just managed to escape, and raised the alarm, but that wasn’t easy, given that all the comms are down.”



“So I gather,” Mo agreed, pouring out their tea and offering them milk, sugar, and some shop-bought biscuits. “Well, you can have a good night’s sleep and meet the others in the morning. The guys have had a hard day, too, running their mouths,” she laughed. “The raid and the shenanigans<sup>123</sup> with the comms caused quite a stir.”

“Thanks, Mo,” replied Brent. “It’s late, so we won’t press you for details. That can wait until morning.”

Once they’d had their drink and a couple of biscuits, Mo showed them to their room upstairs. They crept quietly along the upstairs landing, so as not to disturb the others.

“This room is yours,” Mo waved, opening the door and giving it a little push, “and the bathroom is at the far end of passage, on the right. Sorry it’s not the Ritz.”<sup>124</sup>

They assured her that was fine and thanked her again, and Mo left them to it.

There was only the one bed in the room. That was the first thing that Arielle noticed, and it was probably uppermost in Brent’s mind, too.

“I could sleep on the floor,” he offered.

“Don’t be silly, Brent,” she replied. “No way either of us could sleep on bare and dusty wooden floorboards.

“Then I’ll sleep in the armchair,” he offered, pointing to a rather grubby looking chair in the corner by the window.

“You’ll do no such thing, Brent Messenger,” she insisted, going over to draw the curtains. There were yellowing net curtains over the lower half of the old windows, but they didn’t conceal much.

“Well, then we’ll have to both sleep on top of the bed, with our clothes on.”

Only then did Brent notice that she was slowly unbuttoning his shirt. Then she tugged his shirt tails out and he helped her pull the arms free.

“My, Brent Messenger, what a handsome and muscular man

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<sup>123</sup> Reckless or malicious behaviour that causes discomfort or annoyance in others. The use of tricks to deceive someone (usually to extract money from them).

<sup>124</sup> A famous chain of luxury hotels.

you are,” she cooed, gently rubbing her hand over his hairy chest.

# Scene 35:

## The Briefing

She and Brent woke early the next morning, and they shared a brief cuddle, then both hopped out of bed. There were no showers in the bathroom at the end of the passage, just an old sink, stained by brown limescale, so they had to make the best of it; quickly washing their hands, face, armpits and private parts in the cold water. Still, it washed away the cobwebs and refreshed them.

Once downstairs, they saw that everyone else was already up, milling around in the front room, and engaging in heated discussion. But first things first, she and Brent made a beeline for the kitchen where Mo and what looked like one her kids were cooking breakfast and buttering shop-bought bread.

“A-ha,” Mo greeted them as they wandered into the kitchen. “You’re just in time. Bacon and eggs suit you?”

“Morning, Mo,” Arielle greeted her. “That sounds fine by me.”

“Good job, too,” Mo laughed, heading over to the table to ladle out the bacon, then returning with the eggs. “It’s either that or nothing at all, because right now, apart from a scraping of lumpy porridge in the bottom of the pan, that’s all we’ve got. I’ll have my lads go out later to pick up provisions, but we’ve got to be careful not to buy too much from the one place, or it might attract unwanted attention.”

There was also a large pot of coffee on the go that her lad, Mikey, had prepared. He left it on the table, along with mugs, milk and sugar, and they helped themselves.

“Just what the doctor ordered,” she and Brent thanked him in near-perfect unison, and they exchanged high-fives.<sup>125</sup> Mikey just stood there and chortled.

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<sup>125</sup> A gesture of greeting or elation; one person's upraised palm slaps the upraised palm of another person.

Once they'd hurriedly scoffed their breakfast and refilled their coffee mugs, Mo led them through to the front room, where a circle of mismatched chairs had been drawn up around the room in an improvised circle, and she introduced them to the others.

Over by the window, which had been boarded up at some point, sat an elderly woman with blue-tinted curly hair. This was Felicity, Mo's mother, and she was the only one in the group with a small wooden occasional table as a makeshift desk in front of her, so Arielle presumed that she must be chairing the meeting. There was a time and a place for "facilitation", but this was not it.

"Order, order," she called out.

All eyes were now looking at the lady as she cleared her throat.

After some brief introductory remarks, Fliss invited Arielle and then Brent to brief them on what they knew. They passed a short wooden baton round the circle to Arielle, which she presumed was to signal to the others that it was her turn to talk, and she described as much of the events at Merrymede Hall that she knew about, which wasn't much. There was no further discussion at this point, so she passed the baton on to Brent and he talked about the secure comms outage. Then they passed the baton back to the chair.

"Well," she remarked: "It's clear that our Friends' plight at the Hall are grave and demands our urgent attention, but it seems to me that nothing can be done, at least not in any organised fashion, until our comms are restored. So that should be our initial number one priority.

"But before we go any further, let's go round the group and any of our Friends here who have further information, or who can bring Arielle and Brent here up to speed about what we know, may speak up."

And with that, Fliss passed the baton on to the next person to her left.

With ten people present, though a couple of them remained silent and simply passed the baton on to their neighbour, that initial "round" took up about an hour, some speaking only briefly, some going on at length; some appearing quite meek, and others

far more strident; at times vociferous, though Fliss quite ably directed them to stay calm. This latter sub-group were representatives of a couple of the paramilitary organisations.

By that stage, four main lines of action that they might pursue had emerged – two that they already knew about: that the comms outage must be investigated and needed to be restored post-haste, as had already become apparent; and the question of what, if anything, could be done to help their Friends at the Hall, which was all pretty much up in the air.

Then there were two newly-offered courses of action. The third of the four proposals, much favoured by the paramilitary: launching counter-attacks on the regime in the city. A prerequisite to such action would be that the regime's own comms and surveillance systems, and other critical infrastructure, should be in some unspecified manner compromised or knocked-out.

And a fourth, that Arielle had herself proposed, was that they should mount counter-propaganda operations across all available media and forms of distribution. From commandeering the airwaves to covertly leafleting the streets of the city, and even further afield.

Brent raised his hand at this juncture and Fliss signalled that the baton should be passed to him, but he told them that he only had a relatively brief point to make, and so Fliss changed her mind mid-session and dispensed with the baton, though strongly advising them not to descend into heated or anarchic discussion. She *would* maintain order.

Brent pointed out that though some of the critical infrastructure could be targetted with explosive devices and other physical sabotage, and police and security forces attacked, when it came to restoring their own comms and disabling the regime's electronic systems, including their comms, that would require expert knowledge of electronic and communications systems. What they needed to do was assemble a small team of ethical hackers, mentioning his own experience in such fields, and tentatively offering to coordinate such efforts.

There were a few murmurings of dissent among the paramilitary at these propositions, but his proposals went down

pretty well with the majority.

“Horses for courses, indeed,” Fliss agreed,<sup>126</sup> a phrase that she had to explain for the benefit of the younger representatives in the group.

“Okay,” Fliss decided at length, glancing at her watch: “Let’s open things up for discussion now. We’ll give it maybe half an hour; or longer if there’s a lot of haggling to get through, though I certainly hope not.

“And then, let’s split into informal sub-groups with the primary goal of (a) gathering further intelligence, which I suggest is a fifth proposal that has thus far been overlooked, and (b) assembling teams with the right skill sets and capable of carrying out our other four main tasks. Brent, you may have to liaise with two or three of those groups.”

Fliss turned to Arielle.

“Arielle, I hereby appoint you editor-in-chief, and for my part, if any of you need to document your group work, my secretarial services and typing fingers are at your disposal.”

“I’ll help you with that, and my lads will keep us all watered and fed,” Mo agreed.

“Anyhow, I suggest that each working group find their own space in the building, and we’ll all meet back here later in the day for any follow-up discussion.”

Fliss scanned the room.

“Okay, so who has any further comments or points they’d like to raise?”

One of Mo’s lads had been listening at the door, though he and his brother Mikey hadn’t been invited to join in the discussions.

“Yes, Jason,” Fliss enquired, spotting the lad hovering in the doorway. “Did you wish to say something?”

Jason edged inside the room. “I was going to mention that Dad’s old server is still sitting in the basement. And it probably still works, as far as I know.”

Arielle saw Brent’s eyes light up. “That’s excellent news, Jason. Well observed. Then perhaps my first task might be to see

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<sup>126</sup> An appropriate match, for example between a task and the available skills.

if I can set up a local area network here for our mobis and laptops. And that may make your own work easier, too, Fliss and Mo. Save having to dash around from computer to computer with memory cards to manually transfer materials.”

“Now we’re cooking!”<sup>127</sup> Fliss lilted.

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<sup>127</sup> Said in agreement. We’re doing well; we’re making progress. Now you’re talking.

# Scene 36:

## Now We're Cooking

"We most certainly *are* cooking," Brent assured Fliss as he came out of the basement and entered the front room where the paramilitary group had decided to set out their stall. They paid him scant attention.

"How so?" the lady enquired, looking up from her laptop.

"Though Jason's dad's old server hasn't been used for years, judging by the cobwebs festooning the basement, I managed to get it up-and-running. It's a bit slow, but it's a solid workhorse.

"At one point it must have connected to the secure network, because it has an old version of the Hermes software on it."

Fliss nodded, indicating that she was taking in what he was saying.

"What's more, unlike the other servers in the distributed system, the software on the server is still operational."

He brought out his mobi which he'd already connected to the server, and he handed it to Fliss. "See that? The little symbol at the top of the screen?"

She took it in in a flash. "We have a secure network signal."

Well, that got the others' attention.

He nodded. "Yes, so the comms are still operational, and our remote devices are still operational. There must be something amiss with the software on the servers."

"Such as?" she enquired, handing the mobi back to him.

"Maybe they received a deliberately compromised or crippled software update. I'm just guessing, of course, but it is an informed guess. It could conceivably be other malware, but I'd have thought that Cerberus<sup>128</sup> – the antivirus and intrusion detection system – would have picked up on that."

"The upshot of this being ..." she cued him.

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<sup>128</sup> The three-headed dog guarding the entrance to Hades; son of Typhon.



“The upshot being that if I can extract the software installation files from the old server, and copy it onto a few memory cards, your guys can tour the city, and later further afield, install the old software over the top of the new, and those servers, too, should work once more.

“Until then, we now have one node in the network up-and-running. Being just the one machine, and an old steam engine at that, we need to limit access to intensive media such as videos for now, as that would place too much strain on the server, and we don’t want to crash it.”

“Right you are,” she readily agreed.

“I’ll be back in a few minutes, once I have the installation files sorted; see if we can locate a list of nearby servers; and find someone with some computer training who can go round updating – or rather backdating – the server software.

“Now we really *are* cooking,” he added.

“We are indeed, Brent. Thank you for lending us your technical expertise.”

“You’re welcome, Fliss, and likewise. But thanks most of all to your grandson, Jason. With no access to the source code of the latest software, he has single-handedly saved us a shed load of time and trouble.”

“While Mikey is very good with his hands, his brother Jason is quite computer literate,” Fliss happened to remark.

“Then, with your permission, I’ll see if we can involve him in the teamwork. I mean here, where it’s relatively safe; not wandering the city.

“Oh, and one last thing: I need to show the volunteers how to disable automatic software updates, or we’ll end up back at square one again. I’ll also include a warning and brief instructions in a text file on each of the memory cards.”

That first task out of the way; a copy of the city’s server locations found in the old machine, though no doubt outdated and incomplete; and a couple of willing volunteers from the neighbourhood rounded up, Brent rejoined the working groups to get an idea of what he should be working on next.

By the end of the afternoon, they had the local

neighbourhood covered, and the volunteers had been told about, and managed to cover, several of the newer servers that hadn't been on the old list.

As the memory cards were cloned and passed on to yet more volunteers, before the week was out they'd probably have covered most of the city. And, thinking ahead and mindful of the Friends' plight at Merrymede, Brent and his team had managed to round up three couriers who had business elsewhere in the country, including up north, and had them distribute cloned cards to anyone involved in the Resistance further afield, hoping that at least some of these workers would know where their local servers were located, or at least know someone who did.

Very soon, the "airwaves", as Brent still fondly referred to them, were awash with excited activity; plans were being laid; and extensive preparations already being made. The Friends were back in business.

# Scene 37:

## The Round-Up

The peaceful and yet enlivening, if studious, atmosphere at Merrymede Hall had been abruptly and cruelly shattered by the sudden arrival of the security forces.

Some had attempted to flee in the initial confusion, but by that time the buildings were largely surrounded and those caught fleeing were roughly manhandled back into the building; others were being herded into the main hall under armed guard; and a systematic search had begun, spreading out from the east and west wings, north through the third and fourth wings, and then trapping the remaining students and staff in the quadrangle in a viciously efficient pincer movement.

Gradually, what had been great fear and utter panic had by now subsided as the last of the students were thrust into the main hall and joined their peers who sat cross-legged on the polished wooden floor. Thankfully, by now the power had been restored.

The fear remained, and the confusion had been replaced by suppressed anger, resentment, and silence. Their guards, who walked up and down the makeshift rows, would tolerate no talking, let alone dissent, and they were not averse to using their automatic rifles to club staff, students, men or women, young or old on the back, shoulder or head. Here and there were those who had resisted: some clutching painful limbs; one or two others with dried-up trickles of blood from their scalp and stained white collars.

Every so often, one of them would raise a hand and stand to attention; a guard would approach them, and they would either be rebuked and forced to sit down, or they would be led from the hall, presumably to use the rest rooms adjacent to the hall, not far from the front office. At least their assailants allowed this one concession, though by now one or two of the younger and more

timid students had wet themselves, and now had to sit there in a pool of their own urine. They sat there in isolation and embarrassment, because the others had silently shuffled away from them.

Later that day, the commander issued orders and they were made to separate into discrete groups: the Director and teaching staff into one group; the ancillary workers, such as those who worked in the kitchens and laundry, the porter and cleaners in another; and Matron, the nurse, and the housekeepers into yet another; and the younger students were separated from those who were more mature, even if they were the best of friends.

Then there was more discussion and those who worked in the kitchen were singled out and escorted from the room. It turned out they had been allowed to continue their duties, to provide an evening meal for the other prisoners. As for the assailants, they'd brought their own rations with them and perhaps dare not eat food that the cooks had prepared in case it had been laced with poison.

Some of the other staff were also sent off to fetch water in jugs, and with plastic beakers – not glass – and the prisoners were allowed to stand up, row by row, and queue to get their water, then return to their row and sit down once more. Everything had become so terribly regimented.

Eventually, the kitchen staff returned, wheeling several trolleys, then serving the staff and students, beginning with the younger children. As for the Director and his teaching staff, though patient in themselves, they were forced to wait until all the others had been served. The kitchen staff had made them a simple meal of shepherd's pie: minced beef, diced onion, tomato and peas, topped by lightly-browned mashed potato, that could be easily consumed on your knee with just a dessert spoon. Not that there was any dessert that day.

Though usually one of their favourite meals, none of them appeared to eat with any relish, with the notable exception of a couple of the stouter youths.

And no, you most certainly could *not* ask for more, even assuming you had found the courage to do so.

Later that afternoon, as their increasing discomfort became

clear even to their guards, they were allowed to stand, form double files, and walk around the hall for a few minutes to stretch their cramped legs, under strict supervision; and this happened after that at hourly intervals, which provided some minor consolation.

As evening came, fortunately, they were allowed to retire to the dorms, one row at a time, again under close escort, and an armed guard was stationed inside each dorm, not least to stamp down on any chattering, with yet more guards patrolling the corridors and closely supervising any trips to the bathroom. Well, their assailants had no other option, really, given the circumstances.

Then in the morning, after fitful sleep by most and nightmares by some, especially the younger students, they were up once more. And this time they were told to take their pillows with them, so that they no longer had to sit directly on the hard wooden floor of the main hall. There were, of course, plenty of plastic chairs stacked against one of the side walls of the hall, but they were not invited to make use of them. Perhaps the guards feared that if there were a revolt, they might be used as offensive weapons; and there would have been not nearly enough mats in the gym.

At this point, things changed, and one by one the teaching staff were taken out, perhaps to one of the nearby offices, and questioned; the Director being last of all. Judging by the grim expressions etched on the faces of the returnees, the questioning had been an unpleasant and sobering experience.

When the Director returned, he was clutching his hand to a nasty gash on his right temple, but he remained impassive and dutifully sat down again with his teaching colleagues. Matron raised her hand and stood up at this point, presumably wishing to provide assistance, but her entreaties were rudely denied and she was forced to sit back down again.

That morning, on the commander's orders, a thorough and systematic search of Merrymede Hall was made, going through each room one at a time. Then later, after lunch, Mister Hinchcliff, head of the Information Technology department was

singled out, and they found out later that the commander had personally supervised a close examination of the centre's computer facilities. What they found, nobody knew and perhaps never would know, because Mister Hinchcliff did not return to the hall.

Two shots rang out as dawn broke the following day, and they later found the poor man's body, battered, bruised and blood-soaked, his skull split apart by the force of two high-velocity bullets.

The commander was clearly waiting for something, though for what they didn't know. He kept looking at his watch, and he was frequently on the phone, morning, afternoon, and evening, perhaps even into the night, for all they knew.

The man was strangely agitated the next day, and it was noticeable that he had abruptly stopped using his mobi, though from time to time he would pull it out of his breast pocket, peer at it for a few moments, perhaps curse under his breath, and then put it away again.

Returning from the kitchen under close escort, the cook was now talking to the commander, and she, too, was quite animated, even agitated. Again, they found out later that supplies of certain essential foods were running low, and the commander had allowed the cook to place orders by phone. The commander further arranged for two of the cook's male assistants to visit the nearby village to pick up their regular, pre-ordered supplies, under close supervision.

So clearly they would not be herded off anywhere else even more odious just yet. As long as they were within the grounds of Merrymede Hall, at least they felt relatively safe. And the assailants hadn't trashed the place, or burnt it down – at least not yet – which was another hopeful sign.

# Scene 38:

## Maria

One of the kitchen staff had fallen sick and was being attended to by Matron, so Cook had volunteered Sarah to stand in for him and, though Maria usually tried to avoid work in the kitchen and laundry, much preferring the library and computer room, she was only too happy to make the most of the freedom, given their dire circumstances.

Some new supplies had just arrived and it was her job, with the aid of one of the stronger male staff, to store it away, in the cool pantry, dark cupboard, refrigerator, or freezers.

Having made sure all the frozen items and those that needed to be kept chilled had been safely stowed away, Maria turned her attention to the rest.

She carefully checked through the large sacks of potatoes that Adrian had kindly hauled across the kitchen for her, rebagging them, with his help, and making sure that they weren't sprouting green shoots or rotting. Sprouts could be toxic, and rotten potatoes were the worst. Although perhaps these should be fed to the guards? And if there were a lot of inedible items, a complaint would be lodged and they would be returned to the shop. Cook was a fastidious woman with many idiosyncrasies, and she didn't mess about.

It was when Maria came to unbox the canned food that she came across something strange. She's taken the last cans from the cardboard box, carefully aligning them on the shelf, in alphabetical order, labels facing forward and she was just about to put the box away in a storage cupboard, in case anybody could make use of it, when she noticed a small manilla envelope<sup>129</sup> in the bottom, and she picked it up.

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<sup>129</sup> Made of a strong paper or thin cardboard with a smooth light brown finish made from e.g. Manila hemp.

She turned the envelope to see if it bore a name or address, and saw that it was clearly marked in dark blue, handwritten writing: “Vital update for Hermes. Important instructions on card.”

Having taken communications and propaganda classes with Mister Goldstein, she’d heard about Hermes and used it quite a lot.

Of course all their mobis had been confiscated by the goons<sup>130</sup> when they raided Merrymede, but in any case, she’d heard that there was no network signal anymore. One of the other boys thought maybe the goons had done that on purpose.

Not sure who else she could trust, and since the staff were all under armed guard in the hall, Maria stepped into the shadows of the pantry and carefully opened the envelope. There was no covering letter inside, nor any indication of who might have sent it, except that it must have come from the Resistance; but there was a grey card tucked inside. She fished it out and saw that it was a memory card and, turning the card over she saw the words “Hermes update” written on it and an old date, which was a bit weird since a lot of software updated at least once a month. For some reason the date was doubly underlined and there was an exclamation mark after it, which presumably meant that the old date was not a mistake. Anyhow, it must contain a software update. Again, she could only assume that the instructions on the card would clarify matters.

Unsure of what to do, Maria decided to tear up the envelope and hide the bits of brown paper among the potato peelings in the rubbish bin by the sink, and slipped the small card inside one of her ankle-length socks.

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<sup>130</sup> Goon: A thug hired to carry out acts of violence or intimidation; an aggressive and violent criminal; an awkward stupid person.



# Scene 39:

## Raising Morale

Maria and maybe a couple of dozen of the others were heading off down the corridor, under guard as ever, after another thrilling day in paradise.

Ahead of them, she saw the Director emerge from his office with the commander following on behind. They both seemed to be in peculiarly jovial spirits, considering the shit they were in.

“Thank you for the drink, Director,” the man said, bowing his head slightly. “Such a wonderful bouquet, a novel and refreshing taste, and quite a kick for a fortified wine.”

Their line has slowed and now come to a stop. Perhaps the guard wanted to speak to his commander.

The Director had turned and he was watching as Maria and the others approached. For a moment it felt to Maria as if he was seeing right through her. Then the Director turned back to the man. “Why don’t you share some of the *chungari* with your men, commander? Perhaps it will lift their morale. It can’t be much fun for them standing around all day shepherding a flock.”

Even before the commander had replied, the Director walked back to the office, reached behind the open door and returned with a small silver key. “The wine cellar is just there,” he said, motioning to the unmarked door opposite his office, and handing the commander the key. “Be sure to mind your head on the way down: there’s a low oak beam not far above head height.”

He turned to the waiting line of students again and said: “Why don’t you have a few of the girls help fetch some bottles for you, and you’ll find glasses in the kitchen. Six girls should do: one bottle each to be on the safe side, and two trips each. Or more, should you need it.”

The commander was scratching his chin now, weighing his decision.

“Any volunteers?” the Director asked and six of them stepped neatly to their right, closer to the wine cellar. Maria wasn’t quite sure what had happened, because she hadn’t consciously volunteered. It was as if the decision had been made for her.

“Why not, Director,” the commander finally agreed, and he went to open the door of the wine cellar and switch the light on just by the door.

“Take the bottles through to the front office, girls,” the Director requested. “There’s plenty of room there if you clear a space on one of the desks.”

The Director was looking straight at her, or through her, as he spoke these words, and she was left with no uncertainty that this was exactly what he wanted her to do. No questions asked, and no choice in the matter, it was what she *had* to do.

They emerged from the wine cellar one after another, and carried the bottles to the front office, and one of the guards helped them clear a space and shift one of the wooden tables into place not far from the door.

There were all their mobis, just sitting there.

As soon as the guard’s back was turned she quickly reached out and grabbed the nearest one, and thrust it into a pocket in her skirt, then turned and walked back up the corridor to the wine cellar to grab a second bottle.

Again Maria clambered down the steps into the cold cellar and picked up a second bottle. Then she had second thoughts, replaced the bottle, and wandered further into the cellar away from the light in the ceiling above the wine racks. She crept along even further and was just about to duck into the shadows when her friend Pamela called her name.

Maria turned, her index finger over her lips, and Pam nodded in understanding. Then the girl took two of the bottles, slipping one inside her shoulder bag, and went back up the stairs.

Whether Pam had worked this out for herself, or been subtly prompted as she had been, Maria didn’t know. Or maybe that’s just the ways things naturally worked out in the presence of the Friends.

As the last girl emerged, the commander stepped across the

corridor, clicked off the light leaving her utterly in the dark, and turned the key to lock the door.

Maria waited a few minutes until she could be sure that the coast was clear then felt her way carefully past the wine racks, crept quietly up the stairs on her hands and knees, feeling the way, and clicked the light back on. Then she quickly descended the stairs again and headed for cover away from the light, in case anybody should come back for more supplies.

On the way, she grabbed a small bottle of *chungari* herself and took it with her. They'd all heard of the amber elixir, but only the staff, guests, and the mature students had ever tasted it. Well, if she was stuck in the cellar then she had a damn right to party, too.

Only then did it suddenly dawn on her that she'd been locked in. And yet for some reason, it really didn't seem to matter.

She found an old brown sack in a corner of the cellar and, after giving that a good shake to remove any accumulated dust, she laid it down on the tiled floor and leant against the stone wall.

First things first, she examined the bottle. Fortunately for her it had a bulbous cork that she could twist off with her hands, otherwise she'd have been lost without a corkscrew or Swiss army knife.<sup>131</sup>

She raised the bottle to her lips and took a tentative first sip and, since she liked the taste, she took a large gulp before recorking the bottle and setting it down beside her on the tiles.

Remembering the phone – I mean, how could she forget a thing like that, she laughed to herself – she switched it on and waited for the operating system to boot-up.

Finally the home screen popped-up. To her dismay, however, one glance at the icons at the top of the screen told her she had no regular service, let alone secure comms. She did wonder if she'd be able to get any signal at all down here in the basement with its thick stone walls.

Well, that was her well and truly screwed. What on Earth were you thinking, Maria Whittaker, to hide yourself down here?

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<sup>131</sup> A pocket knife with many accessories that can be unfolded and used, like miniature scissors, a nail file, tweezers, corkscrew, screwdriver bit; etc.

Speaking of thick stone walls, they were also cold and dug into her back, so she stood up, grabbed the sack and her bottle, and went to sit against a wooden-panelled spot further into the cellar. That was a lot more comfortable and not nearly as cold.

She uncorked the bottle and had a second large swig, already feeling lightly, yet wonderfully, squiffy. Well, maybe the Director had been right: it might improve the goons' morale and their temperament. Hell, knock yourselves out, boys!

At that, Maria threw her head back in laughter, instantly regretting it as she hit the back of her head against the sturdy wooden panels.

Ouch!

That was her first reaction. But that was quickly followed by a minor revelation.

Maria put the bottle down, stood up and lightly tapped on one of the wooden panels. She repeated her experiment, only harder this time. There was no way they'd hear that upstairs.

Yes, she was right: the panels weren't solid: they had a distinctly hollow sound to them.

Casting the sack aside and moving her bottle out of the way, she stood back to examine the panels. And another thing: she thought she saw light under the bottom panel when it should have been in shadow.

Getting down on her hands and knees, she confirmed her earlier suspicion. There was definitely light coming from behind the panels. She checked the other panels, but they were all tightly butted up against one-another, so she could find no gaps that she could peer through, and of course the bottom panel pretty much touched the tiled floor, and it was a physical impossibility to see through a narrow gap that low. Even if she'd had a mirror with her, it would have been no use.

Getting back to her feet and brushing herself down, Maria pushed, but the panels merely flexed, they did not move; and she tugged, to no avail. Apart from anything else, there was nowhere that her finger tips could find a purchase to pull the panels open like a swinging door.

Giving up for the moment, she took a third large swig of her

drink and stood back. There had to be some logical way of getting into whatever was behind the panels. I mean, why on earth would you mount a light if there was only stone wall behind the panels? There had to be a space of some sort; maybe an alcove; maybe a room beyond?

Presumably this was because whoever built it didn't want people to know about the hidden space. But they'd surely have installed a secret catch or something. Otherwise they might just as well have not bothered.

"Everything has a catch," she could hear the Director's voice saying in her head.

Well, that was quite unexpected and Maria took it as an encouragement. Starting at the bottom left, she worked her way round the edges of the door in a clockwise fashion, if you could do that on a square door, probing and pushing. When she came to the top left-hand corner she thought she could feel something, but still the door remained shut. She probed and pushed all along the top, to no avail. Again at the top right-hand corner she felt something. Yet still the door didn't budge in the slightest.

For some utterly bizarre reason, Maria had a song floating around in her head now. Not just the idea of a song, but she could hear the lyrics as they'd actually been sung, and there was a full backing band. Had it been an orchestral piece, she'd have been able to hear it all. This was something she'd noticed in herself from an early age. It was like the difference between looking at a picture and actually being in the picture.

This song, however was one called "All Together Now" and it was by The Beatles from their album *Yellow Submarine* that her parents had often listened to. They were neo-hippies.

"All together now; all together now". Round and round these words went in her head.

And then she had a brainwave. Well, it would be a brainwave if she got it right, and a major disappointment and embarrassment if she got it wrong.

She again felt around the edge of the wooden panels and probed and pushed at the top left and top right simultaneously.

There was a distinct "click" and the wooden panels swung

partly open, as if attached to a spring mechanism.

“Oh wow! Thank you, thank you, thank you!” she silently yelled out. And she was sure that she heard something inside her reply: “You’re welcome.”

Maria stooped down, reached for the bottle, and had a third swig of her drink. Or maybe it was the fourth? Either way, she realised by now that she’d maybe had enough, or even had a little too much, so she recorked the bottle and returned it to a shelf near the wine rack. Definitely well away from the hidden door. She moved the sack, too. Well, you never know: someone else might come along and get curious about such clues. Gosh, was she even making sense anymore?

Drawing a deep breath, she took hold of the right-hand edge of the hidden door and it opened easily. So, there it was: a little space with just sufficient room to house an upright wooden chair, a shelf perhaps three feet wide and just as deep; a light fixture fitted into a false ceiling; a flat computer screen and, on the floor, a tall computer enclosure. It looked a lot taller than the ones she’d used in the computer room and seen in the offices. In fact, newb<sup>132</sup> as she was to computers, at least in relation to others like Mister Goldstein or Mister Messenger, she’d bet her last credit that this was a server. So this was the reason she’d seen Mister Goldstein frequent the wine cellar. And all this time she’d thought maybe he was an alchy.<sup>133</sup>

Maria noticed that the server was on, but the screen was blank, so she woke it up. Fortunately a password was not required, because whoever had used the machine last had not logged-out.

She bent down and removed the card from her sock and tapped it against the card reader. Instantly a menu popped up. There were only two options: “Vital instructions” and “Install software update” and, having a modicum of common sense, she clicked on the first item and read the instructions first.

The instructions were very clear: there was something wrong with the latest version of the Hermes software installed on the

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<sup>132</sup> Short for newbie: Any new participant in some activity; a neophyte.

<sup>133</sup> Short for alcoholic.

servers. So they had to install an old version that still worked.

However, they first had to disable automatic software updates, before installing the old version, or else the system would later update and reinstall the latest, flawed software.

Hence the old date on the memory card label. It all made sense now.

Following the instructions to the letter, although with a high level of anxiety and trepidation, and also by now slightly cross-eyed from the drink, she managed to turn off automatic updates.

Then she turned her attention back to the initial menu and clicked on “Install software update.”

While that was working away, seeing the progress bar creeping up very slowly, she went to have one final swig of *chungari*. You could see why the Director enjoyed drinking the stuff. Quite what effect it would have on the goons, though, was anyone’s guess. Well, she figured it would make them more mellow. Whether they found it at all enlightening, though, she couldn’t say. Some people didn’t have an enlightened cell in their body.

Maria figured that if the thing took five minutes to move on to 20%, the installation could take as long as half an hour before it hit 100% complete. Anyhow, right now she had all the time in the world.

Half an hour later, almost on the dot, the server issued a short “ping” and, looking at the screen she could see that the software was restarting. She had been worried that the system would need a reboot, because then she probably would have had to enter a password, and she would have been screwed.

Finally, a message briefly popped up indicating that the update and restart had been successful. So the server must be back online.

Maria sat back down on the seat and woke the mobi. The charge was down to 55% which was slightly worrying because she didn’t have a lead to connect to the computer and there was no inductive charging bay.

She brought the memory card’s menu back up on the screen and opened up the instructions again. At the foot of the page,

beneath the instructions was a number to call once secure comms service had been restored, and there was a QCode. She scanned the code and her mobi automatically dialled the number.

Moments later, she was connected.

“Hello?” a voice greeted her.

“Hi, this is Maria Whittaker.”

“Brent Messenger here. What can I do for you at this late hour, Maria?”

“Not the Mister Messenger from Merrymede Hall?” she asked.

“It sure is.”

“I thought I recognised the voice, but I couldn’t quite match it to a face.”

“Wait a minute!” the man replied, suddenly growing enthusiastic. “I remember you now. Where are you phoning from, Maria?”

“Merrymede Hall,” she told him. “Do you want the long story or the short story?”

“Take as long as you need, Maria: I’m all ears.”

“Well, long story short, we received a memory card. It was smuggled in with a grocery order. I managed to get hold of a mobi when the goons weren’t watching. Then I managed to hide myself away in the wine cellar.”

“Oh wow! You mean where the Hall’s server is.”

“That’s right, though I only found the hidden door by chance. Well, if you can call it chance and not divine intervention.

“So you got the server up-and-running.”

“I sure did. I followed the instructions to the letter.

“There’s just one snag, though: I managed to get myself locked in the cellar.”

“Oh, dear.” There was a noticeable pause. “Don’t worry: we’ll get you out as soon as we can.”

Maria noticed the hesitancy in that brief pause, and realised then that he was only saying that to allay her fears. She didn’t say anything, though.

“Oh wow again, too,” Mister Messenger said. “I can see your server node on the network map now. It just popped up. Thank



you *so* much, Maria. You really are a star!”

There was another brief pause.

“Sorry for the delay, I was just making sure our conversation is being recorded so that the whole team can hear it from the horse’s mouth – firsthand, I mean; directly from the source.”

“You’ve set up a team?” she prompted the man, and he gave her a quick run through, describing his and Arielle’s escape, being smuggled into the city, the meetings they’d been holding, and their efforts to get the secure comms servers back online. Which was where she came in.

“Okay,” Mister Messenger said at length. “That’s the story at our end. What news can you tell me about events at Merrymede Hall?”

So she told him as much as she could – at least as much as she could remember. That took a good half hour and it came as a shock to find that the charge on her mobi was now down to 25%.

She told Mister Messenger this.

“Okay, switch off your phone for now. I mean shut it down, don’t just let it go to sleep. And in the morning, I’ll call you back and show you how to exchange messages using the server.”

Maria thought about that. “I’d rather know now, so I can try to get at least some sleep,” she told him. “I don’t like loose ends.”

“Okay, well I haven’t got a computer screen in front of me right now, so I’ll be flying blind, as they say. But I’ll do my best to talk you through it. You’ll have to describe each screen for me and read out any text prompts that you come across. Does that sound good to you, Maria?”

“That’s fine by me,” she agreed.

“Okay, then let’s give it a shot.”

“I’m not keeping you up, am I?”

“No, not at all, Maria. Arielle has just gone to make me a coffee and she’s as thrilled as I am to hear from you. The whole team will be over the moon. And we’re more concerned about you than anything else. But thanks for asking.

“Oh, and one thing before I forget, Maria: make sure you close up the server booth before you settle down. Just in case you have any surprise visitors.”

Maria laughed: “I was just thinking that selfsame thought, Mister Messenger.”

“And call me Brent, because you’ve certainly earned it.

“Okay, so this is what you need to do on the server ...”

# Scene 40:

## Action Stations

Colonel Rolands checked his watch, made sure his gun was secured in its holster, and pulled on his black helmet.

Then he dropped the visor and checked his secure comms and walkie-talkie,<sup>134</sup> one of the few they'd been able to locate. One of the old boys, a veteran of the special forces, still had a stash of them squirrelled away out in the woods, along with a cache of antiquated rifles, and they'd located and purloined<sup>135</sup> another two from the city's technology museum. These devices were ancient but, given fresh modern batteries and technical know-how, they still worked, and if they lost their secure comms at least the squad leaders would still be able to coordinate with the others.

All was in order, and they were as ready as they would ever be. Some were already in place, either waiting for the order or already carrying out their allotted tasks; and, if orders did not come, they were to follow contingency plans.

A stickler for the "4Bs" – belt, braces, brown trousers, and bicycle clips – his men had thoroughly thought through most of the conceivable scenarios. If all else failed, then it was every man for himself; and, if possible, they would either bunker down or attempt to regroup up north.

"Right then, men. Everyone to their stations. When your teams are in position, report in," the officer ordered them, already striding briskly out of the room with the others trotting along behind him. "And keep all communication brief. I don't want to hear any idle chatter clogging up the channels."

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<sup>134</sup> A small portable radio link (receiver and transmitter).

<sup>135</sup> Stolen.

# Scene 41:

## Government HQ

The stooped old lady pulled her two-wheeled shopping trolley along behind, her, passing by the front of the governmental building, past the row of sturdy steel bollards driven well down into the ground; barriers installed to prevent Resistance vehicles, perhaps packed with high explosives, ramming into the stout front doors and across the wide open space of the lobby.

It was only early autumn, and the evenings were still quite light, but by the end of her shift it would be dark; and, if she had to work overtime, then it would once again be getting light.

Turning the corner and heading down the side of the building, Mavis straightened her straw bonnet which had been caught in a sudden breeze, and fumbled around in her coat pocket to pull out her ID card.

She tapped the card against the yellow plastic panel to the right of the door and waited, eyes looking straight forward into the camera mounted above the panel, for the AI system to match her face, ID, and security clearance level, and allow her access.

Moments later, there was a loud click and the two doors slid open just long enough for her to get through with her trolley, then it slid tightly shut again.

Walking down the wide corridor, she turned into a room on the left and, as she entered, a small light automatically came on, and she pushed her shopping trolley over into the side of the room, pulled off her coat, and hung it on a peg above the trolley.

Feeling quite parched, the old lady got herself a drink of water from the sink tap at the back of the room. She could have done with a nice warm cup of tea, but that would have to wait until her break.

While she was drinking her water, she waved her hand in front of the small screen on the wall to wake it up, and checked

the roster. She was down for cleaning the ground floor that day which was a minor blessing.

Then, going across to the other side of the room, she pulled out one of the cleaning trolleys: a rectangular metal frame with four swivelling wheels and a metal bar across the back to grip hold of and steer the thing, and made sure that the bucket had plenty of water in it, and that she had all the right equipment. She was fussy about such things, but one or two of the others left their gear in an awful mess.

She always got into work earlier than the others, partly because that was the way she was, and partly because she was not particularly fond of Joseph, the porter who was in charge of the cleaning team. He was a sour, crabby old man who was notoriously hard to please. Thankfully she was well on her way long before he arrived.

## Scene 42:

### The Nervous Waiting Game

Arielle and Brent were stuck in the back of the van. It was stifling in there even in the early morning, after a hot, humid night. The driver had the air conditioning on in the cab, and they had the frosted plastic roof flap open, but little of the cooler air made it into the back of the van.

Brent was feverishly tapping away at his laptop and he looked so intent on what he was doing that she didn't like to interrupt his work. She could see a bead of sweat forming in his hairline and trickling down his temple and cheek, and the veins in his neck and hands were bulging, so he must have been quite anxious and pent-up, too, and trying not to show it.

As for her, all she could do was hope, and pray, and practice her deep breathing meditation.

And wait. Time appearing to have slowed to a crawl, the wait that morning seemed interminable. But fortunately she had time to think, or at least that would have been a good thing had she not been so intent on clearing her mind, if such a thing did not sound oxymoronic.

They couldn't move the van until Brent had worked his magic on the surveillance cameras; they couldn't turn off those systems until some of the others were in place; then they had to make a dash across the city themselves to be at their own allotted station.

It was a complex scheme they were tasked with enacting, and timing was of the essence. Brent had it all set out in flow charts on his laptop, critical paths marked in red, but they'd each had to commit all the details of their roles to memory. Colonel Rolands had insisted on that, and the man had spent hours drumming it into them. Rolands was a harsh, though essential, taskmaster.

# Scene 43:

## Merrymede Hall

The men must have found the wine cellar and raided it, because the commander had a drink in his hand and a lot of the guards were milling around the front office and evidently getting quite merry.<sup>136</sup> The younger students had all been escorted to their dorms by now, and before long it would be the turn of the mature students and staff.

The commander, however, had been growing more and more agitated by the loss of comms that evening, checking his mobi every few minutes and cursing under his breath.

Then a courier arrived,. He had a pair of heavy black leather gauntlets in one hand, long boots, and looked to be covered in dust, so perhaps he was a motorcyclist. In his other hand he carried a large red envelope and judging by the man's expression, it was not a love letter or Valentine's card.<sup>137</sup>

"At last!" the commander uttered loudly, having torn the envelope open and read through the contents.

"Will there be any reply, commander?" the courier wanted to know.

The commander shook his head. "Just let them know that the orders have been received and understood."

Then, as the courier was turning to leave, the commander said: "And get yourself a drink on the way out. You look like you've deserved it."

"Thank you, sir."

The courier smartly saluted his superior and left.

The commander called to one of the guards and the Director was brought before him. "Good news at last," the man

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<sup>136</sup> This witness hadn't seen the Director offer the men drink.

<sup>137</sup> Yes, they still celebrated Valentine's day on 14 February, though there were no longer any religious connections.

announced, and he handed his half-full glass of wine to the Director. "A convoy of trucks is on its way as I speak, to take you and the teaching staff on to pastures new."

That did not bode well.

"And the others?" the Director wanted to know.

"The students and ancillary staff will be moved to separate facilities over the next two to three days."

And with that, the Director was escorted back to his place on the floor with the other teaching staff. He bent down and handed the glass to Matron as he passed by because, mourning the loss of her dear husband, she was one of those most affected by recent events, and most in need of comfort.

"I'll throttle them with my bare hands, given half a chance," the woman hissed.

"If you get a chance," the Director whispered, "raid the wine cellar yourself."

"No talking!" the guard demanded, and he rammed the butt of his rifle into the small of the Director's back and pushed him on his way.



# Scene 44:

## In Through the Backdoor

Mavis had decided to work overtime that night and she was feeling more than a little bushed by the time she hurriedly pushed her heavy trolley back into the cleaners' room. She was already running five minutes late.

She'd normally make herself another cup of tea and sit down for a while before braving the early morning city streets, but today she had another job to do. First though, she had to put her coat on and collect her shopping trolley.

Leaving the room, she walked back down the wide corridor to the side door. Pulling out her ID card, she tapped it against the yellow panel to the left of the doors and waited for a brief moment for the doors to slide open.

Her heart lurched when the doors failed to open.

She tapped her card against the panel a second time, and a third. Still the doors refused to budge.

Well, in view of the circumstances, there was only one thing for it. She reached down and yanked on the red lever that opened the doors in the event of a power cut or fire.

Nothing happened; and she had to lean against the wall while she got her breath back, and have two or three puffs on her inhaler.

Pull yourself together Mavis Stafford, she implored herself under her breath.

Just then, she heard footsteps coming along the hard floor of the corridor behind her, and she turned round slowly, trying to act the innocent.

It was Joseph. Of all the people, it had to be him.

"What you doin' there, Missus Stafford? If you ain't gone 'ome yet, get the ruddy kettle on: I'm fair gaggin'."

There was no time for tea, nor for niceties. Not today.

She reached into her shoulder bag and pulled out the old pistol, slipped off the safety catch as she'd been taught by her better half, Morris; took aim; and squeezed, not pulled, the trigger.

*Thunk*, came the muffled report of the silenced pistol.

She'd aimed for the man's chest, but her arm had jerked at just the wrong moment – or perhaps at exactly the right moment; the bullet drilled straight through the man's forehead between his bushy eyebrows, and blasted its way straight out the back, splattering the pale grey walls of the corridor, and the dark green floor, with blood and the insides of the man's skull.

By now shaking like the proverbial leaf in a breeze, Mavis turned round and staggered back to the door.

She gave the red lever one last pull. Again the doors failed to open.

Well, there was only one thing for it, and then she'd have to scarper like the very hounds of hell were on her tail – as they might soon well be.

Mavis took out her set of keys and jabbed at the glass in the red box sticking out from the wall above the lever. Thank Alicia the alarm didn't go off, or she would really be in the mire.

She chipped away the odd remaining shards of glass and retrieved the silver key. Inserting it in the yellow panel and giving a tug, she swung the panel open.

Then she slowly began to turn the handle. The mechanism was stiff and it required the use of both of her hands.

Slowly but surely, the doors inched open until finally there was sufficient room to step through.

The men outside wasted no time now in rushing in, stopping only momentarily as they stepped over the dead body. The last one through gently patted her on the shoulder as he passed, and then they were gone.

So, going back to retrieve her shopping trolley, and relieved that she'd had the sense to pull her coat on, given the way her hands were now shaking, Mavis hurriedly left the premises. And good riddance to the place and all who served there.

# Scene 45:

## Discovered

Matron was being led along the corridor with her staff when she broke ranks and casually walked toward the Director's office. Inside, though, she was feeling deeply anxious.

"Get back in line!" one of the guards demanded, marching up from the rear.

"I have to get some medicine from the cellar," Matron replied assertively. "One of the kitchen staff is still feeling unwell."

The guard appeared unsure.

"You can ask your commander if you must, but I'm sure he will permit this."

The guards exchanged glances. "Very well, but be quick about it."

Perhaps the *chungari* had worked its wonders and made them a little more amenable, or at least a little less distrusting. Yes, they were much more lax.



Maria heard the door creak open at the top of the stairs and only then did she realise – to her horror and chagrin! – that she had left the light on.

Heavy footsteps were now descending the bare, wooden steps. She pushed herself into a corner, out of sight beside two large barrels. Heart beating fast, she tried to quieten her breathing.

The figure loomed closer now; then, in a flash, she recognised Matron, and she crawled out of her hiding place.

Matron recoiled in fright, seeing her there; her eyes wide open and her mouth half open. She had the presence of mind not to cry out, however. Her hand clasped to her heart, she fought to calm herself down.

Maria reached into her shoulder bag and retrieved the mobi. She pressed it into Matron's hand, and Matron quickly hid it away

in one of the pockets of her dark blue uniform.

“There isn’t much charge left,” Maria warned her. Then she rummaged in her shoulder bag and brought out something else: an old army service revolver and a small carton of spare ammunition. Brent had told her that on the floor in front of the chair at the back of the recess there was a battered old cardboard box. And that’s where she’d found the gun.

Matron spoke only three words before stowing away the gun and turning to pick up one of the small bottles of medicinal brandy:

“Bless you, Maria.”

This was not the time for probing questions and long explanations.

And then Matron turned and left, leaving the light on and accidentally forgetting to lock the door behind her.

# Scene 46:

## Fast and Furious

Things were developing fast at Merrymede Hall now.

Matron and her staff had been sent off to the dorms, but Matron had insisted that someone had to stay up through the night to watch over Alan, one of the kitchen staff, who was still running a fever. The poor nurse had been on her feet since early in the morning. Sarah could share the night shift with her, too, she suggested; even though she knew full well that dear Sarah, who had been visiting the Hall and incorrectly assigned to Matron's group, wouldn't know one end of a thermometer from the other.

One of the two guards who was with them seemed happy enough with that arrangement, but his comrade who had yet to taste the amber nectar was not so sure, and in the end he insisted that Matron and Sarah go with him to talk to the commander directly.

It did not slip Matron's hawk-like attention that this would leave just the one guard watching over this group of dorms. And, while the two of them were distracted, she quietly slipped the revolver and packet of ammo into one of the housekeeper's shoulder bags. Though caught off guard momentarily, the woman accepted it, no questions asked.

The teaching staff were still in the main hall when they arrived. It looked like the commander was expecting the trucks to arrive at any time now, and that the teaching staff who would be the first to go would get little sleep that night.

As they crossed the hall, heading for the commander who was talking to the Director, she briefly exchanged eye contact with the Director. She nodded her head slightly and he nodded back, indicating that he understood that the earlier task he'd given her had been successfully completed.

Given the good news that he had received, the commander appeared to be in quite a jovial mood and, brushing aside any objections from the guard, he readily agreed to Matron and Sarah working the night shift.

So they headed for the hospital ward to tend to the invalid. Well, the purported invalid: Neil Chambers was in fact well on the mend, but the more of them who were out of the hall, the better, since it gave them a degree of free movement.

After the guard had left them, it also did not escape Matron's sharp eyes that this left only the one other guard and, more often than not, he would spend his time sitting by the entrance to the ward dozing in one of the comfy chairs. And to ease the poor man's sorrows, since he had missed out on his comrades' party, Matron put on a most glorious smile and, looking around furtively for the sake of heightening the conspiracy, she slipped the little flask of medicinal brandy into his eager hands.

Play on their weaknesses and pander to their desires: that was the whispered advice that she was being given that evening. Even with the Director so far away across campus, she still felt touched by his dear presence.

# Scene 47:

## Green Light

There was a distinctive *beep* over the comms and Brent braced himself, knowing that he was about to receive a call. Arielle was talking to him in his other ear, but he held his hand up, cutting her off mid-utterance.

“Mother Goose to Danny Boy, come in. Over.”<sup>138</sup>

It was the Colonel, but this wasn’t the time for stupid games.

“Spit it out, man!” he snarled back, growing more agitated, even though that flew in the face of his years of training.

“Green light for stage two, Messenger,” came back the terse reply.

“Confirm green light for stage two,” he replied according to protocol.

“Confirmed,” the Colonel echoed back. Then the line went dead.

Brent hit the big red button on his screen and paused for just a few seconds to make sure there weren’t any last-second hitches.

Then, satisfied, he turned to the van driver and gave him the thumbs up.

Within ten minutes they’d arrived and, leaving the laptop in the custody of his trusty lieutenant, Carl Maidstone, and having been given the all clear by a nearby lookout, Brent and Arielle slipped off the safety catches of their pistols, opened the sliding side door of the van, and stepped out into the clammy early morning air.

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<sup>138</sup> An allusion to the film *When Eight Bells Toll*, based on Alistair MacLean's novel of the same name.

# Scene 48:

## The Poor Invalid

Neil Chambers, the poor invalid, was out of bed now and fully clothed. Matron had checked on the lone guard later that evening and, since he had thankfully drunk himself into a stupor and by now fallen into a deep and sound sleep, she'd relieved him of his pistol, automatic rifle, and comms. Then, since she could see that he was beyond rousing, she and Neil had manhandled him into a wheelchair, wheeled him down the corridor and locked him in a storage cupboard. Neil had wanted to suffocate the man, and she had to admit that she was sorely tempted; but, having found some long rolls of bandage, they decided to just tie him up, gag him, and leave him there.

Matron went through to one of the housekeepers' offices, inserted one of her keys in the wall-mounted key safe; then, checking the labels on the keys one by one, she took half a dozen of them and went back to the ward where Neil and Sarah were waiting.

"We need to create a major diversion," Matron spoke at length. She was taking a gamble, of course, but she trusted her intuition, especially in times of emergency or danger. Trust in her inner promptings appeared to be a requirement, and it was as if something deep inside her had also grown to trust her and thrived on the attention.

"Lots of whizz-bangs?" Neil enquired.

Matron nodded. "Yes, just like Gandalf and his whizz-bangs."

"Then I have the very thing," Sarah piped up, and she explained what they should do.

There was a sturdy old shed in the grounds, some distance beyond the kitchen door. Not daring to chance the corridors inside, however, they went out through one of small windows at the end of the ward – Neil taking the rifle, Sarah the pistol, and



Matron hanging onto the comms for safe-keeping – and crept round the edge of the building behind the many bushes.

“Does anybody have a light?” Sarah wanted to know, and Matron’s uncharacteristically red face answered that question.

Neil came to the rescue and pulled out a packet of black market tobacco. Matron looked suitably shocked, and would have given the lad a rollicking, but for now she remained silent.

Sarah laughed nervously. “I was going to say, no I meant matches or a lighter, but since you’re a smoker, I guess you must have something.”

Neil nodded and Matron gave Sarah a push to send her on her way.

As they knelt not far from the shed, Matron handed her a small brass key. “There’s a strong padlock on the shed door,” she explained.

“Okay, so who’s going to make a dash across the grass?” Neil enquired.

“It would take two to collect up the fireworks,” Matron said. There are three large boxes full.

Sarah had other ideas. “There’s no point in running around the buildings with boxes of fireworks,” she said.

“Meaning?” queried Matron.

“Meaning one of us should go and set the whole lot off in situ. In the shed.”

Matron was about to object, but then something told her not to interfere.

Sarah was thinking on her feet. “When that lot go up, we don’t want to be anywhere near the shed,” she advised them, and Matron realised she had start back toward the ward.

“See you back in the ward.” Neil snatched the key from Sarah’s hand, brought out his box of matches, shoved the rifle into Matron’s hands; and, checking that the way was clear, he began to sprint across the grass.

Well the decision had been made for them, and Sarah and Matron hurried back toward the relative safety of the ward as quickly as they could with their backs bent low.

## **Scene 49:**

# **Your Early Morning Call**

It was still very early in the morning when they were all woken at Merrymede Hall, by the sound of loud explosions, somewhere over to the west.

Some of them were already wide awake in the dorms, though.

Shortly before the explosions began, Harry, one of the porters who helped Wilfred out with odd jobs, had been given a mission.

A few yards away down the corridor, the lone guard assigned to these staff dorms was slumped on a chair. He'd fallen asleep not long after escorting them to the dorms, and he was snoring loudly.

Egged on by the others who were, of course, more courageous than he was, his mission was to sneak up on the guard and club him over the head. Gripped in one hand was a sturdy chair leg that they'd broken off the other night, on the off chance that they got a chance to make a break for it.

Just to be on the safe side, though, William, another of the staff and a few years older than Harry but still quite fit, was just three or four steps behind him. He held the revolver that Matron had passed to one of the housekeepers, and he was fully prepared to use it. But that would have to be a last resort for as soon as the shot was heard, all hell would break loose. And he was acutely aware that there were far more guards than he had bullets.

"It's a dirty job, but someone has to do it," Harry had nervously laughed as they had prepared to set out. Since it was part of his own job to unclog the toilets whenever they became blocked, William did not appreciate the ill-timed humour.

As they got within striking distance of the guard, the man shifted his position. He had his eyes closed still, but rather ominously he had stopped snoring.

Harry had just raised his makeshift club and was about to

bring it down with great force on the man's head when they heard the first flurry of explosions (Neil had left some of the fireworks in their boxes and scattered the rest close by).

In a flash, the man was awake and he leapt to his feet, though as yet he was oblivious to their presence. Doubly shocked, Harry staggered back.

The guard had seen them and he swung round and reached for his rifle which was still leaning against the back of the chair.

In that instant, just as a second and third flurry of explosions sounded in the distance, William boldly stepped out from behind Harry and fired two shots at the guard. The first struck the man in the upper thigh, and he staggered on and grabbed hold of his rifle.

But William was closer now and, avoiding the body armour protecting the guard's chest and back, and his helmet, he fired a lucky shot and hit the man right in the side of the neck. Spouting arterial blood everywhere, the guard quivered for a time and collapsed in a heap.

Gathering his wits about him, Harry knelt down to relieve the guard of his pistol, grabbed the rifle, and called the others, who had been cowering in their dorms, to let them know that the coast was, for now, clear.

He kept hold of the rifle and handed the pistol to one of the others.

"We should rouse the younger students and get them to safety," one of the housekeepers spoke up at this point, jangling a set of keys that she'd squirrelled away, in her hand.

"Take them out back, keeping to the edge of the playing fields," William advised. "You don't want to be caught out in the open."

"Hold your horses! We're getting ahead of ourselves," Harry warned. "The other guards will be awake by now, and they're bound to be swarming outside."

"Okay," William advised. "Anyone with a gun or other weapon, follow us. Let's see if we can take out any guards still near the students' dorms."

"And if manage that, take them out back smartish, keeping to the edge of the playing fields. You don't want to be caught out in

the open.”

“Then we need to rouse the mature students,” said another of the housekeepers. “We can take the more elderly to safety and hopefully some of the younger ones will come and help us out.”

Harry was not so sure. “The elderly wouldn’t stand a chance,” he argued. “Better to have them barricade themselves in somewhere, all together in one room. Throw everything you’ve got: beds, tables, mattresses. Throw them all up against the door.”

Another of the staff spoke up now. “Maybe we should just barricade the whole of the dorms,” she suggested. “There are only two ways up and stout fire doors at the top of the stairs.”

Again, Harry and William were not so sure. “I think we have a duty to help the others.”

“Well,” the woman said: “Anyone with weapons or feeling heroic can help the others, and the rest can barricade themselves in.”

There was some certainly merit in that suggestion.

# **Scene 50:**

## **A Meeting with Brace-Hamilton**

While Squad 1 headed for the basement where the electricians and backup generators were housed, and Squad 2 took the stairs to the communications centre on the first floor (that was, the floor above ground level), Brent and Arielle crossed the hall toward the elevators, hoping that the others wouldn't jump the gun and cut the power yet.

There were security forces milling around everywhere, but fortunately they were only checking passes in the front foyer, and for all intents and purposes, in their black uniforms and assumed identities, which would check out on the governmental systems, they would be taken for regular grunts. At least, that was the theory.

With the surveillance systems out, the regime knew that something was going down. As yet they hadn't twigged that some of the security systems had also been compromised, or Brent and the other squads would never have made it into the building. They might still not get out alive, but Brent and Arielle couldn't afford to think about that right now. They had a job to do.

They waited patiently for the elevator to descend to ground level, then got in as the doors slid open. Someone was dashing across the floor toward them now, a bespectacled, middle-aged woman in a grey skirt and jacket, white blouse and sensible shoes. She had a lanyard around her neck and a slim briefcase in her hand, and she looked official.

"Hold the door," she called out to them.

The doors were already closing, but Brent had absentmindedly pressed the button to open them again, when he

had actually meant to stab the button to close them. Not that this would have sped up the process.

So they had to wait while the woman entered the elevator.

The woman was now standing nearest the panel of buttons and apparently remembered her manners. "Which floor?" she asked them.

"Top floor, please."

"Audience with the Beloved Leader?" the woman asked her.

That's all they needed: an inquisitive woman.

She laughed: "Chance would be a fine thing."<sup>139</sup>

Only then did Arielle realise that the woman hadn't pressed a button for her floor, and that could only mean one thing.

"Same here," the woman lilted. "Off to have a word with Brace-Hamilton, one of the Leader's assistant chiefs of staff. Lovely man. You must have met him."

Then: "This your first time with the big cheeses<sup>140</sup> on the top floor?"

"My first time," Brent improvised; "my colleague's second."

Arielle could have died when Brent came out with those words. He clearly hadn't been trained how to deflect questions, and would have made a poor politician or salesperson. Not that they needed politicians any longer: just oligarchs and bureaucrats with rubber stamps.

"Ah, I see," the woman smiled, and thankfully saved them any more small talk.

At last they were on the top floor, and Brent gracefully bowed the woman through the door.

"Nice meeting you," she smiled, and immediately headed left across the lobby, evidently knowing exactly where she had to go.

Brent had it all worked out. He had a file of top secret documents with him for the eyes of the Beloved Leader's chief-of-staff alone, and they had all the official logs and messages and the ID to back that up. Basil Mortimer would himself confirm that their meeting had been scheduled, even though none of the secretaries would be able to recall having been involved in the

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<sup>139</sup> Meaning no chance.

<sup>140</sup> Important people; the bosses.

arrangements.

Brent walked boldly and confidently across the lobby and addressed the guy behind the counter, with her in tow. He told the clerk who they were, they scanned their ID, and patted his briefcase while emphasising that they had top secret documents with them for Mister Mortimer's eyes only. And yes, they did have an appointment booked.

The clerk confirmed the details, saying that he'd informed Mister Mortimer of their arrival, and asking them to kindly take a seat outside an office to their left.

Not long after, a uniformed officer invited them into the office.

Ahead of them were two seats and a desk, either made of real wood or else a rather convincing imitation, and behind the desk sat a formidable looking woman in a grey suit and with her hair tied back severely.

"Please take a seat," the woman requested. "I'm Mizz Brace-Hamilton, and I'm here to carry out your screening."

In that instant, Arielle realised the game was up, and her heart lurched. She really could have collapsed in a sorry heap on the floor.

Just then, she caught sight of two uniformed officers entering the office behind her, and through another door, behind the woman, the bespectacled lady they'd met in the elevator entered, doubly confirming Arielle's suspicions.

Brent exchanged glances with Arielle, and she could almost feel the sorrow behind his sparking, deep blue eyes. She wanted to cry, too. She could have cried an ocean of tears at that moment.

This was it, then. Do or die had been their only option, and they had no Plan B.

Arielle's right hand was resting against her hip, just fractions of an inch away from her holster, and she'd already undone the button. She'd taken the safety catch off as soon as they'd entered the building.

Without warning, she sprang to her feet, yanked out her pistol and took aim.

With equal speed, Brent was on his feet, too, and he grabbed

hold of the gun and forced her arm round behind her.

Not quite knowing what was going on, she squeezed the trigger, and Brent let her do it. *Click*.

He'd forced her down onto the chair by now, and before he had torn the pistol from her fingers, she'd squeezed the trigger three more times.

*Click, click, click.*

Only when Brent had reached in his right-hand jacket pocket, held out his palm, and shown her the ten bullets did she begin to comprehend what had happened.

"I trusted you," she cried out. "And all this time you've been playing me along."

She cast a fiery glance at the woman who sat passively behind the desk.

"All this time you've been working for them. For the fucking enemy. You absolute, detestable bastard!"

For his part, Brent did not even flinch.

"Captain Eugene Bartholemew at your service," Brent said, turning to the woman and bowing his head a little. "And this is, as you have no doubt gathered by now, Arielle Appleyard."

"A runaway and woman of many talents and formidable powers, and a prize catch, she is much sought after by our Beloved Leader, to whom I report, and answer to, alone."

"Greetings, Captain," the bespectacled lady beamed, returning his bow. It's good to see you again after all the years you've spent out in the cold."

Arielle cursed herself. She's even been prompted to check her clip<sup>141</sup> before she'd entered the building, but she'd ignored it. That was a 101.<sup>142</sup> What an absolute fool, and on so many levels!

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<sup>141</sup> Check that the clip of bullets in her pistol was full.

<sup>142</sup> A basic task, taught to novices.



# Scene 51:

## Explosions

When they heard the first explosions, the guards' party abruptly ended.

The commander was quick witted. He dashed from the main hall and into the passageway where the front office was, followed by the lone guard who had been watching over the hall.

Gathering his men together, he ordered many of them to split up into two squads and go round the building, one group clockwise, the other anticlockwise and find the source of the explosions.

The rest were to secure all entrances to the building.

The Director wasted no time, seeing that they had been left unguarded for a moment.

He dashed across the hall, beckoning to the other teachers to follow him.

Grabbing hold of two of the chairs, he ran to the doors into the hallway, which opened inwards and had swung shut, and threaded one leg of each chair through the two brass door handles.

"Anything heavy, bring it over here," the Director ordered, and they soon realised what he was intent on doing.

Then he bent down to bolt the bottom of the doors and reached up to bolt the tops. Unfortunately, he didn't have his keys with him, or he would have locked the doors as well.

By this time, two of the other teachers had wheeled over the upright piano, turned it on its back, and pushed it up against the door. Four more heavy oak tables followed, as the others got the idea. Everyone was on their feet and helping now.

Even the stacks of chairs were piled on top of the tables to add more weight.

By this time, the commander had realised his blunder and

seen what they were up to, but at the moment there was nothing he could do about it, and that made him furious.

“What now?” asked Tiffany, the geologist and archaeologist.

The Director thought about it, then called for the drama teacher. “Alex, check if by any chance either the door at the side of the stage or the door at the back of the stage are unlocked.”

There was an emergency exit at the side of the hall, but he could see that this was heavily chained and padlocked.

And, apart from numerous small windows near the ceiling of the hall – way, way beyond reach without a very tall ladder – the walls were solid. Of course, that was a blessing.

Think, man. Think! “Think logic, lad,” as his dear benighted father would have erroneously advised him, though in this instance, the man would have been quite correct.

Alex reported back breathlessly.

“Sorry, skipper, the side door’s locked. The stage door’s open, but I can tell you now: it just leads into a room where actors congregate and to a trapdoor in the floor that leads down to a cellar where we keep lots of props.”

“Any working pistols or swords?” the director wanted to know.

Alex shook his head. “Nothing worth bothering about.”

Damn.

At least, however, the guards wouldn’t be able to mount an assault through the side door. Well, not easily at any rate.

Then the Director had an awful thought. “Oh, dear Alicia,” he half gasped, half wailed. “If they take the other staff or students hostage, and make threats, then we will have no option but to wave our white handkerchiefs in the air and surrender.”

So perhaps his dear father and his entreaties to “think logic, lad” were bang on the money.

# Scene 52:

## A Bright Idea

One of Commander Schumer's men ran up at that moment and gave him a sloppy salute.

"Sorry, sir, but we can't get into the dorms. They've barricaded the fire doors at the top of the stairs. Both ends."

"They're meant to be under armed guard."

"I don't know who was on duty in the dorms, sir. And the comms are dead."

Commander Schumer was enraged, and he had just about as much as he could take.

He thought for a few moments, his fists tightly clenched, then he had a bright idea.

"Then take Jenkins and Rogers here, go to the hospital ward and bring back the Matron. And if you can't find her, or if she is too much to handle, then drag the patient out of his bed, and bring him here.

"I'll teach these wretches not to meddle with me!"

"Yes, sir. Right away, sir," the private replied with a salute, before turning on his heel and dashing back up the corridor with the other two soldiers in tow.

"Harding! Yes you, you disgusting lump of lard! Take Wright with you and fetch one of the long, low, wooden benches from the gymnasium. And be smart about it!"

Harding saluted and trotted off down the corridor to the right as fast as his little fat legs would carry him, with Wright racing on ahead.

"Fuck around and find out!" the commander yelled at the top of his voice, with his head turned toward the wooden doors into the main hall.

He strode across to the front office, grabbed one of the empty wine bottles, hurled it at the hall doorway, and it smashed noisily

against the stout wood.

Maybe he should just burn the place down. That would flush the bastards out.

# Scene 53:

## Maria

Maria was at the top of the stairs with her ear pressed to the door, listening out. It was almost morning now, but there was no way she could get any sleep. She wished she could have talked with Brent all night, but her mobi battery had been low, and she hadn't wanted to leave the door into the server alcove open.

At that moment, she heard voices approaching. She couldn't hear their voices, but they were approaching quickly, so maybe they were running.

"Who's the matron?" she heard one of them ask.

"Fat bitch in a dark blue uniform and a white bonnet," one of the others told him. "Thinks she owns the place."

"Oh yes, I know her," replied the first. "Wouldn't touch that woman with someone else's bargepole."<sup>143</sup>

"Well, she'll think again when the commander gets hold of her," a third one laughed.

Maria wasn't sure what to do. All she knew was that it was imperative that she did something.

An inner urge took hold of at that moment, and her hand was on the handle opening the door before she knew what was happening.

Following the urge, she crept along the side of the corridor, hoping against hope that she'd blend into the white wall and that the men wouldn't hear her and turn round.

They'd slowed their pace now that they were out of sight and earshot of the commander, and one of them lit a cigarette, took two or three puffs and handed it round, so she managed to edge closer behind them.

They were close to the ward now and Maria waited until the

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<sup>143</sup> Derived from "wouldn't touch that with a bargepole". Refuse to go near someone or something; avoid at all costs.

men started moving on.

As the men turned the corner, a single shot rang out and they hastily backtracked, out of range.

“Maybe we should go back and get some backup,” one of them advised.

“Not on your nelly: he’d have our guts for garters,” a second replied.

“You two rush him and I’ll provide covering fire,” said the first.

“No, you two rush him,” retorted the second.

The third checked his gun and grabbed hold of the first man by the scruff of neck. “We’ll go,” he insisted. “Jenkins, start shooting just before we break cover.”

Maria thrust her hand into her shoulder bag and pulled out the revolver: the one she had kept for herself.

She got down on one knee, cocked it,<sup>144</sup> took aim and, just as the men dashed round the corner, she fired a shot at the third man, but missed by a mile.

She cocked the gun a second time, hitting him in the shoulder this time.

Only now did he realise that he was under fire, and he yelled at the other two men and they hastily retreated.

In that moment, a burst of automatic gunfire was returned and the two men were flung across the corridor and lay still on the ground.

The third man had spotted her now, and he turned, on the point of firing at her.

Then there was a second short burst of automatic gunfire, he crumpled in a heap, and Matron turned the corner into the corridor.

“Hurry, Maria,” she beckoned urgently and Maria dashed across to her and into the hospital ward.

Matron shouldered her rifle, held out her arms, clasped Maria to her ample bosom, and kissed her lightly on the forehead. “My dear child, you are doubly blessed.”

“I think we all are, tonight, Matron,” she smiled in relief.

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<sup>144</sup> Alas, it was an old single-action revolver.

Matron sniffed the air. “Have you been at the *chungari* down in the cellar?” she enquired, hands on hips.

“Just a little,” Maria replied.

Matron held her shoulder and guided her further into the ward. “Well, I think on this occasion, since you so thoroughly deserve it, we’ll turn a blind eye on the matter, Maria.

“Now, let’s reconvene our little war council. And I think a quick lemonade would be in order.”

Drinks hastily poured, Matron and Maria went to sit on two of the beds in the ward wondering what to do next, leaving Sarah on guard by the entrance.

Maria attempted to phone Brent again, so that Matron could speak with him, but there was no reply and no opportunity to leave a voice message. Since her fingers had a lighter touch than Matron’s she left a long text message, typing it out as Matron dictated it, and detailing what had been going on at Merry Mede Hall, as best they were able to ascertain.

Finally she hit [Send] and switched the mobi off to conserve what remained of its charge. It was, of course, a forlorn hope.

Maria was deeply worried that they had, perhaps, merely postponed the inevitable, but she didn’t say anything to Matron, and tried her best to maintain an upbeat disposition.

# Scene 54:

## The Convoy

One of the men on sentry duty at the main gate saw the trucks coming up the lane toward the driveway. Transport, and hopefully fresh supplies, had at last arrived. His mate was sitting in the gatehouse enjoying a quiet fag, and he called out to tell the man to open the gates.

The three trucks drove in without stopping. He'd expected more, but perhaps this was all the Logistics Corps could muster.

The passenger in the cab of the last truck had wound his window down by now, and the man leant out and tossed him something, and he caught it as the truck drove on. It was a bottle of grog, and there were still a good three inches left in the bottom of the bottle. Not enough to get drunk on, but sufficient to make their shift less monotonous: it had been a long and eventful night, though they couldn't tell exactly what had been going on up at the Hall. Comms were still down and nobody had as yet come to relieve them at their post.



Word spread rapidly as the three trucks were spotted coming up the drive. Some of the men were already heading outside to greet them as they swept round in front of the main entrance, and by now the commander had been informed.

Relieved by this arrival, thoughts of battering down the doors into the main hall were abandoned for the moment, and he headed toward the foyer with his men.

The commander was not entirely happy at what he saw, however. "Three miserly trucks!" he scowled. He was no expert in logistics, but saw that it was going to take them the best part of the week to ship out the staff and many students. He'd have to send a strongly worded message back to HQ with one of the drivers and requisition more. Well, a strongly worded, if



respectful, message: he didn't want to get their backs up.<sup>145</sup>

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<sup>145</sup> Offend; annoy; make them less likely to willingly cooperate.

# Scene 55:

## Danger Looms

Matron had relieved Sarah and now stood guard at the entrance. In any other circumstance, nobody would have made it past that formidable woman.

Sarah and Maria should have been trying to snatch some sleep as Matron had recommended, but there would be no sleep for anyone in the Hall. The night had passed and now the light of the morning was creeping up the valley.

Sarah was just wandering over to one of the windows to peer out, not that they could see much with the tall bushes obstructing the view, when she caught something moving out of the corner of her eye, and she started.

Now there was a dark figure looming in the window frame, and she snatched up the rifle that she'd propped against the bed nearest the window.

Her fingers were trembling as she flipped the safety catch.

She should maybe had dived for cover, but instead she was still standing there – like a fool – in plain view.

The dark figure had vanished, but she dare not approach the windows. For all she knew they could have rigged an explosive charge.

That thought in mind, she started to back away from the exposed window. Maybe they should all run?

A thousand thoughts of doom fought a violent melee in her head right now.

Just then, she heard a slow *tap, tap, tap* on the window frame, and she saw a hand. Whoever it was must have been crouching down below the window.

She stiffened, and placed her finger on the rifle's trigger. And if her hands shook much more, she'd probably send off a flurry of shots out of sheer fear. She kept her eyes on the window, just

waiting to let rip.

Maria had been alerted now, and she called out to Matron, who soon came dashing down the ward.

"I think we've got trouble," Sarah hissed. That was something of an understatement.

Just then, something white appeared in the window. It was a white handkerchief tied around the muzzle of a gun.

"It could be a trap!" Matron warned them.

"Maybe they just want to talk," Sarah wondered.

"Well, I have nothing to say to them," Matron snapped, raising her rifle and bracing herself against the recoil. "But I do have a message for them!"

Maria was off the bed now and she darted over to the wall just to the right of the window and out of the line of fire.

"What do you want?" she yelled out.

"Don't shoot! We're here to help," came a man's reply.

"Prove it!"

"Give me a moment."

"You can have two moments!" Matron bellowed, "and then, as they about action movies, 'the shit will hit the fan!'"

"You left a message with one of the Resistance," came the reply.

"With whom?" Maria still wanted to know.

"I don't know. Someone else in the city took the message and it was eventually relayed to us; and we were told that that we would find you here."

"Do we take their word for it?" Sarah whispered to Matron. The two of them were still standing there with their fingers on the trigger.

Just then, the white handkerchief disappeared and two raised hands crept up the window as the man slowly and carefully stood up. He was wearing the black uniform and helmet of the security forces, with a wide yellow band on his right arm, marked with a bold black numeral, "3".

"Give me a moment," the man insisted. He was speaking to someone on his comms now, and there was a delay.

Finally he came off the comms and spoke. "I'm to tell you

that Seq sent me.”

“That means nothing to me!” Matron spat. “You’ll have to do better than that.”

Maria also shook her head. That meant nothing to her, either.

Sarah let out a long and heartfelt sigh of relief, and she lowered her gun. “That’s short for Sequoia, one of the good guys in *The Matrix Resurrections*.”

“That still means nothing to me,” Matron replied adamantly.

“It’s an old H-rated film,” Sarah told her, and she stepped over to the window, released the catch, and opened the window wide.

“You’d better come in,” she told the man, stepping back to give him room.

Only now did Matron lower her guard. “Well, he could have said that in the first place,” she huffed, but as she processed this latest piece of information, she visibly relaxed.<sup>146</sup>

The man scrambled through the window and was back on the comms. “Okay, Yellow 3: it’s safe to come in now, but move smartly across the open space.”

“Oliver Livergood,” the man said introduced himself, coming over and shaking their hands. Maria winced at his iron grip.

Within five minutes, as they climbed in through the ward window, a team of twelve men had been assembled. After Oliver had briefly spoken with Matron to outline his plan, she had fetched a couple of keys, and torn a laminated floor plan from the wall for his benefit, and the squad left the ward to begin the next stage of their mission, one of their men staying behind in the ward to watch over the three of them.

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<sup>146</sup> It turned out that Brent Messenger had arranged for messages to that number to be forwarded to one of his lieutenants, as Brent would be unable to take calls that day.

# Scene 56:

## Much-Needed Supplies

The officer in charge of the convoy had stepped out of the lead vehicle now and he was striding toward the commander who stood watching over the arrival, as were most of his men. In view of his seniority, the commander did not descend the marble steps but let the officer, flanked by two of his men, climb them to meet him.

“Good morning, sir,” the officer greeted him, but the commander did not return his salute. “You must be Commander Schumer. I’m Forster. We’ve brought you some fresh supplies, and transport.”

“Three miserly trucks!” the commander huffed. “I’d asked for, and rather hoped for, more.”

“Sorry about that, sir, but there’s a shitstorm going down in the city right now. Major revolt and a lot of troop movement. So we’re lucky that Logistics could provide even these vehicles.”

That was not the news that the commander had been hoping for.

“Let’s go inside, and we can exchange briefings,” the commander said, leading the way. He was planning on using the Director’s office, where the man kept a good supply of wine. “You men: give them a hand unloading.”

The officer appeared hesitant, so he made a special point of asserting his authority.

“That’s an order.”

“And Richardson ...”

“Yes, sir?”

“Run along to the gymnasium and see what those blithering idiots, Harding and Wright, are up to. If they’ve been slacking, I’ll have them up on charges.”

“Yes, sir. Right away, sir.”

The man saluted smartly and ran off down the corridor.

The commander and the officer were just entering the Director's office when all hell broke loose. Already drawing his pistol, the commander ran back to the front entrance and quickly took in the scene.

The men who had gone to help unload the trucks had been ambushed. Some were prone on the ground covered in blood while others were firing wildly as they shuffled their way back up the steps.

"Shut the doors!" he barked to a group that were still inside, and they obeyed instantly, even though they knew that their comrades were still outside. But before they'd managed to get the doors even half-way closed, they were all knocked off their feet and thrown backwards.

As the commander came round from the temporary concussion, his ears ringing and everything sounding muffled and as if coming to him from down a long tunnel, he saw that the doors had been blown open and lay shattered on the floor of the entrance hallway; and all around him was blood, torn off limbs, and the sharp and unmistakable stench of explosives.

Not knowing quite what he was doing, the commander struggled to his feet and staggered off down the corridor.

He was feeling rather giddy, and feared he might fall over, but Richardson had appeared now, with Harding and Wright. Hearing the explosion they'd dropped the long wooden bench, and now Richardson, who must still have his wits about him, was concerned only with getting him to safety.

Ahead of them as they staggered back up the corridor, was another squad of men, and he called out to them.

For a brief moment, he thought they might be his own men, and that help was at-hand.

But his hopes were cruelly dashed, and he got no further.

Spotting the bright yellow arm bands that the men were wearing, he realised that these must be insurgents, and he raised his gun. Richardson had smelt a rat, too, and he was fumbling for his own pistol.

Even before they heard the shots ring out, they were hit by a

hail of bullets and Richardson, Harding, Wright, and the commander knew no more.

And, after finally rounding up the strays over the course of the morning, hostilities were over; the barricades were dismantled, and much-relieved, if weary, staff and students once again congregated and exchanged hugs of friendship in the main hall.

However, though the ordeal of the battle was thankfully over, the Director was well aware that the war had not yet been won. Indeed, as yet it had barely begun.

As for poor Matron, finally she had a chance to mourn the tragic loss of her beloved husband, Wilfred. He would be much missed at Merrymede Hall and by many other lay folk and Friends alike who lived, loved and worked further afield. They all mourned the loss of Wilfred, and David Hinchcliff, head of IT, and Christopher Plumber, the tractor driver, who had also been killed.

# Scene 57:

## Deep Shit

Things were not going nearly as well for dear Arielle. She was all-too-aware that she was in deep shit and they would soon relieve her of her snorkel.

Brace-Hamilton had taken her pistol, and Brent's too, and the bespectacled woman was now leading them, under armed escort toward the antechamber that led to the Beloved Leader's office suite.

Brent had her firmly by the arm, so firmly, indeed, that she was in pain; and the brute was half dragging her along the corridors.

Now in the antechamber, they had to go through another thorough ID check and through a magnetometer. Then they were manually scanned and physically frisked by two of the attendant guards. With the exception of the uniformed guards, you couldn't have sneaked a single bullet past that room; not even stuffed up your jacksy.<sup>147</sup>

Brent was actually singing now, would you believe it? The man was relishing this; even rubbing her nose in it.

“One, two, three, four, five,  
Once I caught a fish alive.”

“Fuck off, you evil bastard!” she hissed at the man, and he slapped her hard around the back of her head, then gripped tight hold of her again.

One of the attendants nodded to the bespectacled woman at this point. “You're clear to go in now.”

They entered the Beloved Leader's inner sanctum, flanked by two guards and with two more in attendance at either side of the room, and stopped at the thick yellow and red striped line in front of a huge mahogany desk. That, apparently, was as far as they

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<sup>147</sup> The fleshy part of the human body that you sit on.



were allowed to come.

Over on the other side of the enormous desk sat an old woman with thin, silver-grey hair. She wore a bright green suit with exaggerated shoulder pads, or extensions, to emphasise her physique, and she sat in an elaborate chair that more closely resembled a throne, like some queen bee, and yet Arielle couldn't help thinking that the Beloved Leader looked so small, even insignificant, in relation to the oversized desk. Was the office more important than the officer?

What surprised her most, however – startled her even – was when she saw the young boy enter the office through a side door and come to stand at the Beloved Leader's right hand.

"Good morning, Arthur," Brent greeted the young man, bowing his head in respect.

It was Arthur, Brent's "smart, studious and courteous kid." The mole.

"I see you've met my grandson, Mizz Appleyard," the Beloved Leader spoke for the first time. "He's told me so much about you, and not least about your remarkable capabilities."

The woman tweaked his cheek playfully. "Nana's little helper, aren't we, Arty? Such a clever and resourceful boy, just like his dear, departed father.

"Just between you, me and these four walls, father became a liability – as did his father before him, sad to say – so we had to consign him to a care home. It was for his own good, and for the good of the country, of course; and better that than an asylum."<sup>148</sup>

The Beloved Leader was clearly insane.

°A few cards short of a full deck,° Griff agreed.

So good to hear your voice, she whispered back.

"And thank you, too, Captain Bartholemew. Your own help is much appreciated."

"It's a great honour and a pleasure, Beloved Leader," Brent replied, again bowing his head.

What a slimeball.<sup>149</sup>

Brent must have heard that, because he turned and cuffed her

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<sup>148</sup> A secure mental hospital.

<sup>149</sup> A person who is deemed to be despicable or contemptible.

around the ear.

“Now now, Captain,” the Leader chided him: “I told you that we would not accept damaged goods.”

Almost as soon as the thoughts began to form in her mind about whether she dare rip the rifle from the hands of the guard to her left, and shred the Beloved Leader right here and now in a shower of hot metal, Arthur raised his finger to attract her attention, and she felt compelled to look his way

“You’ve gotta ask yourself a question: ‘Do I feel lucky?’ Well, do ya, punk?”

“A quote from *Dirty Harry*,” Brent informed her.

“Oh yes, we know all about your H-rated films and your secret drinking dens, Mizz Appleyard,” the beloved Leader smiled. “Indeed, we know far, far more than you might think.”

She turned to one of the domestic attendants who was standing there to one side of her desk. “Perhaps you could bring us a large pot of tea, and some suggestive biscuits,<sup>150</sup> if you would, Parker.”

“Yes, Beloved Leader,” the man replied, quietly leaving the room.

°Six, seven, eight, nine, ten,

Then I let it go again.°

And then the other shoe dropped.

As she heard these words, which didn’t come from Brent, nor from her, but from the inner voice of Griff, it felt as if a fog had cleared in her mind.

It was as if she’d suddenly awoken from a deep sleep into the real world. Not the so-called real world of concrete and glass, sex and politics, but the Real World, with a capital “R”, and a capital “W” that also stood for “Wonder” and “Wowee!”

°Oh, she’s good; she’s very good,° she heard another voice in her head, but this wasn’t Griff: it was Arthur. Whether this was an intentional intrusion, or just her reading his mind, she couldn’t be sure. All she knew was that even her thoughts had to whispered, or simply not be voiced at all.

°Six, seven, eight, nine, ten,

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<sup>150</sup> A play on digestive biscuits.

Then I let it go again.°

Again she heard those words, and in that instant she understood that these were the words that completed the old nursery rhyme, and that this was precisely what Brent had been trying to tell her all along, without the others twigging.

At that very moment, having knelt down to retie his bootlace, Brent abruptly rose, catching the guard standing beside him right under the jaw, forcing his head back and breaking his neck. He snatched the rifle as the man fell, and swung round to take out the guard by her side, the bullets missing her by just a whisker as she was involuntarily compelled to step back.

Brent took out the guard in the left-hand corner of the room now, just as he was about to spray them with bullets. As for the fourth, he turned tail and he was out of the office like a shot through the side door; partly to save his own skin, and partly so that he could redeem himself by raising the alarm.

The Beloved Leader had hit a large red button on her desk now and, as alarms began to sound throughout the floor, Arielle could see a thick, bullet-proof screen slowly rising up from the carpeted floor.

“Stage 3, Plan C!” Brent screamed into his comms, and all of sudden the sound of the alarms was abruptly cut off and all the lights went out. Fortunately the sun had risen high in the sky by that time and the office had large unshuttered windows.

The screen, however, continued to rise. It must have been on a different electrical circuit. It was at shoulder height already.

Holding his rifle high in the air, Brent fired a burst of bullets, but the shots flew well above the Beloved Leader’s head.

As the bullet-proof screen reached head height, he tried to get closer to rain bullets down on the woman, but he couldn’t move. It was as if his feet had become glued to the carpet.

When she saw Arthur standing there impassively, staring straight toward, if not through, Brent, Arielle realised that he was the cause.

She let off a volley of fire in their general direction, but the bullets ricocheted off, placing her and Brent in danger, and the impact did no more than craze the surface layer of the laminated

glass where the shots had landed.

Hearing banging outside the office, coming from the antechamber, Arielle swung round, prepared to take at least some of them out before herself succumbing.

She needn't have worried about that, however, because when Brent had given the Stage 3 command, the doors on that floor had been sealed.

Brent was going to tell her this, but she already somehow knew, so she turned back to face the desk, just as the bulletproof screen touched the ceiling of the office.

As it did, the Beloved Leader rose from her seat, gave them a little wave and blew them a kiss, and she and Arthur walked toward the side door.

They were the ones now trapped in the office, not her.

The smirk was wiped from Arthur's youthful face, however, when he realised that their escape route had also been blocked. Having tried the door herself, the Beloved Leader swung round and returned to her throne, with a fearsome look on her face that would have curdled milk at ten paces.

So, they were all trapped in the room now, facing each other down, and equally powerless. And, sooner or later, the Beloved Leader's staff would break down the door from the antechamber.

It was with this sudden realisation that she and Brent slumped down in the middle of the floor, facing the bulletproof screen, with no clear idea of how they could extricate themselves from this mess.

To make matters worse, Brent had now discovered to his dismay that his comms were now down. As for her, she was still full of mixed emotions about the cruel subterfuge that Brent had put her through. Given Arthur's own mind-reading capabilities, however, perhaps he'd decided that this was the only way they could evade premature discovery and exposure, since she wasn't exactly an 'A list' actor?

Of more crucial importance right now, though, was that by this point she'd already come to the conclusion that this was not something that could be solved through the use of bullets. Neither

brawn nor brain would get them out of this unholy mess.<sup>151</sup>

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<sup>151</sup> Editor's note: By this point, as the attentive and astute reader will have gathered, the author's wayward characters have managed to back him into a corner of their own design.

# Scene 58:

## Stage 3, Plan C

Carl Maidstone, Brent Messenger's lieutenant for the day, had just received the four word order from his boss before his comms were abruptly cut off: "Stage 3, Plan C", delivered in a hurried and agitated tone that suggested an exclamation mark.

So, Brent and Arielle had successfully reached the Beloved Leader's office, but their carefully laid plans had somehow gone awry. That probably meant that the Beloved Leader was still alive and kicking, and the pair were in need of help.

Plan C left no other option than to seal off all doors on the top floor and then cut the power; effectively sealing Brent and Arielle in. Perhaps sealing their fate. And if they were trapped, then presumably so was the Beloved Leader.

He'd have to speak with the chief, Colonel Heady, of course, because he would have the final word on the matter; indeed, he might have the only word on the matter. In fact Carl's finger was already on the green button ready to call the man.

What would happen then was anybody's guess. All options had been discussed, and it was now up to the Colonel to decide, based on whatever intelligence could be gathered, which options were the most appropriate. Both Brent and Arielle had known the risks they were running when they had signed up with the Resistance, and again when they had volunteered their services for this critical mission.

Oh, if only some master magician were present to pull a rabbit out of their hat. But then, that was just wishful thinking on his part.

# Scene 59:

## Executive Decisions

Colonel Heady was simmering with rage, but he had the self-discipline not to vent his wrath on his subordinates. His own men were carrying out their allotted tasks with professionalism, grit, and grim efficiency, and he was proud of them. When this was all over, he would personally ensure that every man of whatever rank feasted like kings.

As for Messenger and Appleyard, he and some of the other paramilitary commanders had voiced their concerns, and had been overruled by supposedly more intelligent and more enlightened members of the Resistance. There were just too many fuzzy variables and risks in play in their audacious plan.

Of course it was his goal, too, to cut the head off the snake. It's just that he would have adopted other means. And postponed the Beloved Leader's ultimate fate.

Take over the city; seal off the government building; wire it with high explosives; let any who wished to surrender walk out of the front door and into custody; and damn well demolish the place in a series of controlled explosions.

Sorted.

And without need for any airy-fairy ideas and fuzzy variables. Once that was accomplished, then they could search the rubble for the body of the Beloved Leader at their own convenience and at their leisure.

These deep thinkers liked to talk through all the nuances and the ifs and buts and maybes; but sometimes what was called for were simple logic, binary choices, and good old black and white. Too many female hormones and not enough balls floating around in the soup, too, if you asked him. Not that they would.

# Scene 60:

## The Peasants are Revolting

By late that day, all official comms having been compromised, and governmental employees were dashing about their offices like headless chickens. Two of the major media centres had been taken over by the Resistance and every screen in the city, as well as the comms, were pumping out audio broadcasts from Radio Free World, with frequent live updates from the Resistance forces, and a growing army of volunteers were going around the city sticking posters on lampposts, walls and shop windows, and leafleting the high streets and the residential areas. Their editor-in-chief, Arielle Appleyard, and her team had worked long and hard to make preparations and to coordinate and cooperate with other groups.

At the same time, informal recruitment centres had been set up and anything that could be used as an offensive weapon was being collected and distributed. The paramilitary forces had also raided a nearby army depot early the previous morning, and had come away with a large stock of light weapons and ammunition, including a number of shoulder-launched anti-tank weapons and a few small drones; and further raids were planned.

The police had largely been swept from the streets by this time, especially since with their comms off, they were effectively left leaderless and rudderless. Many had retreated to their local police offices and set themselves up for a siege, but some had instead fled to be with their families in their own homes, and more than a few had stripped off their uniforms, donned their civilian clothes, and volunteered their services in the growing rebellion.

The army, however, was a somewhat greater problem. They'd been professionally trained, they had heavy armoured weaponry, and they also had helicopters and drones. Thus far, however, the



paramilitary had posed a significant obstacle to them. The Resistance had blown too strategic bridges leading into the city and, having to funnel their forces across a third, the army's armour was an easy target for the anti-tank rockets the paramilitary had purloined. Urban warfare having moved on since the tank had been designed, the heavier vehicles, especially, were like rolling death traps for their unfortunate occupants.

Nevertheless, the military had established a robust cordon around the government building where the Beloved Leader had her headquarters, backed by armour and heavy machine guns; and at least one military helicopter had landed on the flat roof of the building. Whether this was in order to mount a rescue mission, for defence, or for offensive purposes, the Resistance did not as yet know. They could only assume that the building itself would be crawling with military personnel by now.

In addition, there was chatter over the comms that additional military forces were on the move up north; intelligence that deeply concerned the paramilitary commanders and gave them much pause for thought.

There was also talk about firing directly at the upper floors of the building; even shelling it, if they could get hold of any artillery. What they could do with now would be for some of the military to switch sides, desert their posts, and bring some of their vehicles and weaponry with them.

One thing was clear: gaining access to the government building at this moment in time was nigh impossible; and things did not look good for the two Resistance operatives who were still trapped inside, assuming that they were not already dead.

# Scene 61:

## An Audacious Plan

Colonel Heady sat back in his chair and listened to what the two men had to say, and when they were through, he sat quietly for a time before arriving at his decision. The men had spent all afternoon being shunted from one member of the Resistance to another, then all the way up through the chain of command, so they deserved a fair hearing.

“Let me look at that street map again,” he requested.

Dave Bradley unfolded the map and pointed to the key features. “There’s the government building top centre; and here’s where we are, in safe territory to the south east.”

“There’s a major sewer running up north to the junction of Ridgeway Road and Holburn Street and beyond. Well, the flow is actually north to south, but that’s of no consequence, at least not in dry weather. At Holburn Street, if you follow the branch to the right, to the east, that is, you end up slap bang in front of the government building.

“Then comes the tricky bit. A smaller sewer runs up the side of the building. You can’t walk that stretch, you have to crouch right down or crawl. You take the first junction on the right, and you come up in that alcove in the building there. It looks to me as if that alcove would provide some cover.”

“Right, I’m with you so far,” the commander nodded. “And you say you’ve done this before?”

“As soon as we heard the names on the grapevine – you know, the two people of yours still in the building – my brother Pete here said these must be the same man and woman we sneaked into the city via the sewers. And that’s why we came to you with our proposition.”

“Well, that’s all very well,” the Colonel replied, “but the alcove is at street level, and they’re on the top floor.”

Pete spoke up at this point. “My cousin used to work as a governmental maintenance contractor. And he says – quick as a flash, smart bloke that he is – what you need are plans of the maintenance shafts and tunnels in the building. So we dashes down to the council offices, Dave and me, and we gets hold of the architect’s plans for the building.

“And, thank Alicia, there’s only a hatch into one of the maintenance shafts in that alcove. I mean, how lucky is that, eh? Or maybe by design, if there are sewage pipes running down the shaft.”

The Colonel got up and leant over the table now, growing more than a little interested. “Carry on,” he encouraged the man.

“Right, so there’s only a blooming great ladder there, up the side of the building. And, as you can see – hang on while I show you one of the other floors – all the way up there are wider areas where you can catch your breath if you get puffed out.”

The man flipped over several sheets of the map until he found the one he was looking for.

“This is the top floor, right? Well, when you get there on the ladder, there’s a maintenance tunnel that runs the whole length of the building, under the floor like. There and every so often along the tunnel there’s a short branch and an access point. You see that one in the wall right there? That opens into what is now the Bedevilled Leader’s office. Been there since the Council owned the building, before it was requisitioned and repurposed. Mind you, that would be a few years back. Donkey’s years,<sup>152</sup> my cousin Jamie says, and he’d know.”

The Colonel was growing more enthusiastic now. It was as audacious a plan as Messenger and Appleyard’s earlier escapade, and yet it was straightforward and rational. Nothing that his men couldn’t handle.

“Course, what you do when you get there is your area of expertise, Colonel,” Dave chipped-in, “but we’re willing to guide your men through the sewers; even through the maintenance tunnels, if you think that would help. It’s a dirty job, as they say, but someone’s got to do it, and I figure since you’re in such great

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<sup>152</sup> Originally donkey’s ears, which are long; in other words, a long time.

need then it might just as well be us. Be something good to remember us by when we're dead and gone, eh? And we all have to go sometime."

The Colonel thought for a moment. "But what about protective clothing? In the sewers, I mean."

"Sorry, chief, you're out of luck there," Pete shrugged. "Waders would be no good in the crawl spaces even if we could get you sufficient pairs. Only thing you can do is keep your head above water and your mouth closed. Nothing you can do about the smell, either, but you gets used to that eventually."

Well, the Colonel thought: his men would just have to grin and bear it. He'd volunteer to lead them himself, except that the Brigadier wouldn't allow it, and rightly so. His leadership was required elsewhere.

"So, what do you think, Colonel?" Dave asked, and the two men looked at him expectantly like excited little puppies.

He liked to come to considered decisions, but this was crying out for an immediate response.

"There's no time for beating about the bush. I'm with you all the way," he replied. "And gentlemen, whether or not we pull this off, I will be eternally grateful for your initiative and for your offer of service. Take them through the sewers, and if the men think it a good idea, guide them through the maintenance network, too. And if I may keep the map and the architect's drawings for a while, I'll have copies made for each of the men and another set for you. Not to add to the anxiety of the situation: we don't know who might be in need of the plans."

Pete tapped the side of his nose, signifying that he understood what the Colonel had merely hinted at. "With you there, sir."

"There are great risks," the colonel realised he should have pointed out before allowing the two men to volunteer.

"We've all got to go sometime," Dave reiterated. "So we might as well be doing some good before that day."

"Just one proviso though, Colonel," Pete spoke up at this point.

The Colonel sighed, realising that the subject of danger money had not been mentioned. Okay, come on: out with it.

“Which is?” he enquired, biting his tongue.

“My cousin Jamie suggested you call it Operation Shawshank Redemption.”

That had the Colonel puzzled. “Sorry, I’m not quite with you.”

“It’s named in honour of the H-rated film, *The Shawshank Redemption* which was based on a Stephen King novella, about a prisoner who escapes from a horrible prison via the sewers. Surely you must have heard of it?

““Andy Dufresne – who crawled through a river of shit and came out clean on the other side’, remember?”

“I’m sorry, I haven’t seen that film,” the colonel apologised. “but since you recommend it, I’ll add it to my wish list. Or my wife’s wish list, rather, since I don’t have one.”

Then he added: “I must say, it does sound rather appropriate, so Operation Shawshank Redemption it is, then. But in honour of you.

“Thank you again for your ingenious plan, gentlemen – and not least for your patience, dogged persistence, and good humour. This has been a most rewarding afternoon.”

## Scene 62:

# If I Didn't Care

Brent nearly jumped out of his skin when he heard a dull thud to his left, and he leapt to his feet and spun round, his rifle locked and loaded.

His eyes were fixed on the three foot high service hatch not far from the floor, mounted in the wall.

Not knowing quite what was going on, Arielle was on her feet now, staring in the same direction, too.

The Beloved Leader and her brat had been alerted to this, now, and all eyes were focussed on the hatch.

Arthur was probing again and Arielle did her best to blot him out. Her head was filled not with thoughts but with an old song. There was a man singing “If I Didn’t Care”,<sup>153</sup> a song she’d heard only recently as part of the soundtrack to a film, and she could hear the lyrics in her mind so clearly that the vocal group might have been in that very room, singing live.

Arielle reached out, caught hold of Brent’s rifle by the muzzle, and lowered it. Brent didn’t argue with her, or pull away: he was coming to trust Arielle’s hunches and premonitions, but all the same, he moved back, and caught hold of her arm and pulled her back, too.

Their ears straining to listen, they heard a brief click and the hatch sprang open, and they caught sight of a man’s helmeted head poking out of the service tunnel.

Brent eased his finger off the trigger, spotting the green and yellow helmet of the paramilitaries.

It was all Arielle could do at this point to fend off Arthur’s intrusive presence in her head, as the first man crawled out of the

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<sup>153</sup> “If I Didn’t Care” was a song by the African-American group, The Ink Spots, and it was featured in the soundtrack of the 1994 film, *The Shawshank Redemption*.

hatch. She'd had to turn away now to face the youth, the whole of her attention and capacity taken up with fending him off, so that he couldn't work his dark magick on the others.

Nevertheless, Arthur's intrusion was bothering Brent, and the new arrival could sense it, too, but the man was more concerned by the old woman, who must be the Beloved Leader, sitting at the large desk behind what looked like a bulletproof screen, with a young boy standing by her side. He glanced at the boy briefly, but had to turn away almost immediately, because it was too painful to make eye contact with the lad. There was something strange about the boy, and it felt malevolent.

"Brent and Arielle?" the man asked, pulling himself together, although it must have been clear to him who they were. "Are there any others with you?"

By now, a second man had emerged from the tunnel, and he scanned the room to take in all the details. He, too, was affected by the boy's presence, and he could not bear to look in their direction.

Brent shook his head, "Not that I know of, though I have no idea what became of the other teams who entered the building. It was their job to destroy the electrics and backup generators in the basement and the communications centre on the first floor."

"They all made it out," the man replied, which came as a relief to Brent. Arielle made no reply, so intent was her concentration on the boy.

For a moment she broke her concentration, turned to the first man and put her hand on his shoulder.

Whatever happened between the two, Brent could not say, and he was immediately assailed by a flurry of negative thoughtforms hurled in his direction by the boy.

"I understand," the first man nodded, and Arielle abruptly turned away to face down the boy.

The man dashed to the hatch and called out. "No need for the rest of you. Everything's under control here, so begin making your way back. Smith, pass your bag forward: we have need of it."

Arielle wasn't in the Beloved Leader's office anymore. She

was in a wildflower meadow and Arthur was standing before her.

“You think you’re so clever, don’t you, Arielle Melanie Appleyard,” the boy sneered, and instantly she found herself transported to a bleak, rocky outcrop, with a heavy sea pounding all around her. The spray from the ice cold salt water of the waves that dashed the rock filled the air and drenched her, and the harsh wind nearly knocked her off her feet.

It felt to her as if she’d fallen under the boy’s control now. Perhaps it was because he knew her full real name. He must have plucked it from the depths of her mind or from her childhood memories. Her father only called her by her full name when she was in trouble. And boy, was she in deep trouble now.

She felt a terrible weight on her shoulders, too, like the fates that her father had once threatened would befall her, and her legs buckled beneath her.

“Do that again and I’ll come down on you like a ton of bricks,” her father had warned her. And now the man was laughing in her face; a hideous, blood-curdling laugh.

Forced down on her knees, she felt so utterly helpless, and she felt abandoned, too. For the life of her, she could no longer summon any inner resources. Not a single happy thought remained.

The boy suddenly appeared in front of her again now, seemingly unaffected and unperturbed by the bitterly cold wind and spray.

“And don’t think for one minute that your friend Brent Messenger is going to help you. He’s not an agent working for the Resistance; nor a double agent really working for the Resistance. Playing a deep game, he’s a triple agent, really, really working for the Beloved Leader.

“In any case, though Messenger is a useful idiot, he is of no consequence. It’s you we’re really interested in, Arielle Melanie Appleyard.”

“And if we can’t win you over, then we will shake you and break you, until you do our bidding. As they say: there’s an easy way to do this, and there’s a hard way. It’s your choice, but know this: when you make the choice, you will have to suffer the



consequences. It's almost like a cosmic law."

With still a slither of free will left to her, Arielle began her breathing exercises in earnest now, and she pushed on the rock hard in an attempt to stand up, but it was as if she were anchored to the rock, and she could hardly move a muscle.

A thought popped into her head just then, except it wasn't her own thought, it was her beloved Griff.

°Bring me sunshine ...°

For the life of her she could not remember any of the words, not of this song nor any other, even songs that she'd known since childhood. But Griff remembered the words to this song, and he was singing them loudly in her head just now.

°Bring me sunshine ...°

For a brief moment, Arielle was back at Merrymede Hall and it was a glorious day, before the regime had raided the place and, though she could barely picture him in her mind, she could see Brent standing before her now, in place of the boy.

She concentrated hard; she gave it everything she had, and again she caught a brief glimpse of the man's blond hair, and his deep blue, sparking eyes, and his broad smile, and his rugged, manly jaw, and his hairy chest.

And then, just as quickly as it had appeared, the vision vanished.

°Don't give up,° Griff beseeched her.<sup>154</sup> He was a true friend.

Here was another song that Brent had introduced to her, that she could really relate to.

Damn right I'm not beaten yet!

Again Arielle pushed with her arms, but the weight was still pressing down so heavily on her, and still she could not raise herself no matter how hard she tried.

°Neither brawn nor brain would get you out of this unholy mess, remember?°

Yes, now that she thought about it, she *could* dimly recall having uttered those words. And yet it all seemed so distant it might as well have happened in another star system or another

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<sup>154</sup> From a heartfelt song of the same name by Peter Gabriel that he sings with Kate Bush.

lifetime.

°Once upon a time,° Griff reminded her, °not so long ago, nor a thousand miles away, there was a young lady whose name was Arielle Appleyard ...°

And she was wildly in love with a friend called Brent Messenger, she continued.

Brent had his own difficulties at that moment. The first para out of the tunnel, Carmichael according to the label on his uniform, was still waiting for the others to pass the bag forward, which was no easy task in the confines of the service tunnel.

The second man, Stuart, appeared to be losing his grip, and Brent had had to relieve the man of his pistol before he ended up hurting someone or hurting himself. That had to be the boy's work: he was like someone possessed, and there was nothing that any of them could do about it.

As for Arielle, she was staring straight at the boy, and Brent knew that she must be protecting them from the full force of the boy's psychic attacks, but it seemed as if Arielle was in another world right now.

°There's a difference between knowing the path and walking the path. A whole world of difference, remember,° Arielle was prompted. Except this time it wasn't Griff doing the talking, it was the Director himself. She could hear his voice as clear as anything, right down to his accent and his tone, and she could actually feel his presence, as if he were standing right there on that barren rock beside her.

The boy was standing in front of her now. He wasn't tall, but he appeared to tower over her as she knelt on the hard, cold rock. And by now she was chilled through to the bone, and becoming weaker and weaker as the minutes passed. Hypothermia was setting in.

## Scene 63:

# Making a Lasting Impression

Brent slapped Arielle hard on the back.

“Breathe, damn it! Breathe!” he called out.

In that instant, Arielle had been transported back to the real world, to the Beloved Leader’s office. Except that it wasn’t the same world, anymore. Her world was filled with a fragrant scent, and the colours were that much more vibrant, and she could feel the warm air on her skin. It was as if she wasn’t inside her head anymore but in her skin, and she couldn’t even be sure of the boundary between her and anything outside of herself. Her yin had gone yang.

She looked the boy straight in the eye, and he flinched and staggered back against the window behind him.

The hunter has become the hunted! she snapped and, striding over to the bulletproof screen, she slapped her right palm against the glass. Sparks flew from the control panel to the left, where the Leader’s big red button was situated, causing her to start. When she removed her hand, Arielle saw the crazed outline of her palm, thumb, and extended fingers permanently frosted in the glass.

Carmichael, who had until that moment been working in a daze, finished adhering the shaped charges to the glass screen, turned the dials and initiated the timers.

“Five minutes!” he yelled, dragging his stupefied comrade to the maintenance hatch.

“Ladies first,” he added and Arielle did not argue.

Carmichael went next and Brent helped him get the other squad member through the hatch and into the tunnel, then followed in the rear, closing the hatch behind him and securing it.

As they had navigated the tunnels and begun descending the shaft, Brent heard two loud explosions within a couple of seconds one one-another and felt the whole shaft shudder.

In an instant, Brent's mind fog lifted, and they all knew that the Beloved Leader and her devilish grandson were no more.

They still had to crawl and wade through the shit, of course, but by now they realised, to their intense relief, that they were through the worst of it and heading toward safety, a scrub down with disinfectant, and a long hot shower.

As word spread, bells began to ring out, and soon they had spread across the city and further afield.

And when word finally reached the Director at Merrymede Hall there was fresh cause for rejoicing and celebration, tempered only by the knowledge of the many sacrifices that had been made.

“Out beyond ideas of wrong-doing and right-doing,  
There is a field. I'll meet you there.”

~ Rumi, *The Essential Rumi*.

Translated by Coleman Barks and John Moyne.

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