

Brute Farce

by Craig Houk

BRUTE FARCE

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BRUTE FARCE

For Scott.

He's still trying to sort out what's going on in this play.

I adore him.

BRUTE FARCE

CHARACTERS

ALISTAIR MCHUGH, An Exacting Theatre Critic, Male, 40s or Older

KILLIAN BLACK, A Disgruntled Actor, Male, 40s or Older

DEIRDRE SHEPHERD, A Hardened Stage Manager, Female, 40s or Older

REGGIE BRIMBLE, A Precocious Stagehand, Any Gender, 40s or Older

FIONA BAINBRIDGE, An Absent-Minded Actress, Female, 40s or Older

VIVIAN PRUITT, An Egocentric Actress, Female, 40s or Older

QUINN PONSONBY, A Cynical Actor, Male, 40s or Older

CASTING NOTES

The actors playing Alistair, Quinn and Reggie should if possible be similar in stature.

Reggie can be played by any gender; any needed pronoun changes in the script are pre-approved. Racially diverse casting strongly encouraged. While this play does contain a good deal of physical comedy, it is intended for middle aged to older actors. Please avoid casting too young as it will lower the stakes considerably.

STAGING NOTES

Much of the staging/action depicted in this play can be adjusted or reconceived as needed.

LOCATION

A careworn, scarcely professional, Provincial Theatre in England.

SETTING

A cramped and unkempt Trap Room which has been converted into a Dressing Room.

Concrete or brick tile floor, wooden posts & beams, and a concrete block or brick wall.

Above the Trap Room is the Stage upon which sits a posh 1920s Study, serving as the set for the play within. Imposing double doors, a large desk, a built-in library bookcase, a large window with opulent drapery, an ornate rug, and a closet. One notable item, which should be plainly displayed in the Study, is a functioning horseman's pick, either affixed to the wall with other medieval weapons or attached to a suit of armor. A trap door on the Study floor opens into the Trap Room below. Reggie's Workstation and Deirdre's Workstation are visible to the audience.

TIME

Present.

BRUTE FARCE

A special thank you to the following individuals who have contributed significantly to the development of **BRUTE FARCE**:

- Dana Scott Galloway
- Karina Hilleard
- Lisa M. Hodsoll
- Steve Lebens
- Claire Schoonover

BRUTE FARCE had public staged readings on October 27th, October 28th, and October 29th, 2022, at the Anacostia Arts Center in Washington, DC. Those readings were made possible thanks to a generous grant made available by Duane Gautier and the Valley Place Arts Collaborative/ARCH, and through the kind support of Adele Robey.

The readings were directed by Lisa M. Hodsoll, assisted by Craig Houk, stage managed by Laura Schlachtmeyer and featured the following cast:

Alistair McHugh.....	Michael Replogle
Killian Black.....	Matthew Pauli
Deirdre Shepherd.....	Karina Hilleard
Reggie Brimble.....	Dana Scott Galloway
Fiona Bainbridge.....	Claire Schoonover
Vivian Pruitt.....	Lisa M. Hodsoll
Quinn Ponsonby.....	Steve Lebens

Stage Directions were read by Colin Davies.

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ACT 1

SCENE 1

Lights up on the Trap Room. If possible, the Study above the Trap Room, and including Reggie's & Deirdre's workstations, should not be visible during the first act. ALISTAIR MCHUGH is stretched out on the Trap Room floor. He has just regained consciousness. He moans, looks about, and tries to take in the space. He slowly rises to his feet. Once upright, he attempts to move forward, but realizes that he's been bound by chains. He inspects the restraints. KILLIAN BLACK enters with a horseman's pick. He is in costume and is ready for the impending performance. He strikes Alistair over the head with the knob of the pick. Alistair collapses.

KILLIAN. We're not ready for you.

(DEIRDRE SHEPHERD enters.)

DEIRDRE. House opens in thirty minutes, Killian. *(Referring to the horseman's pick.)* And bring that with you. We'll need it for fight call, won't we, love?

KILLIAN. Has Vivian arrived?

DEIRDRE. She's in hair and makeup. Do you know she's gone through three stylists since we've started the run? And Fiona just got here. She's in the loo.

KILLIAN. Is she stoned?

DEIRDRE. Not this time, no.

KILLIAN. Good to hear.

DEIRDRE. I think perhaps she's coked up.

KILLIAN. Coked up!?

DEIRDRE. Well, I can only assume it's cocaine. I mean, I'm no expert. My only vice is an occasional glass of whiskey. Otherwise, I most assuredly wouldn't know the difference between nose sweets and nose drops.

KILLIAN. Oh, for fuck's sake.

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DEIRDRE. Relax. I went through her things and got rid of anything that looked remotely suspicious, including some prescription drugs.

KILLIAN. Well, she may need those.

DEIRDRE. Oh, I don't know. Might be interesting to see how it affects her performance without them.

KILLIAN. I expect it could only be an improvement. *(Beat.)* And what about Quinn?

DEIRDRE. He phoned to say he'll be late. Again.

KILLIAN. Is he aware yet that he's being dropped from the show?

DEIRDRE. No. I've been asked to hold off informing him until after the Sunday matinee. Otherwise, there's no telling what he might do if he finds out before then.

KILLIAN. I'll be glad to see him go.

(Alistair stirs and moans.)

DEIRDRE. *(To Killian regarding Alistair.)* So, you're going through with it, are you, love?

KILLIAN. I haven't said otherwise, now, have I?

DEIRDRE. I suppose not. *(She checks the time.)* Okay. Make that twenty-eight minutes before we open the house. Fight call at a quarter past.

KILLIAN. Thank you, Deirdre.

(Deirdre exits. REGGIE BRIMBLE enters holding a wooden panel on which are mounted a line of coloured light bulbs, and below that a line of clear light bulbs, and next to the collection of bulbs, a small buzzer. Loose wires hang from the back of it.)

REGGIE. *(Referring to Alistair.)* He's still here?

KILLIAN. Of course, he's still here. Why wouldn't he be?

REGGIE. I was thinking maybe you'd come to your senses by now.

KILLIAN. I am in full possession of all my faculties, thank you very much. *(Beat.)* So, what have you got there?

REGGIE. Deirdre asked me to install it.

KILLIAN. Yes, but what is it?

REGGIE. Well, since we're holding this bloke hostage under the stage, I needed to find another way to let the actors know when they're due their entrances. I mean

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look, I can't be running back and forth between here and up there, as well as managing the props and moving the furniture, now, can I?

KILLIAN. So?

REGGIE. So, after I get this panel wired and mounted, we'll test the system.

KILLIAN. Which is?

REGGIE. Right. Well, about one minute before any of you are due to be onstage, you'll hear a buzzing sound followed by one of these bulbs lighting up. Each colour represents a different actor. The line of clear bulbs below the coloured ones will remind you what scene you're in.

KILLIAN. I see. Quick question.

REGGIE. Mm hm?

KILLIAN. Wouldn't it be a whole lot simpler if you just send us a text on our mobiles?

REGGIE. It would be, yes.

KILLIAN. So, then why are we not doing that?

REGGIE. There's no coverage down here.

KILLIAN. Bloody hell. All right then. And which colours have you assigned to whom?

REGGIE. I haven't. I thought maybe you could sort that out amongst yourselves.

KILLIAN. More than half of us is incapable of sorting out our own knickers. Just assign the colors. All right?

REGGIE. Certainly. Okay. Youuu...?

KILLIAN. Killian.

REGGIE. Right. Mr. Black. You will be blue.

KILLIAN. Fine. Mr. Black is blue.

REGGIE. Miss Pruitt will be red, Miss Bainbridge will be green, and Mr. Ponsonby will be yellow. Have I missed anyone?

KILLIAN. No, Reggie. You haven't missed anyone. There are four actors in this production. And it's all due to the simple fact that there are four characters identified in the script.

REGGIE. I don't understand why they didn't bother to hire understudies.

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KILLIAN. Any proposed budget for understudies was immediately sucked up by Vivian's demands for a higher salary. (*Beat.*) All right. Just so I have this in order. I'm blue, Vivian's red, Fiona's green, and Quinn is yellow.

REGGIE. I'm more familiar with your surnames.

KILLIAN. Oh, for fuck's sake. Black – blue, Pruitt – red, Bainbridge – green, Ponsonby – yellow.

REGGIE. I should write that down. I'll grab a pen and paper after I've put this up. (*A trap door above them drops open, startling Killian.*) I'll need to fix that as well.

KILLIAN. I should think so.

(*Reggie installs the panel during the following. FIONA BAINBRIDGE enters carrying a garment bag, a makeup case, and a handbag. She is not yet in costume.*)

FIONA. Good evening, everyone. (*She settles somewhere and begins to unpack her things.*)

REGGIE. Hallo, Miss Bainbridge.

KILLIAN. (*Flatly.*) Fiona.

FIONA. I'm not sure if either of you are aware, but my dressing room is locked. And there was a notice on the door with instructions to make my way down here.

REGGIE. That's right.

KILLIAN. We've discussed this, Fiona.

FIONA. I don't recall. Nevertheless, I've had a very difficult start to the day already, so these types of disruptions are not appreciated.

REGGIE. Everything okay then?

FIONA. As a matter of fact, no. You see, I awoke this morning to the smell of smoke, only to discover that my bed had been set on fire.

KILLIAN. On fire!?

FIONA. Well, I wasn't in it at the time.

REGGIE. Well, that's lucky.

FIONA. The man I brought home last night was.

KILLIAN. Oh, dear God.

FIONA. Oh, he's fine. Just a minor first-degree burn on his backside. We'd lit some candles late in the evening for some ambiance and then fell asleep after a massive shag. I must've gotten up at some point, perhaps to get a glass of wine,

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who knows really. Except then I woke up on the floor several feet from the bed in a cloud of smoke and to the smell of burning flesh. *(Beat.)* Has someone been going through my things?

KILLIAN. Why do you ask?

FIONA. There are some items that have gone missing.

KILLIAN. Like what?

FIONA. I'm not sure that's any of your business, Killian.

KILLIAN. Well then, I suppose I'm in no position to assist.

FIONA. I suppose not. *(She spots Alistair.)* And who do we have here?

REGGIE. That's Mr. McHugh.

FIONA. Who?

KILLIAN. Oh, for fuck's sake, Fiona. Alistair McHugh.

FIONA. The theatre critic?

REGGIE. From the Daily Telegraph.

FIONA. Well, what's he doing here? And why is he being restrained?

KILLIAN. Are you--? Have you gone completely--? I mean honestly, Fiona, just the other day, we spent hours discussing this.

FIONA. Did we?

KILLIAN. Yeesss. Never mind. I will go over it again. *(During the following, Fiona begins to powder her face, and then happily discovers that she has replaced the face powder with cocaine. She discreetly snorts some of it.)* You see, this mustachioed Billy no-mates right here is, without equal, the single largest threat to the sustained existence of the whole actors' union. He's been relentless in his efforts to undermine and, at times, completely shut down any production that doesn't suit his impossible standards. And he's been particularly vicious as it relates to each of us, repeatedly castigating us in his reviews, with the concerted goal of putting an end to our stage careers. And because of that, we all agreed – I know you agreed, Fiona, because you were in the room when it was all decided – we all agreed that this bastard right here is finally going to get his comeuppance!
(Deirdre enters.)

DEIRDRE. Five minutes to fight call.

ALL EXCEPT ALISTAIR. Thank you, five to fight call!

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(Deirdre starts off.)

KILLIAN. Wait. Where's Quinn?

DEIRDRE. I've already told you. He's phoned to say he'll be late.

KILLIAN. Well, we can't have fight call without Quinn, now can we.

DEIRDRE. Oh, I don't know. I wouldn't mind watching you thump yourself for a change. *(She takes the horseman's pick from Killian and exits.)*

(VIVIAN PRUITT enters. She is fresh from hair and makeup and is in full costume. She carries a large handbag.)

VIVIAN. This place is filthy. *(She spots Alistair.)* Oh God. So, we're actually going through with it, are we?

KILLIAN. Yeeeeesssssss!!!

VIVIAN. You seem on the fence, darling.

REGGIE. I promise you, he's not.

VIVIAN. You know, it took me forever to find my way down here. I'm not certain I'll be able to find my way back.

KILLIAN. Oh, for fuck's sake, Vivian. It's a single flight of stairs. I need all of us together in the same location. All right? We've made an agreement and we need to hold each other accountable. And we can't do that if we're spread out all over the place. Do you understand? I mean honestly, were any of you listening when we decided all this only a few days ago?

VIVIAN. I get paid to talk, darling, not to listen. And I'll have you know that my being compelled to wait my time out in this bedraggled den of ineptitude is in direct violation of my contract, which clearly states that I am to have my own dressing room with swift and unobstructed access to the stage. *(Fiona sneezes, blowing coke powder into the air.)* Fiona, darling, you should really be using a darker shade of powder. Whatever that is, it's far too pale for your skin. *(Fiona's head falls to her makeshift dressing table.)*

KILLIAN. Bloody hell. *(He crosses to Fiona.)* Fiona? Fiona! *(He lifts Fiona's head and checks for a pulse. He lowers her head.)*

VIVIAN. Is she--?

(Deirdre enters.)

DEIRDRE. Quinn's arrived.

ALL EXCEPT ALISTAIR. Thank you, Quinn!

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DEIRDRE. What's happened with Fiona?

VIVIAN. She's expired.

DEIRDRE. What!?

REGGIE. She's kicked the bucket.

KILLIAN. No. No. No, no, no. She is not dead.

REGGIE. Well, she's not moving, now, is she?

KILLIAN. She's breathing.

VIVIAN. Then what's the matter with her?

KILLIAN. (*He moves closer to Fiona.*) She's... Well, it appears that she's...

DEIRDRE. She's what, Killian?

KILLIAN. She's asleep.

DEIRDRE. Asleep?

KILLIAN. Yes.

REGGIE. Hardly seems possible considering the amount of blow she's done.

KILLIAN (*Accusingly.*) Deirdre?

DEIRDRE. What? What have I done?

KILLIAN. Fiona's prescription drugs.

DEIRDRE. What about them?

KILLIAN. Where are they?

DEIRDRE. I've thrown them out.

KILLIAN. Can you get them?

DEIRDRE. Perhaps I misspoke. What I meant to say was that I flushed them.

KILLIAN. You flushed--? Do you really think that was--? I mean, are you intentionally trying to--? Never mind. Listen, do you at least remember what they were for?

DEIRDRE. No. No wait, yes. Yes, I do remember. Er um, one of them was for anxiety and the other for psychosis; I know this because most actors are on those. There was a third one, though. Sodium something. Sodium... ox bite. Or maybe ox bait.

REGGIE. Sodium Oxybate.

DEIRDRE. Isn't that what I just said, love?

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REGGIE. It's nearly what you just said.

DEIRDRE. Well, I said ox bait, didn't I, love?

REGGIE. Correct. But that's incorrect. Because the word is ox-y-bate. Three syllables, not two. One word, not two. And it's got nothing to do with an ox.

VIVIAN. Sounds a bit like a tomato/tomato [to-may-to/to-maw-to] thing to me.

REGGIE. No, it's not like that at all.

KILLIAN. I couldn't care less how it's spelled, or how it's pronounced, or whether it's got two syllables or three. I just want to know what the fuck it means.

REGGIE. She's got narcolepsy.

KILLIAN. (*Quietly, agitated.*) Oh God no.

(*Fiona's head pops up.*)

FIONA. Except then I woke up on the floor several feet from the bed in a cloud of smoke and to the smell of burning flesh.

(*QUINN PONSONBY enters with the horseman's pick. He is already in costume. He does not immediately notice Alistair.*)

QUINN. Can anyone here perchance explain to me why I've been standing all alone on an empty stage holding on to this for the past five minutes?

VIVIAN. (*To Quinn.*) Have you been drinking, darling?

DEIRDRE. (*She checks the time.*) Fight call.

ALL EXCEPT ALISTAIR. Thank you, fight call!

KILLIAN. What about Fiona?

FIONA. What about me?

DEIRDRE. I'll deal with her presently. In the meantime, I need you and Quinn onstage for fight call.

KILLIAN. Well, we can't just--

DEIRDRE. I'll deal with Fiona, okay? And I need Reggie... Reggie?

REGGIE. Yes?

DEIRDRE. (*Referring to the panel.*) Have you finished with that, love?

REGGIE. Just.

DEIRDRE. Good. Now I need you to go and set up for the top of act one.

REGGIE. Straight away. (*He exits.*)

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DEIRDRE. Right. Okay everyone. Ten minutes 'til house open.

ALL EXCEPT ALISTAIR. Thank you, ten 'til house open!

DEIRDRE. Quinn and Killian, follow me. Fiona and Vivian, make yourselves comfortable. And keep a close eye on him.

(Deirdre, Killian, and Quinn exit. Fiona freshens up, fixes her makeup, and, in due course, gets into costume. Vivian tries to settle in, but the place is grimy, so it'll be a challenge. Alistair regained consciousness sometime during the previous.)

ALISTAIR. Is there anything I can do to convince either of you to set me free?

FIONA. *(To Vivian.)* Is he permitted to speak? *(To Alistair.)* Are you permitted to speak?

VIVIAN. It's his mouth that got him into this predicament in the first place.

ALISTAIR. What can I say? I'm a theatre critic who lives for bad theatre. It's my one weakness. I exist because there are actors out there who are profoundly self-aware, and who are grateful to hear the truth. And I persist because there are actors out there – like you lot for example – who take me too seriously when you shouldn't.

VIVIAN. Oh, is that a fact? Do you know, there are mental institutions full to the brim with actors who have taken critics seriously?

ALISTAIR. On behalf of reviewers all over the globe, I'm honored. But you exaggerate. And so, what? So, a trifling few of my criticisms have been a smidge unflattering at times.

VIVIAN. A smidge!? A smidge!? Do you have any idea the damage you've done?

ALISTAIR. Damage?

VIVIAN. Yes. I mean, take poor, daft Fiona here for example. *(To Fiona.)* Fiona, darling, what vice is it this week?

FIONA. I've no idea what you mean? *(Her head drops to the table.)*

VIVIAN. *(To Alistair.)* You see? She's been reduced to a hopeless, hackneyed, slaving nitwit.

FIONA. *(Her head pops up again.)* That's a bit hurtful, isn't it?

ALISTAIR. *(To Fiona.)* Only a smidge.

VIVIAN. *(To Fiona.)* Well, it's not your fault, darling. It's not your fault.

FIONA. I suppose not, but whose fault is it then?

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ALISTAIR. I expect I'm the culprit.

VIVIAN. Indeed, you are, Mr. McHugh. Indeed, you are.

ALISTAIR. And what are your plans for me if I may so inquire?

FIONA. That's a terrific question. I'd like to know as well.

VIVIAN. Well, If I'm to be honest, I've no idea as to our plans for you.

Admittedly, I got a bit weary nearly five minutes into the conversation. I mean, Killian is quite famous for droning on and on without ever really coming to the point. Or perhaps he does come to the point and it's just that by the time he gets there, everyone's lost interest.

ALISTAIR. And he's generally like that onstage as well, isn't he?

(They all laugh.)

VIVIAN. It's no use trying to get into my good graces, Mr. McHugh. And what difference does it make anyway? We've come this far now, haven't we? We can scarcely turn back. And I'm sure whatever Killian has planned for you will be appropriate.

ALISTAIR. Appropriate to what?

VIVIAN. To your aggressions, Mr. McHugh. Your reviews are unreasonably harsh. And I'll accept that though it is the responsibility of the theatre critic to be critical, it doesn't mean that the critic should take pleasure in being cruel.

ALISTAIR. I don't take pleasure in being cruel. It's simply a by-product of years and years of exposure to dreadful scripts, second-rate productions, and vomit-inducing performances.

FIONA. He's been particularly harsh with you, hasn't he, Vivian?

VIVIAN. He has indeed.

FIONA. I'm honestly surprised you're still able to find work. And in fact, I was shocked to see your name on the casting announcement.

VIVIAN. What an awful thing to say.

FIONA. Well, it wasn't meant to be.

VIVIAN. I'll have you know, there isn't a single director or producer in the whole of England who wouldn't kill for the chance to work with me. And at least I'm not compelled to go horizontal for the privilege. *(Vivian stares hard at Fiona before pulling a piece of paper from her handbag. She unfolds it and hands it to Alistair.)*

Read that.

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ALISTAIR. (*He squints.*) I would, except I can hardly make it out.

FIONA. Oh dear. Well, I've a pair of reading glasses right here. (*She retrieves a pair of bejeweled glasses and places them on Alistair's face.*) Better?

ALISTAIR. I suppose so. Except the words are all smudged. Almost as if someone had been crying into them.

(*Vivian wrenches the paper from Alistair's hands.*)

VIVIAN. It's the review you wrote about my performance as Rosalind in *As You Like It*.

ALISTAIR. Well, I can't read it, not in that condition.

FIONA. Not to worry. I've got a copy of it here. (*She pulls a framed copy of the review from her bag.*)

VIVIAN. You've framed it!?

FIONA. Well, it's practically a work of art, isn't it?

VIVIAN. Hand it over. (*Before Fiona can, Vivian seizes it and looks at it in disgust.*) Unbelievable. (*She passes it to Alistair.*) Well, go on. Read it.

FIONA. I've highlighted in yellow the bits about Vivian.

VIVIAN. (*To Fiona.*) I'll deal with you later, darling. (*To Alistair.*) Go on.

ALISTAIR. (*He squints a bit more and is hesitant to read. He clears his throat and presses on.*) Vivian Pruitt, as heroine and protagonist, Rosalind, seemed rather long in the tooth as she grappled with a role typically reserved for an actress whose face hasn't yet been narrowed beyond recognition. Her advanced years only became more apparent when she endeavored to disguise herself as the meant to be young and handsome, Ganymede. Was it her decision to go minimalistic with the foundation and blush or was it simply the aftermath of an embittered makeup designer out for revenge? To her credit, nonetheless, Miss Pruitt successfully tapped into her inherent masculine qualities in a manner that will most assuredly win her the coveted role of Brutus in the National Theatre's upcoming winter production of *Julius Caesar*. "But what of her actual performance?", one might ask. It was, in a word, noticeable. As noticeable as a ring bearer toddler, shuffling down the church nave and pinching his willy determined to get to the altar without wetting himself-- (*Reggie's arm reaches down from above and pulls the trap door closed. Quinn enters holding a sack and a length of rope. He is followed by Killian who carries the horseman's pick.*)

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QUINN. You nearly put an end to me this time ‘round, do you know that? I mean, you can’t just go changing things. We’ve been blocking this fight for weeks. And just when we’ve mastered it, suddenly I’ve got you coming at me from the wrong direction. You nearly took my head off. And I can hardly see a thing as it is with this sack over my head.

KILLIAN. I was trying something different.

QUINN. You were trying something different? Like what? Decapitating one of your castmates? That would be different, wouldn’t it?

KILLIAN. You’re overreacting.

QUINN. Am I?

KILLIAN. Well, it’s certainly nothing to lose your head over.

QUINN. Oh, I see. This is funny to you, is it?

KILLIAN. It’s becoming less so the more you go on about it.

QUINN. You know, you should count yourself lucky you haven’t yet been excommunicated from the actors’ union.

KILLIAN. Is that right?

QUINN. Yes. I mean, are you really that out of touch, Killian? Are you so full of yourself that you actually have no notion of the magnitude of your insidious misconduct?

FIONA. Listen, perhaps we should--

VIVIAN. *(To Fiona.)* Hush. It’s about to get good.

(Deirdre enters.)

DEIRDRE. House is open!

ALL EXCEPT ALISTAIR. Thank you, house open!

FIONA. Haven’t we already had house open?

DEIRDRE. That was the ten-minute warning, love.

FIONA. Was it?

DEIRDRE. I ought to know, oughtn’t I?

(Fiona’s head falls to the table.)

KILLIAN. Oh, for--! *(To Deirdre.)* Did you or did you not say that you were going to take care of that?

DEIRDRE. I did.

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KILLIAN. And?

DEIRDRE. I did not. *(To everyone.)* Oh, and by the way, my bottle of Macallan's has gone missing. I don't suppose any of you lot has taken it. *(All are silent, except Quinn who lets out a belch.)* No? All right then. *(She exits.)*

(Reggie enters and spots the horseman's pick, still in Killian's hand.)

REGGIE. There it is. I've been looking all over for that. *(Reggie takes the horseman's pick from Killian.)* And I'll need those as well. *(He takes the sack and length of rope from Quinn and exits.)*

QUINN. Where was I?

VIVIAN. You were just about to share with us the shameful details of Killian's reprehensible conduct.

KILLIAN. Oh, yes. Full steam ahead, Quinn. We're all waiting with bated breath.

QUINN. Your reputation precedes you, Killian. Countless claims of unprincipled behavior, mostly concerning considerable transgressions as it relates to the fairer sex.

VIVIAN. What you mean to say is, he's molested nearly every woman he's been onstage with.

QUINN. That's precisely what I mean to say.

VIVIAN. Well, the role does call for a sadistic, predatorial, paranoid narcissist, so I might agree that Killian was the only suitable choice. Except that he's an actual danger to women.

KILLIAN. Not to worry, Vivian. Both you and Fiona are quite safe.

(Fiona's head pops up.)

VIVIAN. And what pray tell do you mean by that?

KILLIAN. Not. My. Type. *(Fiona rises, crosses to Killian, and slaps him across the face. Killian scarcely balks.)* Is that all you can muster? *(Fiona punches Killian between the eyes. Killian yelps and stumbles back.)*

(Alistair laughs. They all turn to him.)

QUINN. Alistair McHugh? What's he doing here?

KILLIAN. *(Pinching his nose with a handkerchief.)* You can't be serious! Is there not one person in this room who's at all listened to a word I've said!? Is there no one here who remembers what we agreed upon!?

BRUTE FARCE

ALISTAIR. Well, I know I wasn't privy to those conversations.

KILLIAN. (*Pointedly.*) No. No you weren't, were you?

(*Reggie enters.*)

REGGIE. Well, from what I can recall of the plan, Mr. McHugh will have croaked by the end of act one, scene two.

ALISTAIR. Beg pardon.

REGGIE. You'll have carked it, taken a dirt nap, assumed room temperature--

ALISTAIR. Yes, all right! I get it!

REGGIE. I'll be off then. (*He exits.*)

ALISTAIR. (*To Killian.*) You mean to have me killed!? Is that your plan then? That seems a bit drastic, doesn't it?

FIONA. It does, doesn't it?

VIVIAN. (*Overlapping Fiona.*) I did not agree to that, darling.

QUINN. (*Overlapping Vivian.*) I need a drink. (*Quinn plucks a bottle of Macallan's from his coat jacket. He opens it and drinks from it. During the following, he will pull the bottle out occasionally for a drink.*)

KILLIAN. Enough! Not another word! From anyone! Now listen to me. Very carefully. We need to face facts. We are all of us nearing the end of our theatrical careers. And indeed, some of us have already surpassed our expiry date. And surely none of you – and let's be honest with ourselves here – not one of you could possibly be ignorant to that indisputable truth. I mean, we can all certainly pretend that there might be – hidden somewhere in the splintered cracks of the deeply worn floorboards upon which we have tread many times over – a tinder of hope for a reignited career; for a final chance to shine; for an opportunity to go out on top. But it's only just that... pretend. Otherwise, we're just putting off the inevitable, aren't we? So, this is it, folks. This is our time. As a collective. We will make our way to the stage, and we will put in the best performances of our lives – for some of you, it'll be a challenge. And by the end of act one, scene two, this bloated twat right here will have met his untimely demise.

(*The buzzer on the wooden panel goes off. Vivian bellows. Quinn belches. Fiona's head falls to the table. Alistair and Killian look to the panel. The coloured bulbs light up slowly and in sequence followed by the clear bulbs.*)

QUINN. What the hell's that?

BRUTE FARCE

KILLIAN. (*Quietly.*) Oh, dear God. (*Dreading the explanation.*) That apparatus there will serve as an electronic cue caller.

QUINN. Sorry, what?

KILLIAN. Yes. Since Reggie is sadly unable to be in two locations simultaneously, and since Deirdre is compelled to work without an ASM due to budgetary restrictions, the pair of them decided to find another way to give us actors our entrance cues.

VIVIAN. And this is what their collective brains have come up with, darling?

KILLIAN. Yes.

VIVIAN. How does it work?

KILLIAN. Well, if memory serves, each of the coloured bulbs represents one of the four actors. The clear bulbs below those will tell us which scene we're in.

QUINN. And how do we know which act we're in?

(*Beat.*)

KILLIAN. Say again?

QUINN. How do we know which act we're in? We've got bulbs for actors, bulbs for scenes, but no bulbs for acts.

KILLIAN. How many acts are in this play, Quinn?

QUINN. Two.

KILLIAN. Yes. Correct. There are two acts. Just two.

QUINN. I don't think you're getting my question.

KILLIAN. Quinn. Dearest Quinn. Are you trying to say that you're incapable of differentiating between act one and act two without being prompted by a filament!?

QUINN. I get your point.

KILLIAN. Excellent. So, then with all due respect, shut the fuck up.

(*Fiona's head pops up.*)

FIONA. (*Referring to the wooden panel.*) What the hell's that?

VIVIAN. I'll explain later, darling. (*To Killian.*) Oh, and Killian?

KILLIAN. Yes, Vivian?

VIVIAN. May I ask which colour is assigned to whom?

(*Reggie enters.*)

BRUTE FARCE

REGGIE. Very good question. Mr. Black is blue, Miss Pruitt is red, Miss Bainbridge is green, and Mr. Ponsonby is yellow. And it looks like the system is working brilliantly. *(He gives a thumbs up. The trap door above them drops open. He frowns and then exits.)*

KILLIAN. Everyone got it? *(Murmurs of confusion.)* Oh, for f-- I'm blue, Vivian's red, Fiona's green, and Quinn is yellow. *(He points to himself and then to the others as he lists the colours.)* Blue. Red. Green. Yellow.

FIONA. *(Repeating and pointing.)* Blue. Red. Green. Yellow.

KILLIAN. Very good, Fiona.

VIVIAN. Red is not a good colour for me, darling.

KILLIAN. *(Sardonically.)* Isn't it?

VIVIAN. No. Not at all right for my skin tone.

KILLIAN. Oh. Well, I wasn't aware you were planning on wearing it. Or perhaps that you were considering carrying it around as an accessory. *(He gestures emphatically to the bulb.)*

VIVIAN. Don't be ridiculous, darling.

QUINN. I'd be happy to switch with you.

FIONA. Oh, good idea! Let's all switch.

KILLIAN. No! No one is switching. It's all been settled. Vivian will just have to make do. You will all have to make do.

FIONA. *(Quietly to Vivian.)* I've still no idea what the bulbs are for.

VIVIAN. None of us do, darling.

(Deirdre enters with a costume bag.)

DEIRDRE. Twenty minutes 'til places.

ALL EXCEPT ALISTAIR. Thank you, twenty 'til places!

DEIRDRE. *(She hands Killian the costume bag.)* Here it is.

KILLIAN. And not a moment too soon.

DEIRDRE. Well, you can't expect the costumer to immediately pull together a duplicate outfit on such short notice, now can you, love? I mean, I get that we're down to the wire here, but at this point, there's no sense in debating the timing of its arrival?

KILLIAN. I wasn't debating it.

BRUTE FARCE

DEIRDRE. As well you shouldn't. I mean, there you have it, in hand, and with twenty minutes to spare.

KILLIAN. Thank you?

DEIRDRE. Just doing my job, love. *(She exits.)*

(Reggie's arm reaches down from above and pulls the trap door closed.)

VIVIAN. And what do we have here?

KILLIAN. *(He unzips the garment bag and pulls out a costume.)* This, my dear addlepatented artistes, is a replica of Quinn's costume.

FIONA. Oh, very nice.

QUINN. Well, isn't that thoughtful. *(Tugging at the costume he's wearing.)* This one's a bit threadbare already. *(He reaches for the costume.)*

KILLIAN. *(He pulls the costume back.)* No. No. No, no, no. This is not meant for you. *(At an appropriate moment during the following, Killian will hang the costume bag on a makeshift rack.)*

QUINN. Well, if not for me, then for who?

KILLIAN. For Mr. McHugh, that's who.

ALISTAIR. Me?

KILLIAN. Yes.

ALISTAIR. Why?

KILLIAN. Well, didn't you hear? Didn't any of you hear? The celebrated critic of the Daily Telegraph, Mr. Alistair McHugh, will be making his acting debut this evening here at the Dudley Hackham Commemorative Theatre in Stockton-on-Tees. And in this very production.

VIVIAN. Over my dead body.

(Fiona's head falls to the table.)

KILLIAN. On the contrary, my dear Vivian. Over his dead body.

QUINN. Hold on a damn minute!

KILLIAN. What is it, Quinn?

QUINN. You mean to tell me that this... this... this plug-ugly tosser will be going on in my place tonight?

KILLIAN. Yes.

ALISTAIR. I hardly see how that's possible.

BRUTE FARCE

QUINN. *(To Alistair.)* You shut up. *(To Killian.)* And how do you plan to pull that off?

KILLIAN. He will be going on for you tonight. But only for the fight scene.

VIVIAN. Have you lost your mind, Killian?

KILLIAN. Well, I'm certainly on the verge of it. Now, look, I need everyone's undivided attention. And that includes you, Fiona!

(Fiona's head pops up.)

FIONA. Do I smell smoke?

VIVIAN. Yes. And it's presently coming out of Killian's ears.

KILLIAN. For those of you who aren't the least bit interested in what's taking place onstage when you're not in fact standing on it... At the end of act one, scene two, my character and Quinn's character have a bit of a tussle, during which Quinn, who has been fitted with a sack over his head and strapped to a wooden chair with a length of rope, manages to break free by throwing himself to the floor. At which point, I come after him brandishing a horseman's pick. And, after a carefully choreographed series of punches, kicks, slaps, grappling, and falls, both of us crash through the study doors. *(Beat.)* Any of this sound vaguely familiar to any of you? *(Quinn raises his hand reluctantly.)* Quinn, yes, I would hope so. And the rest of you? *(Heads shaking, looks of puzzlement, murmurs of confusion.)* Right. Anyway, so after a count of roughly five, I return to the stage and reach for the horseman's pick, which has been cast-off during the fight. I then take it and turn back to the door at the same moment Quinn returns, still with the sack over his head. Except tonight, when Quinn reemerges onstage, it won't be Quinn, it'll be Alistair dressed as Quinn. Or more precisely dressed as Quinn's character.

ALISTAIR. Now, hold on--

KILLIAN. *(Moving to Alistair to demonstrate.)* I will then lunge at Alistair with the pick. Only instead of subjecting him to a mere flesh wound as has been outlined in the script, I will thrust the pick through his solar plexus, giving it a hard twist, and then shoving him into the wings where he will succumb offstage. *(Beat.)* Quinn will then of course return in the following scene – his character injured but not fatally of course – and we will then dispose of Alistair's corpse during the intermission.

(A moment. All are stunned.)

BRUTE FARCE

ALISTAIR. Oh my God.

(Reggie enters with the horseman's pick.)

REGGIE. *(Handing the pick to Killian.)* All right, here you go.

KILLIAN. *(Inspecting the pick.)* Yes. Looks good. Looks very good.

REGGIE. Well, I did what you asked. I cleaned and polished it. And then I sharpened the edges. And this pointy bit at the top is no longer retractable. So, it should go through Mr. McHugh like a hot knife through butter.

ALISTAIR. You can't be serious.

REGGIE. It was quite simple really. I just replaced the spring mechanism with a small metal rod.

ALISTAIR. No! What I mean is, you can't be serious about killing me.

REGGIE. Oh. Right. Well, I know nothing about that, so I guess I'll be on my way then. *(He exits with the pick.)*

ALISTAIR. *(To whomever.)* All right, now listen to me. Please. This is ridiculous. You clearly haven't thought this through. I mean, do you honestly believe you'll actually get away with it? Even if you're successful in your endeavor to... exterminate me, it's all sure to unravel in due course.

(Deirdre enters with another costume bag.)

DEIRDRE. Fifteen minutes to places.

ALL EXCEPT ALISTAIR. Thank you, fifteen to places!

DEIRDRE. Here you are. *(She hands the costume bag to Killian. He reluctantly takes it.)*

KILLIAN. What's this?

DEIRDRE. It's a replica of Quinn's costume.

KILLIAN. Another one?

DEIRDRE. Yes.

KILLIAN. We don't need another one.

DEIRDRE. Right. Well, there was a bit of a mix-up with the request, love. After you asked me to speak to the costumer, I happened to mention it to Reggie in passing, so as to keep him informed, you see. Except Reggie thought I wanted him to speak to the costumer. So, we both spoke to the costumer and, well... you know the rest.

BRUTE FARCE

KILLIAN. Oh, for fuck's sake. *(At an appropriate moment during the following, Killian will hang the second costume bag on the makeshift rack.)*

DEIRDRE. Oh, and Killian.

KILLIAN. Yes, Deirdre.

DEIRDRE. The costumer is demanding reimbursement for materials on both garments. And including her usual fee for labour.

(Fiona's head falls to the table.)

KILLIAN. And how does she expect us to pay for it?

DEIRDRE. I've no idea, love.

VIVIAN. Well, it's certainly not coming out of my salary, darling.

QUINN. Well, I for one think it should come out of Killian's fucking salary. I mean, all of this was his big fucking idea. So, he should fucking pay for it.

DEIRDRE. Are you drunk, Quinn?

QUINN. No.

DEIRDRE. Are you sure, love? I only ask because I've yet to find my bottle of Macallan's.

QUINN. I'm not drunk. *(He's drunk.)* And I am offended by your assertion that I am... *(A gas bubble pops up in his throat.)* ... drunk.

DEIRDRE. All right then. I'll take your word for it. I suppose I'll just dash across the street for another bottle then. I won't be long. *(She exits.)*

ALISTAIR. Listen, everyone. I think I have an idea.

KILLIAN. *(Pointedly.)* I'm sorry, what? You have an idea? No, I don't think so, Alistair. As you can clearly tell, this group is not interested in ideas. In fact, I don't think anyone here has any room left in their pea-sized brains for another idea. And besides, it's all been settled. You die tonight.

QUINN. I'd like to hear what he has to say.

KILLIAN. Absolutely not, Quinn. There's nothing left to consider. And we won't negotiate.

VIVIAN. *(To Killian.)* Honestly, darling, don't you think this is all a bit much? I mean, I suppose I get it. We're all actors. We love drama. And we all have a shared hatred for this mound of tainted cabbage over here. But it all seems problematic and perhaps even a bit convoluted, don't you think...?

BRUTE FARCE

ALISTAIR. Oh, thank God someone has come to their senses.

VIVIAN. ...I mean, couldn't you just kill him now and get it over with?

ALISTAIR. What? No!

VIVIAN. I'd be content to step away for a few minutes whilst you do whatever it is you need to do. I could freshen up in the loo, do some vocal warmups... Just let me know how much time you need, darling. In any case, I don't want to be here when you put this old hog down.

KILLIAN. We will not deviate from the plan, Vivian.

VIVIAN. All right. You're in charge. But if this show gets shut down for any reason – and especially if that reason happens to be that this colossal sack of fetid lard over here has been skewered to death in front of an audience onstage – I can assure you, you will not hear the end of it from me.

KILLIAN. Well, I don't like the sound of that. Not hearing the end of it from you is surely a fate worse than death.

ALISTAIR. I disagree.

KILLIAN. What is it you want, Vivian?

VIVIAN. Perhaps we could speak privately, darling? Hm? Over here? (*Killian reluctantly follows Vivian.*) Listen. Killian. Darling. I've been thinking about what you said earlier. That all of us here need to accept that our careers are coming to an end. And that any notion that we might be able to – in some way – extend our shelf life is really just an illusion.

KILLIAN. Mm hm. I also said that at least one of us has already exceeded their expiry date.

VIVIAN. Yes, but I'm not speaking of Quinn, darling.

KILLIAN. Ah.

VIVIAN. Anyway, if this show closes, there's a good chance that I won't get paid. Or that any of us will get paid for that matter. But mostly I'm thinking about me.

KILLIAN. Of course, you are. And?

VIVIAN. And if I don't get paid... Well, there are a few very important things that I simply won't be able to afford, darling. Things that I need right now. Things that might help me to stay fresh and relevant.

KILLIAN. I see. And would these be “from the neck up” things or would they include your tits as well?

BRUTE FARCE

VIVIAN. Don't be vulgar, Killian. It won't be anything drastic. Just some minor alterations. A nip here, a tuck there. A bit of a revamp if you will.

KILLIAN. So, you're getting another facelift.

(Fiona's head pops up.)

FIONA. Thank you, places!

QUINN. Places!?! Already!?

KILLIAN. No. No. No, no, no. We are not at places. I said, facelift.

FIONA. Oh. Well, I highly recommend it, Vivian. And whilst you're at it, you ought to get your tits done as well.

(Vivian shoots Fiona a look.)

VIVIAN. Killian.

KILLIAN. Yes, Vivian?

VIVIAN. Perhaps I could see you over here? *(They have nowhere further to move, but they give it a go. Elevated whispers.)* Listen, darling. I don't take any pleasure in doing this. Nevertheless, show or no show, I'm going to have to rely on your generosity right now.

KILLIAN. My generosity?

VIVIAN. Yes, well the procedures I need aren't cheap.

KILLIAN. Hold on. Are you suggesting that I--? Do you mean to tell me that you--? No fucking way, Vivian.

VIVIAN. I hardly think you have any choice in the matter, darling.

KILLIAN. I won't do it.

VIVIAN. You most certainly will. Because if not, I can't promise I'll be able to keep silent about what's been going on here.

KILLIAN. Oh, I see. So, extortion is your game now, is it? I appreciate your determination, Vivian. I really do. Except there's one teensy weensy flaw in your little scheme. You're an accomplice.

VIVIAN. An accomplice to what, darling? Until just a few moments ago, I had absolutely no idea that you had planned from the start to slaughter that pugnacious pig over there. So, I'd hardly consider myself an accomplice to any of it. *(Killian stews.)* So, do we have a deal?

BRUTE FARCE

KILLIAN. I need some air. *(He starts off.)* Reggie! *(Reggie enters.)* Oh, there you are. Do you have the key? *(Reggie produces the key.)* Good. *(Referring to Alistair.)* Now, as soon as the curtain goes up, I need you to come back here and get this knob head into costume. Do you understand?

REGGIE. English is my native language, so yes.

KILLIAN. Piss off.

(Killian pushes Reggie and follows him off.)

VIVIAN. I'll be in the loo. *(She exits.)*

(Fiona finishes dressing and preparing for curtain, or, if she is ready by this point, her head could drop to the table. Quinn clumsily grabs a chair and pulls it over to Alistair. He sits.)

QUINN. *(Blotto.)* Spill it, Alistair.

ALISTAIR. Beg pardon.

QUINN. You said you had an idea. And I want to hear what it is.

ALISTAIR. What difference would it make now? Killian's mind is set.

QUINN. No. No, he's all bluster and no follow through. He's just trying to terrify you.

ALISTAIR. Trying to terrify me? Trying? Well, he's been bloody well successful at it up to this point, now, hasn't he?

QUINN. Ok, now listen. I may be able to help you, but I need to hear what you have to say first.

ALISTAIR. *(Seeing this as a chance to escape.)* Oh. Oh, I see. Yes. Yes, of course. Well, as you know, Quinn, I have an extraordinary amount of influence in this industry...

QUINN. Yes, I know.

ALISTAIR. ...So, all it would take is one stellar review of this production in its entirety, and of all your performances--

QUINN. No, no. Shh, shh, shh, shh. Now, listen, Alistair. I don't really give a good goddam about this play or the other actors. So, here's what I want you to do: I want you to rip this production to shreds. All right? And I want you to bestow upon the other three the single worst review of their entire careers. Do you understand?

ALISTAIR. Yes, of course. I can do that, except how would panning the show benefit you?

BRUTE FARCE

QUINN. I haven't finished. In that same review, you will then single me out as the one notable, redeeming element in the play: the only sign of life in an otherwise barren desert of walking, talking, utilitarian meat puppets. Have I made myself clear?

ALISTAIR. Perfectly.

QUINN. Good. And in return, I will get you out of here.

ALISTAIR. But Reggie has the key.

QUINN. Don't you fret. I can handle Reggie.

ALISTAIR. How?

QUINN. You see, long before I became an actor, I was once – among other things – an especially gifted street magician. Sort of a legend you might say. And I was widely considered to be the best in my circle at one particular trick, which was to pinch small treasures from people's jackets, trousers, handbags, etcetera, without their knowing it.

ALISTAIR. A pickpocket.

QUINN. I prefer the term "finger-smith". I worked efficiently and imperceptibly, with a timid allure that belied my talent for taking things.

ALISTAIR. A prat with a penchant for thievery.

QUINN. No. Now listen carefully. Yes, I took things, but then I replaced them.

ALISTAIR. I don't understand.

QUINN. Oh, for-- I simply turned a minor criminal offense into an art form. Except that in the end, I'd return the stolen item to its owner. And in response, people would hand me a quid or a fiver, sometimes more.

ALISTAIR. I see.

QUINN. So, with a bit of misdirection and some sleight of hand, I'll have that key in my possession and Reggie will be none the wiser. And you'll be free just after curtain up.

ALISTAIR. I don't know how I'll ever be able to repay you.

QUINN. I think you do. (*Beat.*) Now, I've given you your instructions. Do what I've asked and never, ever implicate me.

ALISTAIR. You have my word.

(*Quinn stares intently at Alistair.*)

BRUTE FARCE

QUINN. I am curious, though.

ALISTAIR. What?

QUINN. How do you honestly regard me? As an actor, I mean.

ALISTAIR. Oh. Uh... Well, I uh...

QUINN. I mean, you've reviewed a dozen or more shows that I've appeared in and yet you've scarcely mentioned me in any of them.

ALISTAIR. Well, yes. Yes, that's true.

QUINN. So, go on. Don't be fearful. And don't hold back. I can handle it.

ALISTAIR. I'm not sure that now is the appropriate time to--

QUINN. Tell me.

ALISTAIR. All right. I suppose I would describe you as... serviceable.

QUINN. Serviceable?

ALISTAIR. Yes.

QUINN. Keep going.

ALISTAIR. Well, I generally feel that you tend to give the minimum – in terms of acting – to your characters. But that's not entirely your fault since you're generally cast in roles that are somewhat generic in nature; roles that are functional per se rather than compelling or integral to the plot.

QUINN. Yes. And?

ALISTAIR. And if I may be so bold...

QUINN. Of course.

ALISTAIR. Your emotional range is... relatively... narrow. And your arsenal of expressions – as a rule – runs virtually on empty. Now, I'm not saying that you haven't earned your success; your name alone sells tickets. And I expect that you're industrious, but what I am saying is that your skills as an actor are limited.

(Beat.)

QUINN. I see.

ALISTAIR. The only reason I rarely mention you in my reviews is that you're simply... unremarkable. And frankly, that puts you in the majority.

(Deirdre enters holding a bottle of Macallan's.)

DEIRDRE. Five minutes 'til places!

(Startled, Fiona spills a jar of face cream onto the floor.)

BRUTE FARCE

ALL EXCEPT ALISTAIR. Thank you, five 'til places!

FIONA. Bloody hell!

DEIRDRE. Everything all right, love?

FIONA. Actually, no. I've just spilt my face cream all over the floor here.

DEIRDRE. I see. Well, I'd ask Reggie to clean it up, but he's got his hands full at the moment. And I'm a bit pressed for time myself. *(She casually opens the bottle of Macallan's and takes a sip from it.)*

FIONA. Yes, of course, you are. Well, don't worry. It's fine. I'll manage.

DEIRDRE. Are you sure, love?

FIONA. Yes. Yes, of course. You go on. I'm sure I can sort it out.

DEIRDRE. All right then. *(To everyone.)* Everyone excited for the show? *(Murmurs and uninspired responses. Fiona's head falls to the table.)* That's the spirit. *(She exits.)*

ALISTAIR. *(Quietly, to Quinn.)* Listen, Quinn. I'm very sorry about what I said. I misspoke--

QUINN. You did not misspeak. And it's all right. I appreciate your candor. Which is precisely why I'm committed to helping you escape.

(Reggie enters with an additional sack and length of rope.)

REGGIE. *(To Quinn.)* Right, here we go then. Mr. Black asked me to supply you with an added sack and rope on the off chance you might need them. So, I'll just leave these with you. *(He hands them to Quinn.)*

QUINN. Yes, of course. *(Reggie starts off.)* Oh, and Reggie.

REGGIE. Yes, Mr. Ponsonby?

QUINN. May I speak with you for a moment? Just outside here?

REGGIE. Can it wait?

QUINN. I'm afraid not.

REGGIE. All right then. But we need to be quick.

QUINN. Of course.

(Quinn exits, followed by Reggie. Killian enters and calls after them.)

KILLIAN. What are you two up to? We're nearly at places.

(They're gone. Fiona's head pops up. Vivian enters.)

VIVIAN & FIONA. Thank you, places!

BRUTE FARCE

KILLIAN. (*Quietly.*) Oh, for fuck's sake.

FIONA. Shouldn't you be heading to the wings, Killian?

KILLIAN. Sorry?

FIONA. Oh honestly. Are you that daft? You have the first entrance. Have you forgotten?

KILLIAN. No, I haven't forgotten.

FIONA. Well, then what are you waiting for?

KILLIAN. We still have a few minutes.

FIONA. So, we're not at places?

KILLIAN. No.

FIONA. So, then who called for places?

KILLIAN. No one.

FIONA. Are you sure?

KILLIAN. At this point, no.

FIONA. Oh dear. Well, then as far as we can tell, the curtain's up, the lights are on, and no one's there.

KILLIAN. Art imitating life.

(Quinn enters and is tucking something into his breast pocket.)

QUINN. (*Calling off to Reggie.*) Thank you, Reggie. I am so sorry to have bothered you. I honestly don't know what we would do without you. (*Quietly.*) Duplicitous little bastard. (*He looks to Alistair, pats his jacket, and winks. He then takes a swig of the Macallan's.*)

KILLIAN. Quinn!

QUINN. What?

KILLIAN. I think you've had enough.

QUINN. Truer words were never spoken.

KILLIAN. I'm talking about the whiskey, Quinn. I need you to be clear-headed out there tonight.

QUINN. Oh, is that right?

KILLIAN. Yes. We all need to be clear-headed, but especially you.

QUINN. And why is that?

BRUTE FARCE

KILLIAN. (*Pointedly.*) Because this time ‘round, it’ll be a matter of life and death, now, won’t it? Do you get my point?

QUINN. I suppose I do.

KILLIAN. Good.

FIONA. You know, you should really make the most of it, Quinn. Have a little fun with it tonight. Perhaps try something different. Let yourself go. Especially considering this’ll be your last week of performances--

KILLIAN. Fiona!

QUINN. What? What do you mean, my last week of performances?

FIONA. Oh dear.

VIVIAN. Oh, Quinn. My darling, Quinn. I don’t think there’s an easy way to say this. Actually, there is. You’ve been replaced.

QUINN. Replaced?

VIVIAN. That’s right, darling.

QUINN. By whom?

VIVIAN. By someone better. They plan to escort you from the theatre after the Sunday matinee. And frankly, I’m surprised you didn’t see this coming.

(A moment.)

QUINN. (*Quietly.*) Ah. (*He finishes the whiskey by guzzling it. He smiles dimly at the empty bottle. He then breaks the bottle over Killian’s head. Fiona shrieks.*)

VIVIAN. Oh my God. (*Killian drops to the floor.*) Quinn! What’re you doing?

QUINN. (*Crossing to Alistair.*) I’m putting an end to this madness right now. I’m letting Alistair go. (*He digs into his breast pocket and pulls out a sardine.*)

VIVIAN. So, your plan is to free him with a sardine?

QUINN. I don’t understand.

VIVIAN. Do you intend to skin it and then use the bones to pick the lock?

QUINN. This makes no sense.

(Reggie appears.)

REGGIE. Are you looking for this? (*He displays the key.*)

QUINN. Reggie! How did you--?

REGGIE. And perhaps you’d like your wallet and watch as well. (*He displays the wallet and watch.*)

BRUTE FARCE

QUINN. (*Steaming.*) You. Little. Rat-arsed... Ahhhhhhhhh!

(*Quinn charges at Reggie. An extended fight ensues, during which Vivian attempts to clear away, but slips on the face cream and falls to the floor. The fight ends with Quinn and Reggie both on the floor. Deirdre enters.*)

DEIRDRE. What the bloody hell is going on down here?!? (*The trap door above them drops open.*) Never mind. We don't have time. (*Beat.*) So, listen up, my lovelies. It appears that perhaps things have gotten a wee bit out of hand. And whilst I would like nothing more than to cancel tonight's performance and to toss every last one of you out on your arses, I can't. Because we have a sold-out show; God knows how. Maybe it's because this production is an absolute turd. Hm? And who's going to pass up the opportunity to witness a quartet of pseudo-celebrities clacking across the stage like a parade of painted corpses in a vaudeville show? Apparently, no one. So, we go on as planned, albeit a few minutes behind schedule.

VIVIAN. Are you mad?

DEIRDRE. I'm a little pissed off, yes.

VIVIAN. What I mean is, have you gone mental? Not one of us is in any condition to perform.

DEIRDRE. So, business as usual then. (*Beat.*) Now look, you're all going on, even if I have to attach you to a meat hook and move you in and out on a fly system. Do you understand? (*Objecting murmurs and groans.*) Reggie.

REGGIE. Yes?

DEIRDRE. Can you let the house manager know that we're running a bit late?

REGGIE. Certainly. (*He exits with urgency, but also with difficulty.*)

DEIRDRE. Right. Now I realize that not one of you actually gives a rat's arse about a sold-out show. And I completely understand. I really do. I mean as a whole, audiences haven't especially earned the respect that they demand, now, have they? They tend to be an unpleasant lot, don't they? And they're inclined to behave badly. Am I right? Just last week, a group of them were passing a pot roast up and down the third row whilst some bloke in the row behind was getting a jobby by one of our premier platinum season subscribers. So, when it comes down to it, they're generally a raging nuisance, aren't they? But... buuuut... the only thing worse than a badly behaved audience is no audience at all. Do you get my point? (*Uninspired agreement among the group.*) Good. Now, I've only one thing to add.

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QUINN. And what's that?

DEIRDRE. Places!

ALL EXCEPT ALISTAIR. Thank you, places!

(Deirdre exits. The buzzer on the cue calling apparatus goes off. The blue bulb lights up followed by the first clear bulb. This means Killian is due onstage for act one, scene one. No one moves. Silence. The buzzer goes off again. The blue bulb lights up followed by the first clear bulb. General uncertainty. Silence. The buzzer goes off repeatedly and urgently. The blue bulb lights up followed by the first clear bulb. Silence. Reggie races in.)

REGGIE. Mr. Black!

KILLIAN. What?!

REGGIE. You're on!

KILLIAN. *(Sardonically.)* Is that so?

REGGIE. Top of show!

KILLIAN. Yes, Reggie, I know. *(Referring to Alistair.)* Get that pompous arsehole into costume and let's get this over with. *(He pushes past Reggie and exits.)*
(Fiona's head falls to the table. Lights to black.)

END OF ACT 1

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