

Brute Farce

by Craig Houk

PERUSAL

BRUTE FARCE

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BRUTE FARCE

*For Scott,
who remains (understandably) confused by this play.
I adore him.*

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CHARACTERS

FERGUS NETHERCOTT, An Unassuming Actor, Male, 40s or Older

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 role of Reggie may be played by any gender; any necessary pronoun changes in the script are pre-approved. Racially diverse casting is strongly encouraged.

While the play contains a good deal of physical comedy, it is intended for middle-aged to older actors. Unless performed in an educational setting focused on young adults, please avoid casting too young, as it lowers the stakes considerably.

SETTING

A cramped, unkempt Trap Room converted into a Dressing Room. The floor is concrete or brick tile, with exposed wooden posts and beams and a concrete block or brick wall. Above it sits the Stage, holding a posh 1920s Study, serving as the set for the play within the play. The Study features imposing double doors, a large desk, a built-in bookcase, a large window with opulent drapery, an ornate rug, and a closet. One notable element, clearly visible, is a functioning horseman's pick, either mounted among other medieval weapons or affixed to a suit of armor. A trap door in the Study floor opens into the Trap Room below. Reggie's and Deirdre's workstations should be visible to the audience.

STAGING NOTES

Much of the staging and action in this play may be adjusted or reimagined as needed. However, this flexibility does not extend to additions or cuts to the dialogue, nor to changes involving key elements such as the horseman's pick, the trap door, or the cue-calling apparatus. Please make every effort to honor what is written on the page. The author understands that budget and available resources may influence certain choices and is happy to remain flexible where necessary.

LOCATION

A careworn, scarcely professional provincial theatre in England.

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

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BRUTE FARCE

BRUTE FARCE received 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:

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

Stage Directions were read by Colin Davies.

BRUTE FARCE

BRUTE FARCE received a public staged reading on May 2nd, 2023, at the Gunston Arts Center, Theater II presented by Dominion Stage of Arlington, VA. Brute Farce was awarded Full-Length Play Winner as part of Dominion Stage's 3rd annual playwrighting competition.

The reading was directed by Matthew Randall and featured the following cast:

Mario Font as Alistair McHugh

Joe Dzikiewicz as Killian Black

Heather Plank as Deirdre Shepherd

Eileen Copas as Reggie Brimble

Kat Sanchez as Fiona Bainbridge

Elizabeth Keith as Vivian Pruitt

Peter Halverson as Quinn Ponsonby

Stage Directions were read by Matthew Randall.

BRUTE FARCE

BRUTE FARCE was originally produced by Dominion Stage at the Gunston Arts Center, Theater II, in Arlington, VA, opening on Fri, Aug 4th, 2023, and closing on Sat, Aug 19th, 2023.

The production was directed by Matthew Randall and featured the following cast and production team:

Mario Font as Alistair McHugh
Joe Dzikiewicz as Killian Black
Shayne Gardner as Deirdre Shepherd
Karey L. Hart as Reggie Brimble
Kat Sanchez as Fiona Bainbridge
Heather Plank as Vivian Pruitt
Richard Fiske as Quinn Ponsonby

Executive Producer | Rebecca J. Harris
Producers | Nick Friedlander, Lauren Markovich
Stage Manager | Sam Jensen
Fight Choreographer | Michael Donahue
Dialect Coach | Alden Michels
Lighting Design | Ken & Patti Crowley
Sound Design | Jon Roberts
Set Design/Master Carpenter | David Correia
Properties and Set Dressing | Helen Bard-Sobola, Jeffrey Davis, Susie Poole
Costume Design | Joan Lawrence
Hair, Wig, & Makeup Design | Rebecca J. Harris
Photography | Matthew Randall

BRUTE FARCE

BRUTE FARCE

ACT 1

SCENE 1

Lights up on the Trap Room. FERGUS NETHERCOTT, in costume, sits reading quietly from his script on a worn loveseat, tucked out of the way. ALISTAIR MCHUGH is stretched out on the Trap Room floor. He has just regained consciousness. He moans, looks about, and tries to take in his surroundings. 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. *(Re: 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 started the run? And Fiona's just arrived. She's in the loo.

KILLIAN. Is she stoned?

DEIRDRE. Not this time.

KILLIAN. Good to hear.

DEIRDRE. I suspect she's coked up.

KILLIAN. Coked up!?

DEIRDRE. Well, I can only assume it's cocaine. I'm no expert. My only vice is the occasional glass of whiskey. Otherwise, I couldn't tell nose sweets from nose drops.

KILLIAN. For fuck's sake.

DEIRDRE. Relax. I went through her things and removed anything remotely suspicious. Including a few prescription drugs.

KILLIAN. She may actually need those.

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DEIRDRE. Possibly. Still, it might be interesting to see how she performs without them.

KILLIAN. I imagine it could only be an improvement. And Quinn?

DEIRDRE. He phoned. Said he'll be late. Again.

KILLIAN. Does he know he's being dropped from the show?

DEIRDRE. Not yet. I've been asked to wait until after the Sunday matinee. No telling what he might do if he finds out before then.

KILLIAN. I'll be glad to see him go. And Fergus?

DEIRDRE. Right over there, running his lines as usual. *(To Fergus.)* What do you say, Fergus? Think you'll be off book soon, love?

FERGUS. Working on it.

DEIRDRE. Wonderful. Perhaps you'll have them down by closing night.

FERGUS. A man can dream. *(Alistair stirs and moans.)*

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

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

DEIRDRE. I suppose not. *(She checks the time.)* Right. Twenty-eight minutes until we open the house. Fight call at a quarter past.

KILLIAN. Thank you, Deirdre. *(Deirdre exits. REGGIE BRIMBLE enters carrying a wooden panel fitted with a row of coloured bulbs, a row of clear bulbs beneath them, and a small buzzer. Loose wires dangle from the back.)*

REGGIE. *(Re: Alistair.)* He's still here?

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

REGGIE. I thought perhaps you'd come to your senses by now.

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

REGGIE. Deirdre asked me to install it.

KILLIAN. Yes, but what is it?

REGGIE. Well, seeing as we're holding this bloke hostage under the stage, I needed another way to let the actors know when they're due their entrances. I can't be running back and forth between here and up there while also managing props and moving furniture, can I?

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KILLIAN. Go on.

REGGIE. Once I get this wired and mounted, we'll test the system.

KILLIAN. Which is?

REGGIE. About a minute before your entrance, you'll hear a buzz and one of these bulbs will light up. Each colour represents a different actor. The clear bulbs underneath tell you which scene you're in.

KILLIAN. I see. Quick question.

REGGIE. Mm-hm?

KILLIAN. Wouldn't it be much simpler to just text us on our mobiles?

REGGIE. Yes.

KILLIAN. So why aren't we doing that?

REGGIE. No reception down here.

KILLIAN. For fuck's sake. Alright then. Which colours have you assigned to whom?

REGGIE. I haven't yet. I thought you might sort that out amongst yourselves.

KILLIAN. More than half of us can't sort our own knickers. Just assign the colours?

REGGIE. Certainly. Right then. Youuu...?

KILLIAN. Killian.

REGGIE. Right. Mr. Black. You'll be blue.

KILLIAN. Fine. Mr. Black is blue.

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

KILLIAN. No, Reggie. You haven't missed anyone. There are five actors in this production. And that's largely because there are five characters in the script.

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

KILLIAN. Any money for understudies was immediately devoured by Vivian's demands for a higher salary. Right. Let me see if I have this straight: I'm blue, Vivian's red, Fiona's green, Quinn's yellow, and Fergus is orange.

REGGIE. I'm more familiar with your surnames.

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KILLIAN. For fuck's sake. Black – blue, Pruitt – red, Bainbridge – green, Ponsonby – yellow, Nethercott – orange.

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

KILLIAN. Yes, I should think so. *(Reggie begins installing the panel. During this, 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 unpacking her things.)*

REGGIE. Hello 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 instructing me to make my way down here.

REGGIE. That's right.

KILLIAN. We've discussed this, Fiona.

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

REGGIE. Everything alright 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. That's lucky.

FIONA. The man I brought home last night was.

KILLIAN. Oh, dear God.

FIONA. Oh, he's fine. Just a small first-degree burn on his backside. We'd lit some candles for ambiance and then fell asleep after a rather enthusiastic shag. At some point I must have gotten up, perhaps for a glass of wine, who knows. The next thing I remember, I woke up on the floor several feet from the bed in a cloud of smoke... and to the smell of burning flesh. Has someone been going through my bag?

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KILLIAN. Why do you ask?

FIONA. A few items appear to be missing.

KILLIAN. Such as?

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

KILLIAN. Then I suppose I'm in no position to assist.

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

REGGIE. That's Mr. McHugh.

FIONA. Who?

KILLIAN. 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—? Honestly, Fiona, just the other day, we spent hours discussing this.

FIONA. Did we?

KILLIAN. Yesss. Never mind. I'll go over it again. *(During the following, Fiona powders her face. She soon realizes the powder compact contains cocaine rather than makeup. Pleased, she discreetly snorts a bit.)* You see, this moustachioed Billy-No-Mates right here is, without question, the single greatest threat to the continued existence of the actors' union. He's been relentless in his efforts to undermine – if not completely shut down – any production that fails to meet his impossible standards. And he's been particularly vicious toward us. His reviews have repeatedly castigated every one of us here, with the clear aim of ending our stage careers altogether. And because of that, we all agreed – I know you agreed, Fiona, because you were in the room when we decided it – 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! *(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?

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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, fresh from hair and makeup and already 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. Yeeeeessss!

VIVIAN. You seem a touch undecided, darling.

REGGIE. I promise you, he's not.

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

KILLIAN. For fuck's sake, Vivian. It's a single flight of stairs. I need all of us together in one place, alright? We made an agreement, and we need to hold each other accountable. And we can't do that if everyone's wandering about the theatre. Honestly. Were any of you even listening when we decided all this a few days ago?

VIVIAN. I'm paid to talk, darling, not to listen. And I'll have you know that being forced to wait out my time in this bedraggled den of ineptitude is in direct violation of my contract, which clearly states I am to have my own dressing room with swift and unobstructed access to the stage. *(Fiona suddenly sneezes, blowing a small cloud of 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 drops heavily onto her makeshift dressing table.)*

KILLIAN. Bloody hell. *(He rushes over.)* Fiona? Fiona! *(He lifts her head and checks for a pulse, then gently lowers it again.)*

VIVIAN. Is she—? *(Deirdre enters.)*

DEIRDRE. Quinn's arrived.

ALL EXCEPT ALISTAIR. Thank you Quinn!

DEIRDRE. What's happened to Fiona?

VIVIAN. She's expired.

DEIRDRE. What!?

REGGIE. She's kicked the bucket.

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

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

KILLIAN. She's breathing.

VIVIAN. Then what's the matter with her?

KILLIAN. *(Leaning closer.)* She's... well... it appears 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. *(Turning suddenly.)* Deirdre?

DEIRDRE. What? What have I done?

KILLIAN. Fiona's prescription drugs.

DEIRDRE. What about them?

KILLIAN. Where are they?

DEIRDRE. I threw them out.

KILLIAN. Can you get them?

DEIRDRE. Perhaps I misspoke. What I meant was, I flushed them.

KILLIAN. You flushed—? Do you really think that was—? I mean, are you intentionally trying to—? Never mind. 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 another for psychosis – I know this because most actors take 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?

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.

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KILLIAN. I couldn't care less how it's spelled or how it's pronounced or how many bloody syllables it has. I just want to know what it means.

REGGIE. She's got narcolepsy.

KILLIAN. *(Quietly, agitated.)* Oh, God no. *(Suddenly Fiona's head pops up.)*

FIONA. The next thing I remember, 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 carrying the horseman's pick. He is already in costume. He does not immediately notice Alistair.)*

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

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

DEIRDRE. *(Checking 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, alright? And I need Reggie... Reggie?

REGGIE. Yes?

DEIRDRE. *(Re: the panel.)* Finished with that, love?

REGGIE. Just now.

DEIRDRE. Good. Then I need you upstairs setting up for the top of Act One.

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

DEIRDRE. Right then. Ten minutes until house open.

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

DEIRDRE. Quinn and Killian, follow me. Fergus, your script is upside down. Fiona and Vivian, make yourselves comfortable. And keep a close eye on him. *(She gestures toward Alistair. Deirdre, Killian, and Quinn exit. Fergus turns his script the right way up. Fiona freshens her makeup and, in time, begins changing into costume. Vivian attempts to settle in,*

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though the grimy surroundings make it difficult. At some point during the previous, Alistair regained consciousness.)

ALISTAIR. Is there anything I might say to convince any of you to set me free?

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

VIVIAN. It was 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 who are deeply self-aware and grateful to hear the truth. And I persist because there are actors – like you lot, for example – who take me far too seriously when you shouldn't.

VIVIAN. Oh, is that a fact? Do you know there are mental institutions positively brimming with actors who've taken critics seriously?

ALISTAIR. On behalf of reviewers everywhere, I'm honoured. Though you exaggerate. A trifling few of my criticisms may have been... a smidge unflattering.

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

ALISTAIR. Damage?

VIVIAN. 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, slavering nitwit.

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

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

VIVIAN. *(To Fiona.)* It's not your fault, darling. Not your fault at all.

FIONA. I suppose not. But whose fault is it then?

ALISTAIR. I expect I'm the culprit.

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

ALISTAIR. And what, if I may ask, are your plans for me?

FIONA. That's an excellent question. I'd quite like to know myself.

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VIVIAN. Well, if I'm honest, I've no idea. I rather lost interest about five minutes into Killian's explanation. He's quite famous for droning on without ever arriving at the point. Or perhaps he does arrive at the point. Only by then everyone's stopped listening.

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 would it make anyway? We've come this far, haven't we? We can scarcely turn back now. I'm sure whatever Killian has planned for you will be entirely 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 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 still find work. In fact, I was shocked to see your name on the casting announcement.

VIVIAN. What an appalling 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 fixes Fiona with a hard stare, then reaches into her handbag and pulls out a folded piece of paper.)* Read that. *(She hands it to Alistair.)*

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

FIONA. Oh, dear. I have reading glasses right here. *(She produces a bejeweled pair and places them on Alistair.)* Better?

ALISTAIR. Slightly. Though the words are all smudged. Almost as if someone's been crying into them. *(Vivian snatches the paper back.)*

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

ALISTAIR. Well, I can hardly read it in that condition.

FIONA. Not to worry. I brought my own copy. *(She pulls a framed copy 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 respond, Vivian snatches it and looks at it in disgust.)* Unbelievable. *(She hands it to Alistair.)* Go on. Read it.

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

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, appeared rather long in the tooth as she grappled with a role typically reserved for an actress whose face has not yet been narrowed beyond recognition. Her advanced years became even more apparent when she attempted to disguise herself as the supposedly young and handsome Ganymede. Was it her decision to go minimalistic with the foundation and blush? Or simply the aftermath of a makeup designer out for revenge? To her credit, however, Miss Pruitt did successfully tap into her inherent masculine qualities in a manner that may well earn her the coveted role of Brutus in the National Theatre's upcoming 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 aisle, pinching himself while determined to reach the altar without wetting his trousers— *(Reggie's arm suddenly 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, carrying the horseman's pick.)*

QUINN. You nearly put an end to me this time around, do you realise that? You can't just go changing things. We've been blocking that fight for weeks. And just when we've finally mastered it, suddenly you're 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.

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KILLIAN. I was trying something different.

QUINN. You were trying something different? Like what? Decapitating one of your castmates? That would certainly be different.

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 longer you go on about it.

QUINN. You should count yourself lucky you haven't already been excommunicated from the actors' union.

KILLIAN. Is that right?

QUINN. Yes. Are you really that out of touch, Killian? Are you so full of yourself that you've no notion of the magnitude of your insidious misconduct? *(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 drops to the table.)*

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

DEIRDRE. I did.

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. *(Silence. Quinn lets out a loud belch.)* No? Alright then. *(She exits. Reggie enters and notices the horseman's pick still in Killian's hand.)*

REGGIE. There it is. I've been looking everywhere for that. *(He takes the pick.)* And I'll need those as well. *(He takes the sack and rope from Quinn and exits.)*

QUINN. Where was I?

BRUTE FARCE

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

KILLIAN. Yes, do continue, Quinn. We're all waiting with bated breath.

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

VIVIAN. What he means to say is you've molested nearly every woman you've ever shared a stage with.

QUINN. That is precisely what I mean to say.

VIVIAN. Well, the role does call for a sadistic, predatory, paranoid narcissist, so I suppose Killian was the natural choice. Except that he's an actual danger to women.

KILLIAN. Not to worry, Vivian. Both you and Fiona are perfectly safe. *(Fiona's head pops up.)*

VIVIAN. And what, pray tell, is that supposed to mean?

KILLIAN. Not. My. Type. *(Fiona rises, crosses to Killian, and slaps him across the face. Killian barely reacts.)* Is that the best you can do? *(Fiona punches him squarely between the eyes. Killian yelps and stumbles back. Alistair laughs. Everyone turns toward 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 has listened to a single word I've said? Does no one remember what we agreed to?

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 recall of the plan, Mr. McHugh here is meant to croak 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, alright! I get it!

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

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ALISTAIR. *(To Killian.)* You mean to have me killed? That's your plan? Seems a bit drastic.

FIONA. It does seem drastic, doesn't it?

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

FERGUS. *(Overlapping.)* Come again?

QUINN. *(Overlapping.)* I need a drink. *(Quinn produces a bottle of Macallan's from his coat, opens it, and takes a long drink. Throughout the following he will occasionally take another.)*

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 suddenly sounds. Vivian shrieks. Quinn belches. Fiona's head drops to the table. Fergus continues reading. Alistair and Killian stare at the panel as coloured bulbs begin lighting one by one, followed by the clear bulbs.)*

QUINN. What the hell's that?

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

QUINN. Sorry, what?

KILLIAN. Since Reggie cannot be in two places at once, and Deirdre is forced to operate without an ASM due to budgetary constraints, the pair of them devised another way to give us our entrance cues.

BRUTE FARCE

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

KILLIAN. Yes.

VIVIAN. How does it work?

KILLIAN. If memory serves, each coloured bulb represents one of the five actors. The clear bulbs below indicate which scene we're in.

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

KILLIAN. Come again?

QUINN. We've got bulbs for actors and bulbs for scenes, but no bulbs for acts.

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

QUINN. Two.

KILLIAN. Correct. Two acts. With an interval between them.

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

KILLIAN. Quinn. Dearest Quinn. Are you suggesting you're incapable of distinguishing between Act One and Act Two without the assistance of a filament?

QUINN. I see your point.

KILLIAN. Excellent. Then kindly shut the fuck up. *(Fiona's head pops up.)*

FIONA. *(Pointing at the panel.)* What the hell's that?

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

KILLIAN. Yes, Vivian?

VIVIAN. Which colour belongs to whom? *(Reggie enters.)*

REGGIE. Excellent question. Mr. Black is blue, Miss Pruitt is red, Miss Bainbridge is green, Mr. Ponsonby is yellow, and Mr. Nethercott is orange. And it appears the system is working brilliantly. *(He gives a thumbs up. The trap door above drops open. He frowns up at it, then exits.)*

KILLIAN. Everyone got that? *(Murmurs of confusion.)* For fuck's sake. I'm blue, Vivian's red, Fiona's green, Quinn's yellow, and Fergus is orange. *(He points to himself and then to the others as he lists the colours.)* Blue. Red. Green. Yellow. Orange.

BRUTE FARCE

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

KILLIAN. Very good, Fiona.

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

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

VIVIAN. No. Quite wrong for my skin tone.

KILLIAN. Oh. I wasn't aware you intended to wear it. Or perhaps accessorise with it. (*He gestures sharply to the bulb.*)

VIVIAN. Don't be ridiculous.

QUINN. I'd happily switch with you.

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

KILLIAN. No! No one is switching. It's settled. Vivian will make do. All of you will make do.

FERGUS. I rather like the colour orange. (*Back to his script.*) Good Lord... I really do have far too many lines in this play.

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

VIVIAN. None of us do, darling. (*Deirdre enters carrying a costume bag.*)

DEIRDRE. Twenty minutes 'til places.

ALL EXCEPT ALISTAIR. Thank you twenty 'til places!

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

KILLIAN. And not a moment too soon.

DEIRDRE. Well, you can't expect the costumer to 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.

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. (*Unzipping the bag and removing the costume.*) This, my dear addlepated artistes, is a replica of Quinn's costume.

BRUTE FARCE

FIONA. Oh. Very nice.

QUINN. Well, that's thoughtful. (*Tugging at his own costume.*) This one's already a bit threadbare. (*He reaches for the costume.*)

KILLIAN. (*He pulls the costume back.*) No. No. No, no, no. This is not for you. (*During the following, Killian hangs the garment bag on a rack.*)

QUINN. If it's not for me, then who?

KILLIAN. For Mr. McHugh.

ALISTAIR. Me?

KILLIAN. Yes.

ALISTAIR. Why?

KILLIAN. Because tonight the celebrated critic of the Daily Telegraph, Mr. Alistair McHugh, will make his acting debut here at the Dudley Hackham Commemorative Theatre in Stockton-on-Tees. And in this very production.

VIVIAN. Over my dead body. (*Fiona's head drops to the table.*)

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

QUINN. Hold on a damn minute!

KILLIAN. What is it, Quinn?

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

KILLIAN. Yes.

ALISTAIR. I hardly see how that's possible.

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

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

VIVIAN. Have you lost your mind, Killian?

KILLIAN. I'm certainly on the verge of it. Now listen. Everyone. And that includes you, Fiona! (*Fiona's head pops up.*)

FIONA. Do I smell smoke?

VIVIAN. Yes. It appears to be coming from 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

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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. Any of this sound vaguely familiar to any of you? (*Quinn reluctantly raises a hand.*) Quinn, yes, I would hope so. And the rest of you? (*Blank looks. Shrugs.*) Right. Anyway, 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. 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 body during the interval. (*Everyone is stunned.*)

ALISTAIR. Oh, my God. (*Reggie enters carrying the horseman's pick.*)

REGGIE. (*Handing the pick to Killian.*) Right then. Here you go.

KILLIAN. (*Inspecting it.*) Yes. Looks good. Looks very good.

REGGIE. Well, I did what you asked. Cleaned it, polished it, 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. Quite simple, really. I just replaced the spring mechanism with a small metal rod.

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

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

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ALISTAIR. *(To the room.)* Alright. Listen to me. Please. This is ridiculous. You clearly haven't thought this through. Do you honestly believe you'll get away with it? Even if you succeed in your... endeavour to exterminate me, the truth will unravel sooner or later. *(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 bag to Killian. He takes it reluctantly.)*

KILLIAN. What's this?

DEIRDRE. 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, love. After you asked me to speak with the costumer, I happened to mention it to Reggie – just 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 here we are.

KILLIAN. For fuck's sake. *(Killian hangs the second bag on the 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 drops to the table.)*

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

DEIRDRE. No idea, love.

VIVIAN. Well, it certainly won't be coming out of my salary, darling.

QUINN. Well, I for one think it should come out of Killian's bloody salary. This was his bloody idea, so he should bloody 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.

BRUTE FARCE

QUINN. I'm not drunk. (*He is.*) And I am deeply offended by the suggestion that I am... (*A gas bubble rises in his throat.*) ...drunk.

DEIRDRE. Alright then. I'll take your word for it. I suppose I'll pop across the street for another bottle. 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 are not negotiating.

VIVIAN. (*To Killian.*) Honestly, darling, don't you think this is all a bit much? I mean, I understand. We're actors, we adore drama, and we all share a deep loathing for this mound of tainted cabbage over here. But the whole thing seems rather... problematic. And perhaps a bit convoluted, don't you think...?

ALISTAIR. Oh, thank God. Someone's 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 perfectly happy to step away for a few minutes while you do whatever it is you need to do. I could freshen up in the loo, run through some vocal warmups... Just tell me how long you'll need, darling. In any case, I'd rather not be present when you put this old hog down.

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

VIVIAN. Very well. You're in charge. But if this show gets shut down for any reason – particularly if that reason happens to be that this colossal sack of rancid lard has been skewered to death in front of a paying audience – then I can assure you, you will never hear the end of it from me.

KILLIAN. Well, that's a disturbing thought. 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?

BRUTE FARCE

VIVIAN. Perhaps we could speak privately, darling? Over here? (*Killian reluctantly follows Vivian.*) Listen. Killian. I've been thinking about what you said earlier. That all of us 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 at least one of us has already exceeded their expiry date.

VIVIAN. Yes, but I'm not referring to 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, there are certain... necessities I simply won't be able to afford. Things I very much require at the moment. Things that might help keep me fresh... and relevant.

KILLIAN. I see. Are we talking "from the neck up" improvements, or does the list include your tits as well?

VIVIAN. Don't be vulgar, Killian. Nothing drastic. Just a few minor alterations. A nip here, a tuck there. A modest revamp.

KILLIAN. So, you're getting another facelift. (*Fiona's head pops up.*)

FIONA. Thank you places!

QUINN. Places!?! Already!?

FERGUS. Might we hold places a moment? I require a bit more time.

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

FIONA. Oh. Well, I highly recommend it, Vivian. And while you're at it, you really should have your tits done as well. (*Vivian shoots Fiona a murderous 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. Lowered voices.*) Listen, darling. I take no

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pleasure in this. But show or no show, I'm afraid I must rely on your generosity.

KILLIAN. My generosity?

VIVIAN. Yes. These procedures aren't cheap.

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

VIVIAN. I'm afraid you have little choice, darling.

KILLIAN. I won't do it.

VIVIAN. Oh, you most certainly will. Because if not, I can't guarantee I'll remain silent about what's been happening down here.

KILLIAN. Ah. Extortion. That's your game now. I admire the initiative, Vivian, I really do. Except there's one small flaw in your clever little scheme. You're an accomplice.

VIVIAN. An accomplice to what, darling? Until a few moments ago I had absolutely no idea you intended to slaughter that belligerent pig over there. So, I hardly consider myself an accomplice to any of it. *(Killian stews.)* Do we have a deal?

KILLIAN. I need some air. *(He starts off.)* Reggie! *(Reggie enters.)* Oh, there you are. Do you have the key? *(Reggie produces a key.)* Good. *(Re: Alistair.)* Now listen. Once the curtain goes up, I need you to come back here and get this knobhead into costume. Understood?

REGGIE. English is my native language, so yes.

KILLIAN. Piss off. *(Killian shoves Reggie lightly and follows him out.)*

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. Fergus remains deeply absorbed in his script. Quinn clumsily drags a chair over to Alistair and sits.)*

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

ALISTAIR. Beg pardon?

QUINN. You said you had an idea. I'd like to hear it.

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

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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 so far, hasn't he?

QUINN. Alright, listen. I might be able to help you. But first I need to hear what you had in mind.

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

QUINN. Yes, I'm aware.

ALISTAIR. ...So, all it would take is one stellar review of this production, and of the performances—

QUINN. No, no. Shh, shh, shh, shh. I don't really give a good goddam about this play or the other actors. So, here's what you'll do: You'll tear this production to pieces. Absolutely shred it. And you'll give the other four the worst reviews of their miserable careers. Do you understand?

ALISTAIR. Yes, certainly. Though I'm not sure how that benefits you.

QUINN. I haven't finished. In that same review, you will single me out as the one redeeming element in the show. The only sign of life in an otherwise barren desert of walking, talking, utilitarian meat puppets. Is that clear?

ALISTAIR. Perfectly.

QUINN. Good. In return, I'll get you out of here.

ALISTAIR. But Reggie has the key.

QUINN. Don't worry. I can handle Reggie.

ALISTAIR. How?

QUINN. Well, long before I became an actor, I was – among other things – an exceptionally gifted street magician. Something of a legend, really. And I was widely considered the best in my circle at one particular trick: relieving people of small valuables from their jackets, trousers, handbags... without their noticing.

ALISTAIR. A pickpocket.

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QUINN. I prefer the term finger-smith. I worked quickly. Invisibly. With a certain timid charm that concealed my talent for... acquiring things.

ALISTAIR. A prat with a penchant for thievery.

QUINN. No. Because I always returned what I took.

ALISTAIR. I don't understand.

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

ALISTAIR. I see.

QUINN. So, with a bit of misdirection and some sleight of hand, that key will be in my possession before Reggie even knows it's missing. And you'll be free shortly after curtain up.

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

QUINN. I think you do. You have your instructions. Do exactly as I've asked. And never, ever implicate me.

ALISTAIR. You have my word. *(Quinn studies him for a moment.)*

QUINN. I am curious, though.

ALISTAIR. About what?

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

ALISTAIR. Oh. Well, I uh—

QUINN. You've reviewed more than a dozen shows I've appeared in and barely mentioned me in any of them.

ALISTAIR. Yes, that's true.

QUINN. Go on then. Don't be shy. Don't hold back. I can take it.

ALISTAIR. I'm not sure this is the appropriate moment—

QUINN. Tell me.

ALISTAIR. Very well. I suppose I would describe you as... serviceable.

QUINN. Serviceable?

ALISTAIR. Yes.

QUINN. Go on.

ALISTAIR. 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

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you're generally cast in roles that are somewhat generic in nature, roles that are functional per se rather than essential.

QUINN. And?

ALISTAIR. And if I may be candid...

QUINN. Please.

ALISTAIR. Your emotional range is... relatively... narrow. And your arsenal of expressions generally run on... empty. Now I'm not suggesting you haven't earned your success; your name alone sells tickets. And I'm certain you're industrious. But as an actor... your abilities are, shall we say... limited.

QUINN. I see.

ALISTAIR. The reason I rarely mention you in my reviews is quite simple. You're... unremarkable. And frankly, that places you squarely in the majority. *(Deirdre enters holding a bottle of Macallan's.)*

DEIRDRE. Five minutes 'til places! *(Startled, Fiona knocks a jar of face cream onto the floor.)*

ALL EXCEPT ALISTAIR. Thank you five 'til places!

FIONA. Bloody hell!

DEIRDRE. Everything alright, love?

FIONA. Not exactly. I've just spilled my face cream all over the floor.

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. Don't worry. I'll sort it.

DEIRDRE. You sure, love?

FIONA. Yes, yes. I can manage.

DEIRDRE. Right then. *(To the room.)* Everyone excited for the show? *(Murmurs and half-hearted responses. Fiona's head drops to the table again.)* That's the spirit. *(She exits.)*

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

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QUINN. You didn't misspeak. And it's alright. In fact, I appreciate your candor. Which is precisely why I'm committed to helping you escape.
(Reggie enters carrying an extra sack and rope.)

REGGIE. *(To Quinn.)* Right then. Here we are. Mr. Black asked me to bring an additional sack and rope, just in case you needed them. *(He hands them to Quinn.)*

QUINN. Yes. Of course. *(Reggie starts off.)* Oh. And Reggie?

REGGIE. Yes, Mr. Ponsonby?

QUINN. Might I have a quick word with you? Just outside?

REGGIE. Can it wait?

QUINN. I'm afraid not.

REGGIE. Alright then. But we need to be quick.

QUINN. Of course. *(Quinn exits with Reggie. Killian enters, calling 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 & FERGUS. Thank you places!

KILLIAN. *(Quietly.)* For fuck's sake.

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

KILLIAN. Sorry?

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

KILLIAN. No, I haven't forgotten.

FIONA. Then what are you waiting for?

KILLIAN. We still have a few minutes.

FIONA. So, we're not at places?

KILLIAN. No.

FIONA. Then who called for places?

KILLIAN. No one.

FIONA. Are you sure?

KILLIAN. At this point, no.

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

BRUTE FARCE

KILLIAN. Art imitating life. *(Quinn enters, subtly tucking something into his breast pocket.)*

QUINN. *(Calling off to Reggie.)* Thank you, Reggie! Terribly sorry to have bothered you. Honestly, I don't know what we'd do without you. *(Quietly.)* Duplicitous little bastard. *(He glances at Alistair, pats his jacket pocket, and winks. Then he 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 mean the whiskey, Quinn. I need you clear-headed out there tonight.

QUINN. Oh? Is that right?

KILLIAN. Yes. We all need to be clear-headed. Especially you.

QUINN. And why is that?

KILLIAN. *(Pointedly.)* Because this time it will be a matter of life and death, won't it? Do you see my point?

QUINN. I suppose I do.

KILLIAN. Good.

FIONA. You know, Quinn, you really ought to enjoy yourself tonight. Have a bit of fun with it. Try something new. Let yourself go. After all, it's your last week of performances.

KILLIAN. Fiona!

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

FIONA. Oh, dear.

VIVIAN. Oh, Quinn. Darling, Quinn. I'm afraid there's no easy way to say this. Actually, there is. You've been replaced.

QUINN. Replaced?

VIVIAN. Yes, darling.

QUINN. By whom?

VIVIAN. By someone better. They plan to escort you from the theatre after the Sunday matinee. Frankly, I'm surprised you didn't see it coming.

BRUTE FARCE

QUINN. *(Quietly.)* Ah. *(He calmly finishes the whiskey in one long swallow. He studies the empty bottle... then suddenly smashes it over Killian's head.)*

VIVIAN. Oh, my God. *(Killian collapses to the floor.)* Quinn! What're you doing?

QUINN. *(Crossing to Alistair.)* Ending this madness. I'm letting Alistair go. *(He reaches into his breast pocket and pulls out... a sardine.)*

VIVIAN. Your plan is to free him... with a sardine?

QUINN. I don't understand.

VIVIAN. What exactly do you intend to do, darling? Skin it and use the bones to pick the lock?

QUINN. This makes no sense. *(Reggie appears.)*

REGGIE. Are you perhaps looking for this? *(He holds up the key.)*

QUINN. Reggie! How did you—?

REGGIE. And you may also want these back. *(He displays Quinn's wallet and watch.)*

QUINN. *(Seething.)* You. Little. Rat-arsed... Ahhhhhhhhh! *(Quinn charges at Reggie. A chaotic fight erupts. During the struggle, Vivian tries to move out of the way but slips on Fiona's spilled face cream and crashes to the floor. The fight ends with both Quinn and Reggie sprawled on the ground. 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. Listen up, my lovelies. It appears things have gotten a wee bit out of hand. And while I would love nothing more than to cancel tonight's performance and toss every last one of you out on your arses... I can't. Because we have a sold-out house. God knows how. Perhaps it's because this production is an absolute turd. Hm? And who's going to pass up the opportunity to watch a quintet of pseudo-celebrities clatter 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.

BRUTE FARCE

VIVIAN. No. I mean have you gone completely mental? Not one of us is in any condition to perform.

DEIRDRE. So... business as usual then. Now listen. You're all going on. Even if I have to hang you from meat hooks and move you in and out on a fly system. Understood? *(Groans and objections.)* Reggie.

REGGIE. Yes?

DEIRDRE. Let the house manager know we're running a bit late.

REGGIE. Certainly. *(He exits quickly, though not gracefully.)*

DEIRDRE. Right. Now I realise none of you gives a rat's arse about a sold-out show. And frankly, I understand. Audiences haven't exactly earned the respect they demand, have they? They're unpleasant. They behave badly. Just last week a group of them passed a pot roast up and down the third row while some bloke in the row behind was getting a jobby from one of our premier platinum season subscribers. So, yes. Generally speaking, they're a raging nuisance. But... but... The only thing worse than a badly behaved audience... is no audience at all. Do you see my point? *(Half-hearted murmurs of agreement.)* Good. Then I've only one thing left to say.

QUINN. And that is?

DEIRDRE. Places!

ALL EXCEPT ALISTAIR. Thank you places! *(Deirdre exits. The buzzer on the cue-calling panel sounds. The blue bulb lights, followed by the first clear bulb – Killian's entrance for Act One, Scene One. No one moves. Silence. The buzzer sounds again. The same lights. Still no movement. The buzzer now goes off repeatedly and urgently. The blue bulb flashes again. Silence. Reggie rushes in.)*

REGGIE. Mr. Black!

KILLIAN. What?!

REGGIE. You're on!

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

REGGIE. Top of show!

KILLIAN. Yes, Reggie. I know. *(Re: Alistair.)* Get that pompous arsehole into costume and let's get this over with. *(He pushes past Reggie and exits. Fiona's head drops to the table. Black out. End of Act 1.)*

BRUTE FARCE

ACT 2

SCENE 1

Continuous from Act One. The trap door above the Trap Room is closed. Alistair – still chained – is now dressed in a replica of Quinn’s costume. Lights rise on the Stage Manager Station. Deirdre settles in, slips on her headset, and pours herself a double of Macallan’s. Lights rise on Reggie’s Workstation. He puts on his headset and prepares for the top of the show. Killian passes through behind Reggie to take his place “backstage.” He’s looking a bit worse for wear. NOTE: Deirdre calls the light cues. Reggie runs the sound cues.

DEIRDRE. *(Into headset.)* Reggie.

REGGIE. *(Into headset.)* I’m here.

DEIRDRE. Is Killian at places?

REGGIE. *(Glancing over.)* Yes. Just.

DEIRDRE. Right. Good.

REGGIE. What could possibly go wrong?

DEIRDRE. At this point, love, things could hardly get worse.

REGGIE. I suppose not.

DEIRDRE. That’s the spirit. Right then. Here we go. Stand by sound cue one and light cue one. Sound cue one, curtain music... go. *(1920s melodrama-style curtain music begins.)* Light cue one... go. *(Lights rise on the Study.)* Stand by sound cues two and three. Sound cue two, music fade... go. *(The music fades.)* Sound cue three, telephone ring... go. *(Reggie triggers the cue. The desk phone rings. And rings. And rings.)* Reggie.

REGGIE. Yes, Deirdre?

DEIRDRE. I thought Killian was at places.

REGGIE. *(Checking again.)* He is.

DEIRDRE. Then why hasn’t he made his entrance?

REGGIE. *(Squinting.)* Looks like he’s asking for a bit more time. Couple of minutes maybe? No, that’s not it. He’s giving me the two-finger salute. I believe he’s taunting me.

DEIRDRE. And what do you plan to do about it, love?

BRUTE FARCE

REGGIE. I plan to kick his arse. (*Reggie kills the phone cue, rips off his headset, and rushes off. We see a brief scuffle backstage. Reggie forcibly shoves Killian through the Study doors and onto the stage floor. Killian sprawls, groaning. Reggie calmly returns to his station and replaces his headset.*) He's made his entrance.

DEIRDRE. Yes, I can see that. We can all see that. Right then. Again. Sound cue three, telephone ring... go. (*The phone rings again. Killian crawls to the desk, pulling himself up as he reaches for the receiver.*)
NOTE: Underlined dialogue indicates lines from the play within the play.)

KILLIAN. Hello...? Yes, this is he... Who is this, please...? Ah. Yes, detective. I've been expecting your call... (*He winces in pain.*) Yes, well, listen. This is actually not a good time. I'm in considerable pain at the moment and may require medical attention, so I'm going to hang up now. (*He replaces the receiver and starts toward the Study doors.*)

DEIRDRE. No. No, no. That's not in the [script]. Reggie!

REGGIE. I'm on it. (*He triggers the phone cue again and rushes toward the Study. Killian glances back at the ringing phone and grimaces. Reggie bursts through the Study doors and immediately realizes he's visible onstage.*) Shite. (*Improvising.*) Good evening, sir.

KILLIAN. (*Annoyed.*) Good evening. And who, pray tell, are you?

REGGIE. Ah... right. Well... I am... your new manservant.

KILLIAN. I see. And your name?

REGGIE. My name?

KILLIAN. Yes. You do have one, don't you?

REGGIE. Of course I do.

KILLIAN. Which is?

REGGIE. Bromley. Bromley... Shufflebottom.

KILLIAN. Mm-hm. Well, Bromley Shufflebottom, I regret to inform you that I have received no notice of a change in staff. As a rule, I insist on interviewing all applicants personally.

REGGIE. Yes. I'm sure you do. Except your former manservant... (*The phone continues ringing.*)

KILLIAN. Go on.

BRUTE FARCE

REGGIE. Your former manservant is... well... I'm sorry to say he's deceased.

KILLIAN. Deceased?

REGGIE. Dead.

KILLIAN. Yes, I know what deceased means. It seems rather sudden. Gregory was the picture of health. When did this occur?

REGGIE. Moments ago.

KILLIAN. Indeed? And here you are... moments later.

REGGIE. Right. Well... before becoming a manservant, I was... er um... a messenger.

KILLIAN. I see. And I assume what you're wearing is the standard uniform for messengers?

REGGIE. Yes. Precisely. And that, sir, is how this all came about.

KILLIAN. Really? Do explain.

REGGIE. You see... I arrived here to deliver a letter to you. On horseback. And when I arrived, I – completely by accident – crushed your manservant under the weight of my steed's hooves... So, now... his corpse is presently resting beneath your grand portico.

KILLIAN. Good heavens. That's dreadful.

REGGIE. And here's the truly sad part–

KILLIAN. Sadder than what you just described? *(The phone keeps ringing.)*

REGGIE. Yes. Because with the invention of the telephone... I didn't actually need to come here at all. Which means your manservant died completely in vain. And – coincidentally – the gentleman who sent the letter... is calling you right now. On that telephone. *(He gestures emphatically to the phone.)*

KILLIAN. Really? You think so?

REGGIE. I know so.

KILLIAN. My word. So, in addition to messenger and manservant, you're also a clairvoyant?

REGGIE. Exactly.

BRUTE FARCE

KILLIAN. Remarkable. And the letter you were delivering? Do you still have it?

REGGIE. Beg your pardon?

KILLIAN. The letter. I should like to read it.

REGGIE. Just answer the bloody phone! *(He exits quickly, closing the Study doors behind him.)*

KILLIAN. Absolutely disrespectful. *(He answers the phone.)* Hello...? *(The phone continues ringing. Killian slowly replaces the receiver. Back at his station, Reggie ends the cue. Killian lifts the receiver again.)* Hello...? Yes, this is he... Who is this, please...? Ah. Yes, detective. I've been expecting your call... Yes, well, your messenger – now apparently employed as my manservant – failed to deliver your correspondence, so I'm pleased you were able to reach me by telephone. Tell me. Have you discovered anything about my accountant, Hubert? He's been missing nearly a fortnight now, and I've grown quite concerned... Mm-hm... I see. And on a hunch, you visited my bank...? Oh, is that so...? Well yes, he is my accountant, after all... What was that...? You can't be serious... (His eyes widen. He puts his hand over the receiver and turns front.) Oh, my God!

DEIRDRE. Reggie.

REGGIE. I'm here.

DEIRDRE. We're going to need Fiona onstage.

REGGIE. Right. Of course. Straight away. *(Reggie manipulates the controls. In the Trap Room, the cue panel buzzer sounds. The green bulb lights, followed by the first clear bulb – Fiona's entrance cue.)*

VIVIAN. Oh, dear. The, uh... the whatsit just went off, darlings. It appears one of us is due for an entrance. Quinn?

QUINN. Yes?

VIVIAN. Is it you?

QUINN. Is what me?

VIVIAN. Are you onstage, darling?

QUINN. No, I'm not onstage. What do you think you're speaking to? A hologram?

BRUTE FARCE

VIVIAN. No, darling. I mean are you expected onstage? The whatsit just went off.

QUINN. Yes, I heard it. I do have a pair of functioning ears. *(The buzzer sounds again. Green bulb followed by the first clear bulb.)*

VIVIAN. And there it goes again.

QUINN. My entrance isn't until scene two. And I very much doubt we've reached that point in under five minutes. *(He leans forward.)* Oh... I'm not feeling well. *(The buzzer sounds again. Green bulb followed by the first clear bulb.)*

VIVIAN. Is it you, Fergus?

FERGUS. I shouldn't think so.

VIVIAN. Well, if it's not you, not Quinn, and not me... perhaps it's Fiona?

QUINN. Let's hope not.

VIVIAN. *(To Fiona.)* Fiona, darling?

QUINN. She's in a rather sorry state at the moment.

VIVIAN. Yes... best to let her rest. The poor tart needs it.

ALISTAIR. It's Fiona! For God's sake, it's Fiona! Killian is blue, Vivian is red, Quinn is yellow, Fergus is orange, and Fiona is green! Fiona is due onstage for Act One, Scene One! My God! If Killian doesn't murder me soon, I swear I'll do it myself!

VIVIAN. Alright, darling, there's no need to become hysterical. *(Reggie bursts into the Trap Room, scoops up Fiona, and carries her off. Back in the Study, Killian has just finished his phone call and replaces the receiver.)*

KILLIAN. Blast! I'm broke. Ruined. He's taken everything. What am I to do?

DEIRDRE. Sound cue four, doorbell ring... go. *(Nothing. Killian waits.)* Reggie? Reggie, are you there?

KILLIAN. *(Louder, repeating the line.)* Blast! I'm broke. Ruined. He's taken everything. What am I to do?

DEIRDRE. Reggie! *(Reggie arrives at his workstation with Fiona slung over his shoulder. Somehow, he manages to hit the cue.)*

BRUTE FARCE

KILLIAN. A visitor? And at this hour? I certainly hope it's not more bad news. Perhaps an innocent passerby who's stumbled upon Gregory's remains. What a dreadful sight that must be. *(He heads for the Study doors. Outside the doors, Reggie drops Fiona against the wall and props her upright. He lightly slaps her cheeks. Killian opens the doors.)* Bromley? *(He sees the chaos. Quietly.)* For fuck's sake. *(Calling out.)* Bromley! Would you answer the door, please? It appears we have an unexpected guest.

REGGIE. Yes, alright! Keep your trousers on! *(He steps away. Fiona begins sliding down the wall.)*

KILLIAN. Utterly impudent. *(Killian closes the Study doors again. Reggie catches Fiona before she collapses. She suddenly rouses.)*

FIONA. Reggie! You naughty little minx! Well, yes, of course I'm interested but now is hardly the time. I have an entrance to make. *(She kisses him hard on the lips, then sweeps through the Study doors to make her entrance.)* Kenneth!

KILLIAN. Dolores! What are you doing here?

FIONA. How terribly uncivil. Is that any way to greet your mistress?

KILLIAN. I didn't realize there was a proper protocol for greeting the woman with whom one is having an affair.

FIONA. Formalities aren't required, darling. But a touch of reverence would have been nice.

KILLIAN. I'm sorry, my dear. It's just been a dreadful evening. I've received some terrible news and, frankly, I'd like nothing more than to slither into bed.

FIONA. That sounds like a splendid idea. *(She moves closer, caressing him.)*

KILLIAN. Oh no. Not tonight, my love. I very much doubt I'm up for it.

FIONA. *(Leaning in.)* You misjudge my talents.

KILLIAN. Dolores, please. I'm quite serious. I have far too much on my mind. There are matters I must sort out and – at the moment – I simply don't have the appetite.

FIONA. Rubbish. Your wife returns from Biarritz tomorrow, does she not?

BRUTE FARCE

KILLIAN. Yes. But what of it?

FIONA. Tonight is the last night we'll have together until Priscilla's next excursion.

KILLIAN. Excursions that I afford her.

FIONA. Exactly. And who knows when she'll travel again? Weeks could pass before we see each other. Frankly, I find that unbearable.

KILLIAN. *(Resigned.)* I'm sorry, Dolores.

FIONA. So that's it? There's nothing I can do to persuade you?

KILLIAN. I'm afraid not. I'll ask my manservant to drive you home.

FIONA. Drive me home? At this hour? Absolutely insulting. What would my neighbours think if I arrived at my Bloomsbury flat in the middle of the night? My reputation would be in tatters. Besides, I've brought an overnight bag. So, I shall be staying here, whether you like it or not. And in one of your superior guest rooms, if you please. Now, perhaps you could ask Gregory to—

KILLIAN. Bromley.

FIONA. Come again?

DEIRDRE. Damn it, Killian!

KILLIAN. Bromley. His name is Bromley.

FIONA. Whose name is Bromley?

KILLIAN. My manservant.

FIONA. No... that's not right. I'm quite sure it was—

KILLIAN. Gregory has recently passed away, I'm afraid. In fact, I'm astonished you didn't notice his corpse beneath the grand portico as you arrived.

FIONA. I'm sorry, his... his corpse? You know what? Never mind. Perhaps you could simply ask... Bromley, was it?

KILLIAN. That's right.

FIONA. Yes, well... I'd be most grateful if you would instruct Bromley to fetch some fresh linens and prepare my room immediately.

KILLIAN. Of course, my love. And where is it?

FIONA. Where's what?

KILLIAN. Your overnight bag.

BRUTE FARCE

FIONA. Well, it's right there by the... *(She looks around. Then slowly back to Killian.)* Oh, dear.

REGGIE. Bloody hell! *(He dashes behind the set. A moment later he reappears holding the overnight bag. He starts toward the Study doors... then stops.)* No. No, I'm not going back out there. What to do? What to do? *(He looks up.)* Ah. *(He lobs the bag over the top of the set. It lands with a heavy thud on the stage floor.)*

FIONA. There it is. *(Reggie races back to his workstation. Fiona retrieves the bag, places it on the desk, and begins rummaging through it.)* Oh, and Kenneth.

KILLIAN. Yes, Dolores?

FIONA. Should your mood improve later... I thought you might like to know I'll be wearing this to bed. *(She produces a negligee. Reggie reaches his Workstation.)*

DEIRDRE. Reggie.

REGGIE. Yes, yes. I know. Miss Pruitt's entrance. I'm cueing her now. *(He works the controls. In the Trap Room, the cue panel buzzes. The red bulb lights, followed by the first clear bulb – Vivian's entrance cue.)*

VIVIAN. You look dreadful, Quinn.

QUINN. I feel dreadful. I'm soaked through, my hands are shaking—

VIVIAN. Then by all means keep your distance. I want no part of whatever illness you're cultivating over there.

QUINN. I'm not contagious.

VIVIAN. I'd rather not take any chances, darling. Best you remain exactly where you are.

ALISTAIR. Vivian—

VIVIAN. Yes, yes, I'm perfectly aware my entrance is imminent. It's insulting enough that I must be summoned by a plank of wood festooned with lightbulbs. Must I also endure prompting from a decomposing swine? *(The buzzer sounds. The red bulb lights, followed by the first clear bulb.)* And so, I go... into the fray. *(Back in the Study, Fiona still holds the negligee.)*

FIONA. So... what do you think, Kenneth? Perhaps I should try it on for you?

BRUTE FARCE

KILLIAN. The negligee? Now? You can't be serious, Dolores.

FIONA. I couldn't be more serious.

KILLIAN. You're making this very hard for me, my love. Very hard indeed.

FIONA. Nonsense. It's quite simple, really. I'll remove what I'm wearing and replace it with this delightfully sheer little garment.

KILLIAN. Indeed. I should very much like to see that.

FIONA. Then it's settled?

KILLIAN. Yes. Yes, I suppose it is. It would certainly take my mind off... recent developments.

FIONA. Oh, splendid! *(She begins to undress. Vivian passes Reggie's workstation and shoves him lightly before slipping behind the set to take position outside the Study doors.)*

KILLIAN. Wait. One moment. I should lock the Study doors first. In case Gregory wanders in unexpectedly.

FIONA. You mean Bromley.

KILLIAN. Yes, yes, of course. Bromley. Poor Gregory. We can't simply leave him rotting away out front forever, can we? Still, that will have to wait. We have more pressing matters at hand. *(He locks the Study doors, then turns back.)*

FIONA. Do I have your full attention now, my love?

KILLIAN. Entirely. Please. Carry on. *(Fiona continues undressing. Vivian rattles the door handle.)* Damn it, Bromley! Go away! Your timing is appalling! *(To Fiona.)* Go on, Dolores. *(Vivian knocks.)* Did you not hear me? I said go away! *(To Fiona.)* Wait. Allow me to avert my eyes. True beauty deserves to be revealed only in its finished form. *(Killian turns away, covering his eyes. Another knock.)*

VIVIAN. ("Off".) Kenneth!

KILLIAN. Oh no. It's my wife.

FIONA. Priscilla? How can that be? She wasn't due back until tomorrow evening.

KILLIAN. Something's amiss.

BRUTE FARCE

VIVIAN. (*“Off”. Knocking again.*) Kenneth! What on earth is happening in there? Unlock these doors at once!

KILLIAN. (*Rushing to Fiona.*) Quickly, Dolores. Conceal yourself. (*Fiona suddenly collapses. Killian catches her.*) Oh no. No, no, no. Damn it, Fio— er um... Dolores. Now is not the time, my dear. (*He tries to rouse her.*) Dolores...? (*Leaning close, improvising.*) What’s that, my love? Where should you hide? Why, the closet of course. Allow me to assist. (*He props Fiona up and awkwardly drags her to the closet.*)

VIVIAN. (*“Off”. Knocking again.*) Your refusal to answer is making me suspect something thoroughly improper is happening behind these doors. (*Killian stuffs Fiona into the closet, grabs the overnight bag and negligee, tosses them in after her, and shuts the door.*)

VIVIAN. (*“Off”. Knocking again.*) I am quickly losing my patience, Kenneth. This is your final warning before I summon Gregory to—

KILLIAN. (*As he crosses to the doors.*) Bromley! For God’s sake, his name is Bromley! Bromley Shufflebottom! Gregory is dead! Deceased! Quite thoroughly expired! His lifeless body currently lies beneath the grand portico! And Bromley – a former messenger and occasional clairvoyant – has taken his place! Have I made that perfectly clear?! Because I should hate to have to explain it again. (*He unlocks and opens the Study doors.*) Hello, my darling. Did you have a pleasant trip?

VIVIAN. (*Pushing past Killian and entering the Study.*) Don’t try to distract me, Kenneth. I heard a great deal of frantic chatter, and quite a bit of knocking and thrashing about in here. Something is clearly afoot. (*She surveys the room.*)

KILLIAN. You’re absolutely right. You see, I’ve just received some dreadful news, Priscilla. News that affects both of us greatly. So, what you overheard, my darling, was me... having something of a tantrum.

VIVIAN. Dreadful news? What sort of dreadful news?

KILLIAN. I think you should sit down, Priscilla.

VIVIAN. Oh. That sort of dreadful news.

KILLIAN. (*Crossing toward where the settee should be.*) Yes. Perhaps you should join me here on the settee... (*He stops. Looks around.*)

VIVIAN. Is something the matter?

BRUTE FARCE

KILLIAN. No... no... except that I've just invited you to sit on a settee that appears to have vanished.

DEIRDRE. Reggie, where's the settee?

REGGIE. *(Looking offstage.)* It's in the wings.

DEIRDRE. And where should it be, love?

REGGIE. Onstage, of course. I'll fetch it. *(He runs to retrieve it.)*

VIVIAN. Really, Kenneth, it's hardly important. *(Reggie begins dragging the settee toward the Study.)*

KILLIAN. Hardly important? A missing settee? Now, think about that for a moment, yes? I mean, it does defy logic, doesn't it? My suggesting that you join me on a settee that's no longer there. A settee that ought to be there because it has been there without fail for weeks. I mean, why on earth would I recommend that the two of us sit down for an especially critical conversation on a settee that doesn't exist? It's presumably my home, after all, isn't it? My study. And for those reasons, I think that I might notice if a sizable piece of furniture just up and vanished! Wouldn't you agree? *(Reggie arrives at the Study doors with the settee.)*

VIVIAN. Let's not give ourselves a migraine over the furniture, shall we? I'll simply sit in your desk chair. Problem solved

KILLIAN. Yes, of course. Why didn't I think of it? *(Reggie quietly starts dragging the settee back offstage.)* You'll sit in the desk chair. Perfectly reasonable. *(He goes behind the desk... then stops.)* Except... there is no desk chair. *(Reggie abandons the settee and runs to fetch the desk chair.)*

VIVIAN. Admittedly curious. But perhaps we should move on?

KILLIAN. Move on?

VIVIAN. Yes. We'll simply remain standing.

KILLIAN. But I've asked you to sit down. *(Reggie reappears carrying the desk chair.)*

VIVIAN. Yes, but there's nowhere to sit. And I'm just now noticing that the armchairs are missing as well. *(Reggie drops the desk chair and runs off again. Fiona steps out from the closet.)*

FIONA. Priscilla? How can that be? She wasn't due back until tomorrow evening.

BRUTE FARCE

KILLIAN. We've already done that bit! *(He shoves Fiona back into the closet and shuts the door. To Vivian.)* A deceased manservant, vanishing furniture, and a half-nude woman in my study closet... It has been quite a day, my darling.

VIVIAN. Indeed.

KILLIAN. *(Gesturing nervously at the closet.)* Shall I explain the, uh...? [woman]

VIVIAN. I've no idea what you're talking about. Moving on

KILLIAN. Right. Moving on. And that's not even the worst of it. You see, I've just received some dreadful news, Priscilla. News that affects both of us greatly.

VIVIAN. Dreadful news? What sort of dreadful news? *(Reggie enters carrying the armchairs.)*

KILLIAN. Perhaps you should sit—

VIVIAN. No! No one is sitting. We will remain upright and continue. Do you understand?

KILLIAN. Yes. *(Reggie tosses the armchairs further into the wings, stacks the desk chair on the settee, pushes them off, then returns to his workstation.)*

VIVIAN. Good. Now go on. What sort of dreadful news?

KILLIAN. Right. You see, earlier this evening I received a phone call. From a detective.

VIVIAN. A detective?

KILLIAN. Yes. As you know, Hubert—

VIVIAN. Your accountant?

KILLIAN. My account, yes. He went missing nearly two weeks ago.

VIVIAN. It's awful, to be sure.

KILLIAN. So, I hired a detective to find him.

VIVIAN. Of course you did. You must have been terribly worried.

KILLIAN. I was. Two weeks before he vanished, Hubert and I met here to review my finances for the year.

VIVIAN. Yes, I remember. I was packing for Biarritz that very morning.

KILLIAN. The same morning you fell down the east wing staircase.

BRUTE FARCE

VIVIAN. “Fell” is rather dramatic. Gregory was out running errands, and I had to carry my own luggage. A minor stumble, really.

KILLIAN. Minor? I heard a scream followed by what sounded like an avalanche of hats and shoes crashing into the rear foyer.

VIVIAN. I did give you quite a fright.

KILLIAN. You certainly did. I’ve no idea why you didn’t call for me to help with your bags instead of compelling me to come to your rescue after the fact.

VIVIAN. Why would I, my darling? You were busy with Hubert. I didn’t want to bother you.

KILLIAN. I was so distraught I scarcely took the time to examine the paperwork I was signing. So many forms, documents, numbers... I simply couldn’t focus, having been so worried about you.

VIVIAN. I’m so sorry.

KILLIAN. It isn’t your fault, my dear. But I suspect that was precisely when Hubert took advantage of us. I must have signed away our entire fortune.

VIVIAN. Oh, Kenneth.

DEIRDRE. Stand by sound cue five.

REGGIE. Sound cue five, standing by.

KILLIAN. What a fool I’ve been. And afterwards I allowed Hubert to escort you to the station instead of waiting for Gregory to return. How betrayed you must feel, Priscilla. Because that’s certainly how I feel. Hubert has taken everything. Everything of value, that is. Except... of course... you, my darling

DEIRDRE. Sound cue five, telephone ring... go. *(The phone rings.)*

KILLIAN. Now who could that be calling at this hour?

VIVIAN. I’m leaving you, Kenneth.

KILLIAN. Well don’t go too far, Priscilla. I won’t be a moment. *(He reaches for the receiver.)*

VIVIAN. No. What I mean is... I want a divorce.

KILLIAN. A divorce!?

BRUTE FARCE

VIVIAN. Yes. And I would greatly appreciate it if you didn't make things unnecessarily difficult. Now, if you'll excuse me, I shall be spending the night in one of our superior guest rooms. (*She exits through the Study doors, closing them behind her.*)

KILLIAN. Will this nightmare never end? (*Fiona slips out of the closet wearing the negligee.*)

FIONA. (*Urgent whisper.*) Kenneth!

KILLIAN. Not yet! (*He shoves Fiona back into the closet and shuts the door. He crosses to the desk and answers the phone.*) Hello...? Ah. Hello, detective... No trouble at all. I'm listening... Say again...? Well, that's wonderful news! Hubert's been captured then... Oh. My apologies. He's been located. So now it's simply a matter of reaching him... I see. And where is he now...? Oh, he is? Well, what a curious coincidence. My wife Priscilla has just returned from Biarritz this very evening... (*His eyes widen. He covers the receiver and turns front.*) Oh, my God. (*Back to phone.*) Yes. Er um, sorry, detective. Yes, I'm still here... No, no. Nothing's wrong. It's just that... well, listen carefully. I've changed my mind... Yes. Entirely. I think it best we simply drop the matter altogether... Yes, I've just had a sudden change of heart... No, there's nothing further you need do. I'm quite certain. After all, it is entirely my own fault that I find myself in this dreadful predicament... Yes, thank you for your time, detective... Of course. If anything changes, I'll contact you directly. Good evening. (*He replaces the receiver. Silence. He slowly turns toward the closet. Nothing. He crosses to the closet door. Fiona bursts out, the door striking Killian.*)

FIONA. (*Urgent whisper.*) Kenneth! (*Killian is hidden behind the door.*) Kenneth! (*She steps downstage. The closet door slowly swings shut behind her, revealing Killian pinching his nose with a handkerchief.*) Ken—! (*She sees him.*) Oh, dear. Are you alright?

KILLIAN. Do I look alright?

FIONA. You've looked worse.

KILLIAN. How reassuring.

FIONA. Is it safe to come out, my dear?

BRUTE FARCE

KILLIAN. Of course. By all means, let's simply carry on, shall we? Never mind that my nose has been broken twice and I've likely cracked half a dozen ribs.

FIONA. Hm. Yes, that's all very troubling, Kenneth. Except what I'm truly concerned about is whether it's safe to come out.

KILLIAN. Yes. It's safe. Priscilla has gone to bed. And I've just finished speaking with the detective.

FIONA. I overheard. Is it true you've signed away your entire fortune?

KILLIAN. By all accounts, yes.

FIONA. And that your wife is leaving you?

KILLIAN. Indeed. And to make matters worse, it appears she's been having an affair with Hubert. I suspect they conspired together to strip me of everything I own. Everything that is except my most valuable possession. (He moves closer.)

FIONA. *(Rebuffing him.)* Is that how you see me, Kenneth? As one of your possessions?

KILLIAN. No! I, uh—

FIONA. Do you wonder why I've changed into this negligee?

KILLIAN. The timing is... unusual, Dolores. Though I assure you, I have no complaints.

FIONA. And do you like what you see?

KILLIAN. I believe I've already made that clear.

FIONA. Indeed, you have. So, if you wish to see more – or for that matter, if you wish to see me at all ever again – I suggest you resolve your financial predicament immediately.

KILLIAN. Right. Of course. Well, you'll be pleased to know I'm already ahead of you on that front.

FIONA. I hardly consider calling off the hunt for your crooked accountant a promising start.

KILLIAN. Ah. But that's the brilliant part, my dear. I needed the detective out of the way... so that I could put my real plan into motion.

FIONA. Oh? (She leans in.) And what plan would that be? (Back in the Trap Room, Fergus closes his script and rises from the loveseat.)

BRUTE FARCE

FERGUS. Right then. I've prepared as best one can. The moment has arrived for me to take to the boards. I'll see you out there, Quinn.

QUINN. It's not time yet.

FERGUS. What do you mean it's not time?

QUINN. You're not on for several pages. I haven't even made my entrance yet, and you don't arrive until well after me.

FERGUS. Well, that can't be right. According to the script, Killian enters first, then Fiona, then Vivian... then me... and finally you. Kenneth, Dolores, Priscilla, Hubert... and then the detective.

QUINN. You're the detective.

FERGUS. No, I'm not. I'm Hubert. The accountant.

QUINN. No. I'm Hubert.

FERGUS. So, I'm the detective?

QUINN. Yes.

FERGUS. And that's been changed, then?

QUINN. No. It's always been that way. *(Silence.)*

FERGUS. Good Lord. Well, that would explain rather a lot. Right then. Back to work. *(He returns to the loveseat, sits, and opens his script again. Quinn, looking increasingly unwell, hunches forward.)*

ALISTAIR. Are you alright, Quinn?

QUINN. I need a drink.

ALISTAIR. That's the last thing you need.

QUINN. Perhaps a little hair of the dog will steady me. Otherwise, I don't think I'll be able to go on.

ALISTAIR. Well, I hope you'll forgive me when I say I would wholeheartedly support you missing your entrance. I'm not particularly eager to shuffle off this mortal coil... especially not onstage in a third-rate production written by a third-rate playwright and performed by a pack of third-rate actors... Except for you, of course.

QUINN. *(Resigned.)* No. You're right. This entire production has been a disaster from the start. And it's only been made worse by Killian's relentless determination to snuff you out. But listen, Alistair. It's

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imperative that I go on. I realize now that my entire career has been – well, to put it bluntly – a failure.

ALISTAIR. Quinn...

QUINN. It's true. I've been far too rigid. A perfectionist who never allowed himself to indulge the irrational... the dangerous impulses that make an actor live. I've kept audiences at arm's length. Never daring to reveal the whole truth of who I am. Never truly serving the characters entrusted to me. I've played it safe for far too long. And now – after all these years – and perhaps too late... I'm finally beginning to understand what it means to be an actor. A thespian's greatest triumph is finding the courage to be vulnerable. So, tonight – on that stage up there – I will be vulnerable. But don't misunderstand me, Alistair. I'm fully aware of what's at stake for you. Still, you must trust me. Because I do have a plan.

ALISTAIR. Does your plan involve a petite fatty scavenger fish?

QUINN. I don't think you're in any position to be making jokes, Alistair.

ALISTAIR. Fair enough.

QUINN. No. My plan does not involve a sardine. As it happens, I intend to employ a more sinister plan.

ALISTAIR. Oh? *(He leans in.)* And what plan would that be? *(Back in the Study, Killian and Fiona are on top of the desk, locked in a passionate embrace.)*

DEIRDRE. Stand by sound cue six.

REGGIE. Sound cue six, standing by. *(Vivian appears in the wings wearing an exceedingly modest yet elaborate nightgown and carrying a small decorative throw pillow. She seems distracted as she approaches the Study doors. She enters.)*

DEIRDRE. Sound cue six...

VIVIAN. Kenneth!

DEIRDRE. ...Go. *(Vivian drops the pillow. We hear porcelain shatter. Vivian sneers. Killian and Fiona scramble off the desk.)*

KILLIAN. Priscilla! What have you done? That... small... decorative throw pillow... belonged to my grandmother's priceless Turkish teacup and saucer collection!

BRUTE FARCE

VIVIAN. Yes, and speaking of antiques, it appears you're presently attempting to smother one.

FIONA. How dare you?

VIVIAN. How dare I? How dare you?

FIONA. How dare you?

VIVIAN. How dare you?

KILLIAN. Enough!

VIVIAN. Are you truly that foolish, Kenneth? Are you trying to make this divorce easier for me?

KILLIAN. Rest assured, Priscilla, I have no intention of contesting the divorce. What I will contest, however, is your deceitful attempt to relieve me of my entire fortune.

VIVIAN. I hardly think there's anything you can do about it.

KILLIAN. I disagree. I know what you've been up to. You and Hubert.

VIVIAN. Hubert? I've no idea what you're talking about.

KILLIAN. Is that so? Do you recall I mentioned earlier that I spoke with the detective?

VIVIAN. Yes, I recall.

KILLIAN. And do you remember what he uncovered?

VIVIAN. Yes, I remember.

KILLIAN. Good. What you are not aware of, however, my darling... is that he made a further discovery. It seems Hubert was recently spotted in Biarritz.

VIVIAN. Oh, dear.

KILLIAN. And he was not alone.

VIVIAN. Wasn't he?

KILLIAN. No, Priscilla. As a matter of fact, he had a lady friend with him.

VIVIAN. I see. Well, he is unmarried, you know. I hardly think it inappropriate for him to be courting a young and attractive woman.

KILLIAN. Yes, well this woman was anything but young and attractive.

VIVIAN. How dare you!

FIONA. How dare you!

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VIVIAN. How dare you!

KILLIAN. Aha! So, you admit the affair!

VIVIAN. I admit nothing.

KILLIAN. Drop the pretense, Priscilla. We have... photographs... of you and Hubert together.

FIONA. Do we?

KILLIAN. (Emphatically.) Yes, Dolores. Of course, we do. Taken by the detective himself.

FIONA. Truly?

KILLIAN. Perhaps you should remain silent and allow me to handle the details, hm?

VIVIAN. Photographs, you say. Sounds dubious. And where are these alleged photographs?

KILLIAN. In my solicitor's possession. Sealed in an envelope... locked away in a safe.

VIVIAN. Is that so? I'd like to see them.

KILLIAN. You can't.

VIVIAN. Because they don't exist.

KILLIAN. They most certainly do.

VIVIAN. Prove it.

KILLIAN. Very well. One of them shows you and Hubert enjoying champagne on the terrace of the Imperial Suite at the Hôtel du Palais... as he nibbles your exposed shoulder.

VIVIAN. Blast! We've been found out.

KILLIAN. Indeed, you have.

DEIRDRE. Stand by light cue two and sound cue seven.

REGGIE. Standing by.

KILLIAN. Listen carefully, Priscilla. I will not contest the divorce, and I will ensure you're provided for when it's finalized. Before that happens, however, there is something I require of you.

VIVIAN. I knew there'd be a catch. What exactly am I expected to do, my darling?

BRUTE FARCE

KILLIAN. You will telephone Hubert immediately and insist he return to London. To this house.

VIVIAN. And for what purpose?

KILLIAN. So that I may exact my revenge of course.

VIVIAN. That's absurd. Hubert is expecting me back in Biarritz in three days. What exactly do you propose I tell him to convince him to return?

KILLIAN. You'll think of something.

VIVIAN. And if I refuse?

DEIRDRE. Light cue two, sound cue seven...

KILLIAN. *(Ominously.)* Gregory won't be the only corpse resting beneath the grand portico tonight. *(Killian offers the telephone receiver to Vivian.)*

DEIRDRE. ...Bloody Hell. Go. *(Dramatic music swells as the lights fade on the Study.)* Reggie.

REGGIE. Yes, Deirdre?

DEIRDRE. Fetch Alistair and bring him to the stage.

REGGIE. Right.

DEIRDRE. And before you go, cue Quinn. Best to have him waiting in the wings for scene two.

REGGIE. Got it. *(Reggie manipulates the controls. Suddenly there is a loud pop, followed by a bright flash and a burst of smoke. Back in the Trap Room, the cue-calling apparatus also pops, flashes, and begins to smoke. Everyone – both in the Trap Room and "onstage" – is startled. A chaotic mix of gasps, shouts, and startled reactions erupts from all directions. All action halts abruptly as the lights cut out. Total blackness. The lights begin to flicker weakly back to life. As they do, we see Quinn standing directly behind Deirdre, casually swigging from her newest bottle of Macallan's. Deirdre, completely unaware of him, is frantically working the lightboard.)*

DEIRDRE. *(Into headset.)* Reggie? Reggie, are you there? It seems we're having a bit of trouble with the electrical, love. *(The lights go out again. A moment passes before they begin to flicker back to life. In the Study, Killian, Fiona, and Vivian stand frozen in confusion.)*

BRUTE FARCE

KILLIAN. (*Elevated whisper.*) What the hell is happening now? I mean honestly, are we expected to just—? For fuck’s sake.

VIVIAN. (*Elevated whisper.*) Kenneth, do calm yourself and keep your voice down. They’ll hear us.

KILLIAN. (*Elevated whisper.*) Who will hear us?

VIVIAN. (*Elevated whisper.*) The audience.

KILLIAN. (*Elevated whisper.*) Fuck the audience.

FIONA. (*Elevated whisper.*) I’m sorry, what? (*The lights snap fully on in the Study.*)

KILLIAN. (*Full voice.*) I said, fuck the audience! (*All three slowly turn to face front.*)

ALL THREE. Oh, dear. (*The lights begin flickering again. Fiona creeps toward the closet.*)

FIONA. (*Elevated whisper.*) Vivian. Killian. I believe I’ve found a way out. Follow me. (*She slips into the closet. Immediately we hear a thump.*) Bloody hell. (*A heavy thud follows. Vivian crosses to the closet and peers inside.*)

VIVIAN. (*Elevated whisper.*) She’s out again.

KILLIAN. (*Elevated whisper.*) For fuck’s sake. (*The lights cut out again. Another moment passes. The lights flicker faintly. We now see Quinn quietly lifting the key to Alistair’s restraints from Reggie’s back pocket.*)

REGGIE. (*Into headset.*) Deirdre? Deirdre, are you there? It seems we’re having a problem with the electrical. (*The lights go out again. Silence.*)

SCENE 2

Nearly continuous from Scene 1. Everything appears normal. Fergus, Vivian, and Fiona are in the Trap Room. If time and budget permit, both women should be wearing costumes different from their previous ones. Alistair remains restrained. Killian and Quinn wait in the wings. Reggie and Deirdre are at their stations. The Study is presently empty. A single chair sits center. A sack and length of rope lie nearby, perhaps on the desk.

DEIRDRE. (*On headset.*) Reggie.

BRUTE FARCE

REGGIE. *(On headset.)* I'm here.

DEIRDRE. Is Killian at places?

REGGIE. *(Checking.)* He is.

DEIRDRE. And Quinn?

REGGIE. *(Checking again.)* With him. They're both ready to go on.

DEIRDRE. Astonishing. And Alistair?

REGGIE. Still below. I'll bring him up just before his entrance. No sense taking chances.

DEIRDRE. If you think that's wise, love. Alright then. Looks like we're ready. Stand by light cue three. Light cue three... go. *(Lights fade on the Study. Killian enters and takes his position upstage of the doors.)* Stand by light cue four and sound cue eight.

REGGIE. Standing by.

DEIRDRE. Light cue four and sound cue eight... go. *(Dramatic music plays briefly, then fades as lights rise on the Study.)*

QUINN. *(Calling from "off".)* Priscilla? Priscilla, my love. Are you here? The front door was unlocked. Is everything alright? I came as soon as I could. Priscilla? (He enters the Study.) Are you in here? (Killian quietly locks the Study doors behind him.)

KILLIAN. Hello Hubert.

QUINN. *(Turning.)* Kenneth! I wasn't expecting to see you tonight.

KILLIAN. No. I'm quite certain you weren't.

QUINN. Priscilla told me that you were—

KILLIAN. That I was what, Hubert?

QUINN. I suppose it doesn't matter now, does it?

KILLIAN. No. I suppose not. Have a seat.

QUINN. Where is she?

KILLIAN. Locked away for the moment. Don't worry. She's comfortable. Resting safely in one of my superior guest rooms. Sit down.

QUINN. I refuse.

KILLIAN. You will do as I say. Because if you don't, I may have to move Priscilla from her room... to the courtyard. By way of an open window. Or perhaps a closed one. Who knows?

BRUTE FARCE

QUINN. You wouldn't dare.

KILLIAN. I would dare. Now, sit down. (*Quinn sits. Killian retrieves the horseman's pick.*) Do you know what this is, Hubert?

QUINN. (*Indifferent.*) Enlighten me.

KILLIAN. It's a horseman's pick. A medieval war hammer. Designed to pierce plate armor. The curved tip locks onto the enemy and drags him down with brutal efficiency.

QUINN. (*Indifferent.*) Terrifying.

KILLIAN. Indeed. (*Killian retrieves the rope and begins tying Quinn to the chair. Meanwhile, in the Trap Room below, Alistair quietly reveals the key Quinn slipped him earlier. He frees himself and grabs the spare costume bag. He heads up to the stage unnoticed.*) I underestimated you, Hubert. You weren't merely my accountant. I considered you a friend. Perhaps my closest friend. Part of me even feels I have no right to be angry with you. I should be angry with myself... for being so naïve. And perhaps I should congratulate you as well. A master of deception. Except that you failed miserably, didn't you...? (*Alistair appears backstage, disappearing into the wings with the costume bag.*) ... I remember the day I first interviewed you. You arrived wearing a blue checkered suit. And I thought to myself, well that's a bold choice for an accountant. I invited you to sit. And what's more, in that very same chair... (*Alistair appears, places a sack over Reggie's head, and the two struggle briefly before Alistair successfully maneuvers Reggie into the wings.*) ... Then I offered you tea and biscuits, which Priscilla was keen to deliver herself, and which you devoured in short order. And after a bit of amiable small talk, we got down to business ... (*Reggie, with the sack over his head and his trousers to his ankles, stumbles from the wings, slams into the Study doors or a wall, and falls to the floor. Alistair follows.*)

DEIRDRE. Reggie. Is everything alright, love? (*Killian presses on despite the commotion.*)

KILLIAN. ... Do you recall what I asked you? A very simple question. One that that any middling bookkeeper might take offense at. But not you. I asked, "What does two and two equal?" You paused. Raised an eyebrow. And then you said, "What would you like it to equal?"... (*Alistair has*

BRUTE FARCE

pulled off Reggie's shoes and trousers, tossed them into the wings, and is now dragging him off by his ankles. Killian presses on.) ...And that's when I knew. You were the man for the job... (Reggie – sack-headed and in his underwear – reappears and bolts behind the set, Alistair in pursuit. They spill into the Trap Room below, sparking a frantic chase that sweeps Vivian and Fiona into the action.) ...You don't fit the accountant stereotype, do you, Hubert? Not the dreary sort with the charm of an undertaker. Nor the kind whose personality functions best as a contraceptive. No. You're a man who craves excitement. Adventure. A challenge...

DEIRDRE. Reggie, answer me. What the hell's going on back there?

KILLIAN. *... And therein lies the rub. Because beneath all that charm, you're really nothing more than a swindler. A despicable swindler with a dazzling array of swindler tricks... (Killian retrieves the sack. Reggie, having eluded Alistair in the Trap Room, makes his way up to the backstage area, pursued by Alistair.) ... But never once did I imagine you'd use them against me. You betrayed me, Hubert. And for that reason... you will now pay with your life.*

QUINN. I would like to speak.

KILLIAN. Sorry, what?

QUINN. I said I would like to speak. I have something to say. *(Cornered backstage, Reggie dives through the Study wall into the closet with a thud.)*

DEIRDRE. Bloody hell. That can't be good. *(Reggie – now onstage – bursts from the closet, races past Killian and Quinn to the Study doors, finds them locked, panics, then leaps out the Study window.)* That'll leave a mark. *(Outside the Study window, Alistair meets Reggie. They tussle briefly in view of the audience before disappearing into the wings. A loud crash is heard offstage. Silence.)*

KILLIAN. No. No. No, no, no, Qui... er um... Hubert. There is nothing left to say.

QUINN. You'd deny a dying man his last words?

KILLIAN. That depend on the words.

QUINN. It will work out better for you if I'm allowed to speak now. *(Killian reads this as a threat.)*

BRUTE FARCE

KILLIAN. Fine. But be sensible. And be quick. *(During the following, Alistair enters from the wings and listens at the Study doors.)*

QUINN. You're right, Kenneth. I am a trickster. A fraud. For most of my life I've been able to project excellence. To convince others I'm industrious, brilliant, and destined for greatness. People mistook the mask for the man. But the mask is slipping now. And there's nothing of value beneath it. As for those who refuse to admit that they've been deceived by me, they'll simply contend that I've broken down, that I've somehow transformed overnight into an abject failure. But the truth is... I've been a failure all along. And in the end, the only trick I've played... is on myself.

KILLIAN. Heartbreaking.

QUINN. Do you mean it?

KILLIAN. You'll go to your grave wondering. *(As Killian places the sack over Quinn's head, Reggie appears from the wings wearing a replica of Quinn's costume, a sack still over his own head. Seeing Alistair distracted, Reggie slips another sack over Alistair's head and hustles him into the wings. Killian retrieves the horseman's pick. At that moment Quinn throws himself to the floor, breaking the chair and freeing himself. An extended fight follows as described in Act One. During the struggle the horseman's pick is cast aside, and the two crash through the Study doors. Quinn escapes into the wings. Killian returns to the Study, retrieves the pick, and turns toward the doors. Quinn, Alistair, and Reggie – each in the same costume and each with a sack over his head – come blundering into the Study together, jostling to overtake one another. They separate. All action stops. Killian now faces three identical, sack-headed figures)* For fuck's sake. *(All four men pant heavily.)* Alright. Listen carefully. This can go one of two ways. Either I kill one of you – and I think we all know which one that should be – or I kill all three of you. Because frankly, at this point, I don't give a good goddamn who dies. So, who's it going to be then? Hm? Do I have a volunteer? *(Each of the three slowly raises a hand. The moment their hands are fully extended, the trap door opens beneath one of them, sending him tumbling into the Trap Room below. Startled, Killian drops the pick. Lights to black.)*

BRUTE FARCE

SCENE 3

Back in the Trap Room, a man – presumably Alistair – lies on the floor. Vivian and Fiona stand over him. Above, the trap door remains open, and the pick hangs precariously at its edge, teetering as if it could slip through at any moment.

VIVIAN. Has he expired?

FIONA. I don't think so. *(She leans in.)* Alistair? Alistair, are you alright? *(The man moans.)* Oh, thank God. He's breathing, at least. *(Killian and Reggie rush in.)*

REGGIE. Is he dead?

VIVIAN. Sadly, no. It appears he survived the fall.

KILLIAN. Damn it. *(He moves toward the man, but Fiona blocks him.)*

FIONA. Don't you think he's suffered enough, Killian?

KILLIAN. Yes, Fiona. As a matter of fact, I do. Which is precisely why I'm going to finish him off. *(Fiona punches Killian between the eyes. Killian yelps and stumbles back.)*

FIONA. *(To Reggie.)* Come on then. Let's get him upright. *(She fetches a chair. Reggie lifts the man and seats him. Killian pinches his nose with a handkerchief. Deirdre enters.)*

DEIRDRE. The paramedics are on their way.

ALL. Thank you paramedics!

DEIRDRE. And the audience has been sent packing.

FIONA. They must have been terribly confused.

DEIRDRE. Actually no. Most of them loved it. A few said it reminded them of the works of the late Sarah Kane. Several left in tears, though it's hard to say why. Oh, and the actor scheduled to replace Quinn next week happened to be in the audience tonight.

FIONA. Oh lovely. Did he have any thoughts on the performance?

DEIRDRE. Yes. He thought he should set fire to his contract and then toss it into one of the foyer bins.

FIONA. Oh, dear.

DEIRDRE. Exactly. So, we're stuck with Quinn for the time being. *(The man in the chair removes his sack.)*

BRUTE FARCE

QUINN. No, you're not. I quit.

ALL. Quinn?!

QUINN. That's right. Quinn Ponsonby. Maestro of mediocrity. Human punching bag. A man who has failed at nearly everything in life, except, just moments ago, surviving a one-story drop onto a concrete floor. Though who knows. I may still be concussed. Internal bleeding is always a possibility. One can only hope.

FIONA. Wait.

REGGIE. Yes, Miss Bainbridge?

FIONA. Aren't we forgetting someone?

QUINN. You mean Alistair?

VIVIAN. Yes, of course she means Alistair, darling. What's become of him?

QUINN. He's escaped, you imbeciles. Honestly. Did you imagine he'd stay for the after-party?

FIONA. Oh! Have we got one planned?

DEIRDRE. No, Fiona. There is no after-party, love.

FIONA. Right. Well, that's sensible, given what's happened here.

KILLIAN. (*Distraught.*) Oh, my God. What have I done? I've made an absolute mess of everything.

VIVIAN. Indeed, you have, Killian. This entire disaster is your doing.

QUINN. (*Sardonically.*) Do you truly think so, Vivian?

VIVIAN. Of course. And if anyone is to take responsibility, it should be Killian.

QUINN. (*Sardonically.*) Really?

VIVIAN. Well, naturally, darling. (*To Killian.*) So, I suggest you get your affairs in order and confess your crimes. Alistair has surely gone straight to the authorities. (*Alistair enters.*)

ALISTAIR. As it happens, I have not.

ALL EXCEPT ALISTAIR & FERGUS. Alistair?!

FERGUS. Alistair! What an unexpected delight. I see you've been granted rather generous access to the backstage area. Splendid. I must say I admire a critic who takes such interest in the mechanics of theatre. And since we

BRUTE FARCE

have a moment together, I should like to thank you. Truly. Your reviews over the years have been memorable. Devastating, some might say, but always honest. Bracingly honest. Like plunging into ice-cold water. The shock is unpleasant at first, but it does get the blood circulating. And if I'm being candid, my career might look rather different without you. Not necessarily better. Just... different. So, in a way, I really do believe I owe you a bit of thanks. Well... aside from this production, of course. I prefer to think of this as a minor blemish in an otherwise fruitful career. Good Lord, I'm getting emotional. That simply won't do. One must save such feelings for the stage. And speaking of which, it appears the time has come for my entrance. Which means I must now make my exit. But afterwards – if you're still about – we might slip out for a drink and a proper chat. Provided, of course, the evening goes as planned. Though in the theatre... it rarely does. (*Fergus exits with a flourish.*)

ALISTAIR. Anyway... about the authorities. I haven't spoken to them yet. Though I am keeping the option open, my dear Killian.

VIVIAN. Oh! Who doesn't love a bit of blackmail?

ALISTAIR. Don't imagine I won't point the finger at you as well, Vivian. Or any of you for that matter. There's plenty of blame to go around.

VIVIAN. Carry on, darling.

ALISTAIR. (*To everyone.*) So, do we have an understanding? (*Confused murmurs.*)

KILLIAN. What exactly are you suggesting, Alistair?

ALISTAIR. You don't seem particularly grateful.

KILLIAN. I'm not sure I have it in me to be grateful.

ALISTAIR. I see. Well, looks like I have an unexpected consultation to attend. (*He starts off.*)

KILLIAN. Wait!

ALISTAIR. Yes, Killian? (*Killian hesitates.*) Is there something you'd like to say?

KILLIAN. Yes. I suppose there is. You win.

ALISTAIR. So, all of this was merely a game to you? And I've won? Curious. I don't feel like a winner. Not yet.

BRUTE FARCE

KILLIAN. Fine. I'll be blunt. Whatever it is you want, I'll do it. Nothing is off limits.

ALISTAIR. Truly?

KILLIAN. Yes. Whatever it takes to erase this entire evening, to expunge it from our collective memories.

ALISTAIR. And I have your word? *(He offers his hand.)*

VIVIAN. Not that it's worth anything.

KILLIAN. Shut up, Vivian. *(To Alistair.)* You have my word. *(They shake on it.)*

ALISTAIR. Excellent. Well then... there is one thing you could do.

KILLIAN. Name it.

ALISTAIR. Wonderful. *(With great pride and gusto.)* I'm delighted to announce that I've just completed my first full-length, five-act historical drama based on the life and tragic death of Button Gwinnett.

FIONA. What an unusual name.

ALISTAIR. Isn't it? Button was largely unknown until he signed the American Declaration of Independence in 1776. His signature is extremely valuable today; there are only fifty-one known examples to exist. And why so few, you ask?

VIVIAN. Nobody asked, darling.

KILLIAN. Shut up, Vivian.

ALISTAIR. Shortly after signing the Declaration, Gwinnett was shot and killed in a duel by his political rival Lachlan McIntosh, who blamed Button for his failed invasion of British-controlled East Florida. *(Silence.)*

KILLIAN. *(Insincere.)* Riveting.

ALISTAIR. I've spent nearly a decade writing it.

KILLIAN. And what exactly do you need from me? Feedback?

ALISTAIR. Dear God, no. What a dreadful thought. Allowing an actor input on a playscript? Have you gone mad?

KILLIAN. Then what?

ALISTAIR. Well – and I know this may sound a bit self-serving – I've cast myself as Lachlan McIntosh.

VIVIAN. Critics are not actors, darling.

BRUTE FARCE

ALL EXCEPT ALISTAIR. Shut up, Vivian!

ALISTAIR. And I would be honored to have you play the title role opposite me. *(Silence.)*

KILLIAN. Button Gwinnett. The man who gets shot and killed in a duel.

ALISTAIR. The very one.

KILLIAN. In a five-act play.

ALISTAIR. That's right. *(Silence.)*

KILLIAN. You... pompous little wanker.

ALISTAIR. And yet here I stand. Unperforated. Which, if I recall correctly, was not your plan for the evening. *(During the previous, Fergus has entered the study above but is astounded by the absence of both actors and audience. He moves about cautiously, searching for any sign of life. In his distraction, he bumps the horseman's pick. It slips through the open trap door, and plunges below, striking Alistair and killing him instantly.)*

ALL EXCEPT KILLIAN. Oh, dear.

KILLIAN. For fuck's sake. *(Lights to black. End of play.)*