

# Brute Farce

by Craig Houk

# BRUTE FARCE

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BRUTE FARCE

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

# BRUTE FARCE

## **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

## BRUTE FARCE

**BRUTE FARCE** received public staged readings on October 27<sup>th</sup>, October 28<sup>th</sup>, and October 29<sup>th</sup>, 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 2<sup>nd</sup>, 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 4<sup>th</sup>, 2023, and closing on Sat, Aug 19<sup>th</sup>, 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

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# 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, slaving 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?

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**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.

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**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.

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**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.

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**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.

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**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?

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**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.

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**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.

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**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

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