

**Gamine**

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# Gamine

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**Chapter 1 - Skotos**

*Click.*

Romilly was not happy. This, however, was nothing new. Pola sighed inwardly, and considered her next move. Her sister was nothing if not competitive, and sat cross-legged (with the emphasis on ‘cross’) on her side of the board with a sour disposition spreading from her face to the rest of her body like a drop of oil in water. Connect 4 should not be this stressful, thought Pola. Especially when neither of them had even taken a turn yet.

“We can flip the coin again. Or you can go first.”

Romilly glowered. “No. Make your play.”

“I don’t care who goes first.”

“No. It’s fine.”

“This always happens! If you think going first is better for strategy, then go first.”

“Make your play.”

“You’ll drag this out all day! I’ll not hear the end of it!”

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“Make. Your. Play.” Although Romilly was speaking softly, her words rang out like a threat.

Pola hated this, these unnecessary stand-offs. There was no reasoning with Romilly. She would simply pick a stance, and become concrete-inflexible until you either gave up, or passed out from frustration. Maybe there was a way to win these arguments, but Pola couldn't see one. Today was not the day. She pondered the yellow coin in her hand, and then the flimsy blue plastic grid in front of her. Did it make a difference, the first move? She snuck a look at her implacable opponent. Romilly was tracing the raised circumference of the red plastic coin with her thumb, steadily and continuously, clearly simmering under in anticipation of her turn.

Pola took a short breath, and leaned forward. Central column, straight down the line. The coin clacked and bounced its way to a standstill. Romilly's eyebrow arch was so minor, it barely registered. A moment's stillness became a few seconds, which in turn became a full half-minute. Finally, she raised her hand slowly, but instead of playing, she extended a finger and reflexively tapped the bottom of her lip, as if in thought. Pola wasn't fooled. Romilly knew exactly what move she was going to make the moment the yellow coin began its tumble down the central column. All the waiting was for show, a theatrical affectation to taunt her opponent. At long last, Romilly leaned forward in the manner of a mantis painstakingly sneaking up on its latest snack, and dangled the red coin over the central column.

Then, with a minor flourish, she betrayed the faintest hint of a smirk, and flung the piece to one side. “Let's do something else”, she said flatly.

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Pola was inwardly relieved. She'd not wanted to see this game through. She'd not wanted to drag the box out from under the bed in the first place. Some childhood pastimes weren't really worth wheeling back out. She glanced around Romilly's flat. Connect 4 appeared to be the one trace of sentimentality Romilly allowed herself. Everything else was sparse, functional, and meticulously arranged like an interlocking puzzle. Stark blacks and whites tramlined alongside the only colour pulling it out of desaturated classicism - deep violets that flooded carefully etched out areas with a luxuriant air. There was still something restrained and calculated about that luxuriance, as if it was intended to indulge the visitor, not the owner. Intimidate, even.

Where was Luana? Perhaps a third sibling would relieve the tension somehow. Romilly's alabaster-skinned, almond-shaped visage loomed into view. "Pola!", she barked, startling her sister back to attention. "*Tea?*". "Yes", Pola blinked. "Yes, please". Romilly stalked out of the room. Luana wasn't always late, but she was when it suited her. If she would only bloody well turn up, they could get to talking about...everything. One thing was certain - the worst thing to happen with Romilly in the room today was not going to be an abortive attempt to play a board game from their childhood. Shrugging off a shudder, she got out her phone.

"Yeah?"

"Luana! Where are you?"

"Uh...think I'm in the right street now, so - shit! Look where you're going, mate! Yeah, you

too! Cretin. What number was it again?"

"11B. Push the buzzer hard, as it's a bit wobbly".

"Gotcha. Is ma'am behaving?"

"It's like a nuclear winter here, Lu. For goodness sake, save me!"

"Haha. I'll do what I can, sis. I'll do what I can..."

-

Out in the ice-white kitchenette, Romilly delicately lifted the fine-engraved silver tea-strainer out of the steaming depths of the De Vos. Pola didn't like black tea, but it barely mattered. She wouldn't object, as keeping the situation on edge meant she simply wanted to prevent the atmosphere in the room from catching fire. Romilly's sense of unease had been piqued by Pola arranging the sisterly meeting whilst carefully skirting round the reasons for it. Romilly could sense this wouldn't amuse her, and she resented being shut out of need-to-know situations. As such, she had playfully tortured Pola as recompense to herself.

The birch-like, volatile scent of the cinnamon in the tea reached her, and she almost felt the rolling burn of it on her tongue. Unlocking tiny doors in her subconscious, she couldn't conceive of anything more evocative. Pure experience without the hell of ingrained, learned perception, she preferred her senses to be caressed by abstraction such as scent, texture,

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colour, and noise to that of people, with their endless surfeit of crooked drives, superfluous expulsions of conversational slop, and poorly-considered rhetoric.

Logic and order made sense to help wend one's way through life, but tiny, discreet pinpricks of stimulation were what made it tick. The engine under the hood, the motivation, the journey, the landmarks, the destination. An empty car on its way to nothing.

Still, she'd squeeze it out of the both of them once Luana was here. She never knowingly let them keep anything from her. It wasn't worth their while.

-

Luana tottered up the street, feeling rather the worse for wear, though it didn't take a niggling hangover to explain the undercurrent of dread as she approached Romilly's apartment. Fiddling with a tube of Imperial mints, she blearily considered the possibility that today might not be a disaster, only to upbraid herself with the fact it was before noon on a Sunday, and nothing good ever happened before noon on a Sunday.

In order to keep herself awake on the bus, she'd read an article in a discarded magazine about how wearing high heels increases your risk of cancer. It was less the standard of journalism that kept her attention as the barefaced attempt to scare the reader. To sneak a little drop of poison into the midst of day-to-day mundanity. Is this really what people had to cope with on the morning commute? Pages of this? She'd clomped her Dr Martens on the bus floor in protest, earning a bemused look from a jowled lady with the face of a bloodhound

trying and failing to swallow a beach ball.

She could feel prickles running under her lower eyelids, and the mop of hair that was supposedly a Klute shag was getting in her eyes. She fumbled for a cigarette, only to remember that cigarettes should come *before* the mint. Skip, or spit? Skip the cigarette. She could barely be bothered. She needed to get hold of herself before Romilly clapped eyes on her, and began radiating calculated waves of disapproval with her every gesture. She set her phone to silent, so that the latest fawning texter wouldn't disrupt the getting-through of this lunch, and with what she imagined must be a rather melodramatic last look at the outside world, pushed the buzzer.

-

Pola started slightly at the buzzer. Thank god! She hurried over to the intercom to let Luana in. Luana's crooked smile hove into view from behind the door: "hi sis!". Some minor flailing saw her fake fur coat sprawled over the patent leather charcoal sofa, and with legs and arms held at playfully splayed angles, she leaned forward conspiratorially and whispered.

"So, how's Miss Havisham-on-ice, then?"

"Dreadfully suspicious, of course."

"Mmmhmm. She's not asked?"



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“No. She knows she’ll be told eventually. She’s just been enjoying - well, whatever that means with her - poking at me.”

Luana knew that putting someone like Pola in the same room as Romilly for too long probably contravened parts of the Geneva Convention.

“Well, let’s not dance around the point, otherwise she’ll gladly stretch it out to watch us stumbling about like two drunks juggling fire trying to avoid setting themselves alight.”

“Yes...quite.”

“There’s a lot to...blah about.”

“Blah...?”

“Discuss, Pola. Discuss.”

“I think I hear her coming through.”

“Here we go...”

Carrying the exquisite Whittard bone china tea set on a carved oak tray, Romilly took in the sight of one sister perched on the edge of her seat like she was going to bolt for the front door at any moment, and the other a smirking tangle of limbs splayed out on the sofa.

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To Romilly, Pola was a sigh in human form, a diluted juice drink of a person who would never pull her slack-shouldered composure up to a height taller than herself to face down the challenges of life. Pola the Pinwheel, blown this way and that by other people's concerns. As a sister, she could be mewlingly obsequious, but she also had other habits Romilly could not bear. Pola never stopped fiddling with whatever was to hand - the buttons on her cardigan, the clasp on her purse, the frayed edge of a hem. Romilly often saw the detail before she saw the person it was the detail *of*. She simply could not look away. So, the tension built.

Luana, on the other hand, was a firecracker given to swanning off on a whim to pretty much anywhere she chose, into any situation she chose and connecting the dots of a plan as she went - in any way she chose. 'Kicking against the pricks' like it was a noble calling, her targets were as random and scattershot as they came. Luana didn't know what to believe unless it had a counterculture seal of approval on it, and always expressed surprise when the tenets of the cultural barometers she clung to turned out to be as changeable and directionless as her own beliefs were. So, the domino effect continued on down the line - youthful, doomed romantics, always headed for the gutter, only realising at the last minute that everything fades, and that they are just ballast for the next generation to cling to, as the chimera of cultural progression headbutts itself into unconsciousness at the entrance to the womb.

"So. Here we all are...again."

"Want a game of Connect 4, Rom? I see you have it out."

“Luana!”

Pola tried to divert attention from the inert game in progress by getting up to take the tray from Romilly. Her sister simply regarded her quizzically with a slight tip of the head, and Pola thought better of it, sinking back into her seat.

“Can we get on with this?”, Luana sighed.

Romilly wordlessly set the tray down, unfurled her thin frame into the largest of the seats, the back arching up like a cropped throne, and fixed her gaze on Luana.

“And...?”

“We thought about how to break this news, and decided we really should all be in the same room”, rushed Pola. “We thought you’d resent simply hearing about it second-hand, or by email.”

Romilly wouldn’t have. She was mystified on an emotional level by all the softly-softly treatment. Pola was so concerned to be seen as a force for good - whatever that meant - she wouldn’t release the single piece of information she came to impart, and it struck Romilly as ludicrous. She was forced to be patient about it, though - this is just how people worked. The harder you squeeze some of them, the less you get. One day, there would be a way to bypass this silly dance entirely.

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Even so, the revelation knocked her off-balance with a grinding lurch.

“Father’s coming back.”

**Chapter 2 - Terrans**

It always began with the small detail. A barely perceptible winking-out of a letter on a page, or a sharp, straight edge to be momentarily chipped away at by nothingness. Flickering in and out of perception, a destructive droplet would slowly become apparent, distorting the world beyond it like frosted glass. Shifting constantly as oil in water, new glutinous segments would creep into existence, until a shimmering crescent shape had consumed the entire right side of her vision.

Scintillating Scotoma, it was called. Then, once the scotoma had reached its sharpest form, the seed of the main event would take root. The scotoma would slowly dissipate, a vaseline smear across a camera lens, and the wave of pain would sweep in like a roaring tide. Sometimes, the migraines were bad enough to wipe out days. They didn't happen often, but when they did, the same excuses had to be wheeled out, in the hope they'd not quite been bled dry. The powers-that-be would not promote a chronic case. Working remotely, so that fallow periods when the painkillers worked could be taken advantage of, was the only option.

It began with small detail, and that focus had stayed with Romilly. Pay attention to detail, always. She looked back up from the flickering stitching on her skirt, and stared at her sisters. "You need to leave", she said in a low voice.

Pola blinked. "What?" Luana shot her a warning glance.

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“Please.” She began to raise her hands off her lap, but stopped. “Just...go.”

“But...but we need to talk ab-” Luana grabbed Pola by the arm with a stern look.

“We’ll go, Rom.”

Silence. Romilly was staring into her lap.

“Come *on*”, hissed Luana, dragging Pola to her feet, and towards the door. Flipping it open, she stuffed Pola through the gap, before she had a chance to open her mouth again. Carefully shutting the door behind her, she heard Pola begin to protest.

“Why did we leave? She seemed quite calm to me, Luana. We have a lot of things to arrange still!”

“This is the start of a fucking meltdown”, hissed Luana, her eyebrows arched. “How is that not obvious?”

Pola stopped. “I don’t understand...”

“There’s only one other time I’ve seen her like that. Not even looking us in the eye. She’s usually weirdly calm, yes, but this isn’t her usual reaction, not at all. ”

“Yes, but it’s not as if we expected Father coming back to be something she’d shrug off!”

“But no snide remarks? No disaffected air? None of that patented casual Romilly sadism?”

No, we need to make ourselves scarce. At least until she’s got a handle on it.”

“Shouldn’t we jus - “

“We can’t help, Pola. Not right now.”

Pola was defeated. She seemed to deflate a little. Luana hooked her arm under hers.

“Come on. I need a drink.”

-

It was frightening the first time it happened. The nine-year old Romilly had been petrified as the scotoma slithered out from some unseen hole in her field of vision. She wondered whether she was going blind, whether she had a tumour, whether something indefinably awful was after her. Dropping the book she’d been reading by torch under the duvet, she sat in the twilight glow that was tracing the sharp angles of her bedroom, knees clasped to her chest, frightened and alone.

She had to pull herself together. Deal with what it all meant. Deal with the cursed migraine that was most definitely on the way.

-

Luana gazed out the window of the greasy cafe. Brighton had the best chip shops in the country. Perhaps it was just a perk of being on the coast, though how that equated to the expert frying of King Edwards, she couldn't say. Grease and the salty air just seemed to go hand-in-hand. She might not have gotten her drink due to Pola's insistence, and the cafe had been an uneasy compromise, but at least they were out of range of Romilly's no doubt rapidly expanding mushroom-cloud of gloom and fury.

Her artfully torn tights had begun to attract furtive glances from a man the wrong side of forty with a face like a bloodhound, and a faded King Crimson t-shirt bearing a large hole spreading out from under one of the armpits. At least he had the decency to be relatively discreet about it, she thought, even if it was artlessly done.

She wondered if Benjamin was missing her back in London. She also wondered whether it would even matter if he did. If being a rolling stone meant being someone who couldn't and wouldn't sit still, then Benjamin was certainly that. Shame that didn't mean he had a ton of money too. She smirked to herself, slightly sourly.

Pola poked at a chip with a plastic spork. She couldn't bear to leave people when they were in pain, even if she knew Romilly was usually beyond help. Just like Mother, really. She stared at the fried hunk of potato, a discoloured black spot just under the surface, like a submerged bruise.



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She struggled not to be disappointed. When she'd gotten the call from Father, her heart had skipped a beat. For all the reasons the sisters had to be angry with him, she missed having a parent - any parent - around. It had galvanized her out of her current malaise, and she desperately wanted the other two to feel the same way, yet even Luana had simply looked painfully nonplussed by the news.

She gave up on the chip. It wasn't going to magically transform into anything more appetising. She sighed. She had less than a week to sort this all out, as Father was coming regardless. Back from Milan, maybe for good. Luana would be cautiously on the defensive, certainly, but there's no telling how Romilly would react to coming face-to-face with him.

"Luana...?"

"Mmm?"

"What do we do now?"

"Fuck knows. Wait, I suppose."

"Until when?"

"Fuck knows. At least until I've finished this cod."

"Perhaps she'll ring us. Do you think she might ring us?"

“Fuck knows.”

Pola sighed. She had the sense she'd been sighing rather too much lately. Out of the corner of her eye, she could see that the King Crimson fan was snatching glimpses of her now.

-

Romilly stumbled into the kitchen. Slapping her hands against the drawers, trying to find a handle, she put one out to steady herself using the worktop. It struck something cold and smooth, which span towards the floor and smashed with a sharp, ringing crack. Whittard china. Another cup gone. Still, that was the least of her problems right now. The scotoma had almost entirely claimed the sight in her right eye, and she was running out of time to find painkillers. If she took them early enough, she could get a little relief time to sort her cover story out before the wave took her.

But where were they? She never ran out. She couldn't afford to. Sumatriptans were available over the counter, but Rizatriptan worked much better, and she badly needed to head this off at the pass. She should have plenty of both, but every drawer she checked bore no trace of it. Romilly's palms started to prickle with sweat. She felt a tide of panic rising in her, and for the second time in her life, did not know what to do.

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“What...the *fuck*...have you done...?”

“I was worried about her! Why does she have these? Why *this* many?”

The contents of Pola’s bag had been turned out on the cafe table. In amongst the usual paraphernalia were three unassuming cardboard boxes containing rows of vacuum-packed pills. Luana looked weakly at her. She remembered vividly what happened if Romilly got angry, and Romilly noticed everything. She would not react kindly to having her property taken without permission.

“Well...well, let’s take them back! But she could’ve been saving them up to do something...stupid! You know what she’s like...”

“No! No, I don’t. And neither do you. Since when has she shown any interest in suicide? Our dear Romilly might be a simmering cauldron of fuck-you in a pencil skirt, but I’ve never gotten close to working out why she does what she does.”

Pola paused, mouth hanging open, as if on the verge of saying something. Then, she rose up quickly, scooped the contents of her bag up, and turned to Luana.

“I’m going to take them back.”

Luana held up her hands. “Better you than me”.

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Pola looked at her imploringly. Luana held her gaze for a moment, and then deflated a little.

“Oh fuck, *alright*. But if she tries to curse me or something, I am *gone*.”

-

As the first dull stabs of pain began to emerge, Romilly felt a rush of recall. Her eyes winced closed. As a nine year-old, she had lain in the fetal position, alternately gasping and gritting her teeth as the migraine squeezed like a vice at her temples, sending shooting pains the length of her body, and causing her to screw her eyelid tightly shut whenever even the baleful, milky glow of the moon met her gaze. Heightened sensitivity was the real insult of a migraine. Aside from the crushing, white-hot supernova in the centre of your consciousness, every texture chafes, every sound is channelled through a bullhorn, and every interaction is enveloped by a jittery nausea.

Another sickening pulse jerked her out of her reminiscence. Romilly’s mouth was dry, but her palms were slick with sweat, as if all the moisture in her body was being drained out. Being dehydrated made her feel worse, so she pulled herself up from her prone position on the floor, and fumbled her way to the fridge to locate a bottle of water. It had barely started yet.

The doorbell suddenly rang out, sending a piercing blast through her head. Romilly reflexively clapped her hands over her ears, falling against the cold stainless-steel refrigerator door. She froze, wide-eyed. Who...? Luana and Pola simply couldn’t be back this soon. Or be

*this* stupid. Romilly had no intention of answering the door. Whoever was out there could go to hell. The chimes of Westminster again pounded out a rhythm on Romilly's nerves. Even with her hands over her ears, the sound was moving her to slight sickness. God, why was this one coming on so quickly? She considered bolting from the kitchen, across the lounge, and into the bedroom to hide away from it all, but she didn't want to move. She'd gotten used to the position she was frozen in, and motion would likely make the symptoms worse. Her calves were tightening up with the strain of holding still. The back of her neck twinged something awful, as her chin tipped further towards her chest. A third time the doorbell spat out its song, the notes warped and dissonant to her ears, a sonic smear.

She was going to have to do it. She would have to brave the nausea and suffocating tightness in her skull in order to deliver a terse message to this person - *leave me alone*. She took a deep breath, which stuttered as the migraine growled its protestations. Making it to the kitchen door frame, she could smell the drifting cinnamon scent of the abandoned De Vos, it wound its way into her nostrils and made her sense prickle right to the tips with a lurching queasiness. Her heels conspired to splay at odd angles as she intuited her way towards the front door. At the last moment, she stumbled forward, only steadying herself by slamming her palms against the burnished wood. Damn it! Whoever was out there would know she was on the other side of the door. She put her less occluded eye to the peephole, expecting to see Pola pulling her startled, slightly gormless expression, much like a particularly dim kitten confused by its reflection in the side of a kettle.

Instead, she saw a short, rather squat and heavy-set woman in her thirties, clad in a faded maroon nylon polo shirt. It was embroidered with a cotton emblem of a delivery van, and

had a grease stain on the shoulder. Her chin-length brunette bob framed a beady-eyed, austere expression, like a badly-hung pair of curtains. She cradled a small parcel bound in packing tape.

Why was this person here? Romilly wasn't expecting anything to be delivered (least of all on Sunday, postal charges relating to which were idiotically expensive). The woman's eyes kept darting towards the peephole, and Romilly could sense she wasn't to give up easily. Her head throbbed from the effort of processing the visual distortion that the fisheye glass threw up into her retina. The woman was clearly considering the doorbell again, or perhaps worse than that - knocking. Something like that at close range would not be pleasant. Romilly steeled herself. Be concise, be firm, be quick. She slipped the jangling chain off the lock, and opened the door with wincing caution.

"He-". The sound of her own voice reverberated through her skull, a low-frequency boom sending a throb of pressure to her temples. "Hello...?"

The woman looked her up and down. "Hiding, were we, madam?", she said in a manner she perhaps thought jovial, but Romilly knew it thinly disguised a sudden and defensive disdain.

"I'm not expecting any sort of delivery. I think you have the wrong address". Romilly felt a trickle of sweat begin to work its way down from the nape of her neck.

The woman glanced down at the parcel labelling. "Romilly...Habert? I can't quite read the

writing.”

“...yes...” Who would be sending her anything? She didn't really have 'friends'. An unpleasant sense of bewilderment was building in her, and she had to get it under control.

“but I don't...who?”

“*Miss*, it's very simple”, the woman said slowly, as if addressing a confused child. “The address is yours. The name is yours. It's yours.”

Romilly did not like her tone, and glared at her the best she could. The debilitating thud of the headache was not helping matters either. Nonetheless, she sought to keep the exchange civil, and more importantly, quick. She gingerly took the parcel in hand.

“I need you to sign for it as well, *Miss*.”

The woman waved the clipboard and attached pen at her, which Romilly snatched from her in a jerk of irritation she immediately regretted, as the sudden movement made her stomach lurch. Through the stippled haze of the now-retreating scotoma, she saw a familiar, looped scrawl on the clipboard. Her father's signature.

Shock reverberated through Romilly, and her shaking fingers fumbled the clipboard, sending it tumbling to the floor with a dull thump, the attached string pulling the pen from her grasp too. From the corner of her good eye, she saw the woman roll her eyes skyward. The dust settled for a moment. Neither party was making a move to pick up the prone clipboard

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and pen. Wishing the scenario to be over, Romilly steadied herself against the door frame, and attempted to crouch down as slowly and - most importantly - as gently as she could. The woman regarded her with a growing smirk, as this outwardly immaculate young woman grimaced and shook like a frail old lady.

A tremor shot through Romilly's left knee, and with that, her vertiginously-heeled shoe tipped over suddenly, sending her slumping against the door, simultaneously smacking her head sharply against the outside edge. A throaty cackle burst from the delivery woman's thin lips. "Ouch! You need to ditch those shoes, sweetheart! Hurgh hurgh!"

Between throbbing eyelids, Romilly blearily observed the clipboard propped up on one ragged corner against the door frame, where it had been unceremoniously dropped. At the bottom left of the delivery form, 'Employee-ID: 00426 - Carnall, Karen' was printed in smudged text. Karen the unhelpful, Romilly thought. Karen the stout. Karen the cretin. Another surge of anger curdled with regret and nausea rose up in her, and as she panted shallowly with the effort of keeping her balance, it rose up a second, more intense time. Her eyes screwed shut involuntarily. The roar in her head became a shriek, then - grindingly slowly it seemed - narrowed into a piercing whine, focussing all the pain into one white-hot pinprick of anguish. Then, in a flash, it was gone.

This was new. Her head felt as if tiny fissures were slicing themselves open all over her scalp. Wisps of tension were belching out in hot, frequent gasps, and she could feel every expellation. It was exquisitely painful, but it filled her with a harsh ecstasy. Blades and pinpricks, thrusts and carvings. Her flesh billowed to the touch, and deformed smoothly into



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unnatural shapes as the bones shifted under her skin. Her imperfections rose to the surface, and detached in waxy, translucent globules. Karen the deserving. Romilly pushed.

Karen Carnall's smile vanished.

-

Pola was speed-walking ahead, and Luana had to break into a periodic jog merely to keep pace. Why hurry to the inevitable mauling they would receive at the hands of Romilly? Perhaps Pola wanted to get it over with. Perhaps she even felt she deserved it. Though Luana could see the point of taking your punishment, she was only guilty by association. Part of her simply wanted to bolt for a train back to London, back to her messy bed, assorted scattered books, scrunched-up Rizlas, busted earphones, and other random paraphernalia. She felt surrounded by everything she had come to rely on, in the absence of trustworthy influences in her life. She didn't want to be in windy Brighton. She didn't want to have to deal with this situation, full-stop.

As they rounded the corner, a stocky woman in a cheap-looking dark red polo shirt, slumped, but still-standing against the new-brick pillar adjacent to Romilly's apartment block entrance, a clipboard hanging limply from grubby fingers at her side. She was turned slightly towards the pillar, staring down at the pavement. Another victim of Romilly's evil aura, Luana smirked to herself, as Pola clattered past the woman and into the block. She stole a look at the woman's expression as she attempted again to keep pace with Pola. What she saw unsettled her in a way she couldn't quite put a finger on.

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The woman's face hung slack and glazed, attention clearly turned inwards, a small bubble of spit escaping from the corner of her mouth. In that moment, Luana thought she saw the wide, flattened bridge of the woman's nose wink out of existence for a fraction of a second. Luana's momentum carried the woman's ghostly expression out of view the very next instant, and she couldn't be sure if she'd even seen what she thought she did. Even if she had, it was nothing incredibly bizarre, just not exactly...right. Cities had plenty of people with problems, but this person was clearly in the middle of some sort of job.

She didn't have time to mull it over any further, as Pola was pulling insistently at her sleeve. "We're here. You knock. No, wait! I should knock - it is my fault. But..." She hesitated, caught in a storm of anxiously competing thoughts. Luana waited for Pola's internal struggle to play out.

Pola was a bundle of nerves. More than that, she was tired. All this fretting had worn her down, and while her nerves had been fluttering like the gossamer-thin threads of a broken spider's web in a stiff breeze, her usual ability to doggedly do the right thing on instinct had been stymied. Romilly scared her. This was nothing new, but the idea of being the target of Romilly's withering ire was giving her the cold sweats. It made her want to run in the opposite direction.

Without warning, the door opened. Pola and Luana both suppressed an urge to take a step back. The bittersweet scent of cinnamon wafted out, and Romilly slid into view with a serene expression on her face. She regarded both of them for a moment, smiled broadly, and then

spoke in a measured voice.

“Shall we talk?”

**Chapter 3 Part 1 - Weather Vane**

Karen Carnall was adrift. She was dimly aware of her feet dragging, as an insular haze enveloped her on the way back to the van. She'd lost time, she knew that, but she couldn't marshal any practically-minded thoughts whatsoever. Assaulted by waves of regret, anger and anxiety, the likes of which she'd never known, she felt borderline-lobotomised.

As a teenager, a careless cartwheel by a classmate had resulted in a stinging smack to the bridge of her nose from the girl's heel. She had felt cartilage crunch, and bone splinter, as she reeled from the blow. Her classmates had gasped, giggled, and then when they saw she wasn't actually unconscious (and therefore possibly dead), fell about laughing. But then, that crowd had never been keen on her. Susie and Paula came running past the cackling bunch to take her off to the nurse, and away from the sniggers. Her nose had certainly been a mess. It had needed whatever passed for corrective surgery in the early 90s, which her dad had been very loathe to pay for, but she had begged for it. A portly, unremarkable teenager she may have been, but she had pride all the same. At the time, she really didn't want to look any less 'ideal' than she already was.

The corrective surgery had been decent. It was barely noticeable that Karen had broken her nose at all. However, there was a slight widening to the nasal bridge, which classmates at school had immediately noticed, or at least pretended they had and somehow guessed right. Certainly, everyone knew she'd had to go under the knife, so this had been the comedic cause célèbre for a number of months. The doctor had speculated that Karen may have had

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'dystopia canthorum' - a fairly mild facial dysmorphism where the eyes are set wider apart than usual, giving the impression of a wider bridge - to begin with and that this may account for the perceived discrepancy. It was simply that now that the focus was on her nose, she was searching for flaws. Karen bridled at the notion she was imagining it.

A rite of passage? Surely, everyone has their turn at high school. But a low background buzz of anxiety about it had followed her throughout her life. She'd blustered her way past the niggling, peripheral worry that it was the first thing people would notice about her, jokes and bonhomie counting for a lot. She'd never dieted, sought to dress herself up for the sake of others, she had friends she was sure didn't care. She'd been content to pass under the radar where desirability was concerned too. It didn't mean she didn't want to be wanted, but she'd gotten used to her options being somewhat narrowed by her choices. Even as she'd seen those who were effortless in their magnetism, graceful and stylish, and quietly envied them on occasion, she'd been largely content.

Yet this barely noticeable wideness of the bridge of her nose, real or not, was all that mattered to her in this moment. She felt grief. Even her friends wound the clockwork of judgement behind their eyes. They pitied her. Regret that she'd always been treated differently because of this difference, especially now that she looked back, had welled up. How one simple flaw could have left her so unable to cope with life, she couldn't grasp. The feeling felt disproportionate, but it filled her up like a raging flood waterlogs a plain riddled with gulleys and underground tunnels. Washing away all traces of the bearable life she knew. Perspective was a trickle on the lip of a gushing river.

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She moved her head soporifically to try and find a way forward. Her movements seemed to lag behind her thoughts, so whatever move she made in the physical world, her consciousness was already there, waiting for her. On the edge of her perception were lights and squeals, clanks and shouts. All she wanted to do was lay down. Lay down, and not get up. She did so, and felt the world thunder over her.

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Romilly felt something else that was new.

Calm.

-

Luana and Pola sat in front of her, looks of utter befuddlement on their faces. The pill boxes were spread out on the immaculate white coffee table between them. Romilly noticed how the silver-foil packets caught the light, their segmented textures causing splayed glares of the sun to reflect off of them. She'd considered the fact that Pola had stolen them in an act of stupidity that seemed quite commensurate with her general personality, and decided that in light of the event that had happened only thirty minutes ago, it was not worth putting her through a punitive confrontation. She was clearly terrified, and that would have to do. The confusion both Luana and Pola were clearly feeling was amusement enough.

“I told you, it’s fine.”

“But...but...I still don’t - ”

“That’s it, Pola. Learn to take ‘yes’ for an answer.”

Admittedly, the thought of throttling Pola had flitted across her mind when she babbled her admission, and subsequent profuse apology, but...she was in too good of a mood. Too in control to feel threatened by a cog falling off, or, indeed, another one coming back. She’d seen a glimpse of extraordinary possibilities, and she was going to explore it.

“So”, she said in a controlled tone. “Father”.

Pola and Luana furtively caught each other’s eye.

“Uh”, said Pola, suddenly finding her throat dry. “He...he called me on Thursday, said he was planning a visit to England. Things are apparently quiet for him in Milan, so he wants to take a trip here. And see us. All three of us”.

“Why? He’s not usually concerned with seeing us”.

“He didn’t say much, so I don’t know”. She shook her head, gaze fixated on the table beyond her clamped-together knees. “I mean, *really* he didn’t say much”, she added hurriedly when she looked up and caught Romilly’s eye.

“He wants something”.

“He...said he feels the time is right for us all to talk. As adults”.

Romilly furrowed her brow. Her father never did anything without first thinking it through. He gave the impression of dashing spontaneity, but Romilly knew how carefully he considered everything he let out from within. Much like her. Perhaps he could just process things more quickly than most people.

“When is he coming?”

“He’ll fly in on Wednesday, though he wants to meet on Friday. At a flat he’s leasing from a friend in Kempton”.

“Leasing?”

“I-I don’t know...borrowed...leased...something like that...”

Romilly fell silent. There was something she wasn’t being told, that much was painfully obvious. Still, it would come out in time, and having considered every angle, she would be ready for it.

There was a pause. Eventually, Pola spoke up.



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“So, what do we all think...? I didn't tell him it was a 'yes' yet”. She had. As silly as it was, she felt excited about his return. Almost to the point of tears. His call had been a shock, but it was like pulling the cork out of a bottle swirling with years of tension. Relief had flooded her. But she still had to persuade these two.

“I dunno”, Luana shrugged. “I'm only really here because Pola wouldn't leave me alone”.

Pola turned red. “That's not true!”

Luana smirked slightly. “Ok. Fine. Let's see what the old man has to say. Rom...?”

Romilly smiled broadly again, and Luana was put in mind of a feral cat sizing it's prey up for sport. Nothing unusual perhaps, but there was a glint in her eye that wasn't there before.

“Yes. Let's.”

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Luana and Pola stalked towards the train station in the rich purple glow of dusk. They'd been silent for the last five minutes. Pola opened her mouth to speak, stalling twice before letting out a stuttered, “...what...?”

“I don't know, Pola”.

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“She practically crucified me when I put the teaspoons in the wrong drawer a few months ago! But this time...”

“...she shrugs off you stealing from her, and *then* agrees to meet dad at the drop of a hat?”

“Yes!”

“With no objections, no snide remarks, no banshee antics?”

“Mm-hmm”. Pola nodded vigorously.

“Yep. I’m stumped too”. Luana breathed out heavily, her breath hanging in the crisp autumn air.

“Do you think she’s...alright?”

“Is that a trick question?”, Luana grinned.

“Luana!”

“Ok, ok. I don’t know. I can sense a change in the weather with her, but what ‘s going on in her wasps’ nest of a head...anyone’s guess.”

“Mmm. What a day this has been. I don’t know what to think”.

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“Jeez. This has been so bloody stressful, I nearly forgot I smoked. I need one now, if ever I did.” She pulled out a pack of Royals, and grimaced. Slumming it, but needs must.

Reaching the whitewashed frontispiece of the train station, the Italianate-style patchwork of listed buildings providing a perfect flow of shiver-inducing draughts throughout the structure, Luana wished she’d brought a coat that had more buttons in a sewn-on capacity. This would be a cold wait. Perhaps she’d have to do laps of the station to keep warm.

She looked round at Pola, who was watching her carefully.

“Remember to come stay at mine next week, Lu.”

“Sure.”

“Really. I know things are tight.”

“Benjamin’s just short this month.”

“I thought you’d said he’d not paid rent for most of the year. Isn’t he at least giving you money for food now?”

“Mmm.”

“Oh, Lu.”

Luana suddenly felt very tired. She mumbled thanks, embraced her sister, and wandered off towards the station entrance. The draught blew.

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Pola drifted back off towards the smeared orange lights of town, the coast a purple-grey stroke of paint in the far distance. She sighed. Very little about this day added up.

Across the road, there was a woman lying in the doorway of a Debenhams, an incongruously placed clipboard and pen beside her. She was just gathering her resolve to check on the prone woman when two passers-by stopped. They looked friendly enough, and the last few hours had exhausted her, so she took care to avoid the murky puddle she was close to stepping in, and struck out for home. The lights lazily trailed after her.

**Chapter 3 Part 2 - Social Strata**

The violent red glow of Monday's dawn framed Romilly as she strode down the street, heels clacking in a brisk rhythm. The streets were thick with people and crisp, sharp ambition. The scent of roasted coffee beans mixed uneasily with the heavy chemical dryness of drilled tarmac - consumer convenience nestled alongside the cost of progress. Details jumped out at Romilly as she stalked the pavement - a worn patch on the elbow of a fake leather jacket, a plaster over a shaving wound, the turn up of the toe of a road worker's boot, a feeble sprig of willow herb worming its way up through a crack between the slabs.

Romilly saw herself as a minnow in the city, a small, but intricate detail. She liked it that way. Up until now, at least. The world - her world - was changing, and she had to meet the challenges looming on the horizon. It was time to...expand her interests. First though, she had to more fully explore what had happened to her.

Switch & Co, a healthy competitor in the crammed claims adjuster market gave her a comfortable income, and on stepping into the lobby and ignoring the prissy receptionist attempting to similarly ignore her, she reflexively took a visual sweep to see what had changed since the weekend refit. A medium-sized atrium tetrastylum with four support columns formed reception, the circular white stone reception desk in the dead centre, the elevator at the back of the room, exits off to the left and right for stairwells. Smaller reproductions of the reception desk surrounded it in a diamond formation, housing six foot high *Dracaena Reflexa* trees standing like sentries. Navy-blue couches for visitors nestled in

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the corners near the entrance, flanked by white tables stacked with magazines. Little more than new furniture and a lick of paint, then. A medium-sized atrium designed with medium-sized pretensions for a medium-sized business with a medium-sized impact upon the world. It suited Switch & Co.

Taking the elevator to the second floor, she smoothed down her barely-creased skirt. Today was the day to set a few things in motion. Most notably, promotion. The chime of the elevator rang out. Stepping out into the corridor, the hustle and bustle of the office suffused her senses. Cascades of thin clicks from busy keyboards, a hiccuping titter from gossiping co-workers, the faint cloying aroma of the incense Lina burned at her desk, despite being told not to...

As she headed in the direction of her desk, the portly form of Neil Tennison paced into view. The head of department, Neil was a workhorse - a physique sculpted into being by torpidity, inattentive eating habits, and too many late nights in the office. Like a not-quite-full sack of flour lifted into the air, the contents forming a slumped bulb at the bottom, Neil had 'middle-age' written all over him at the age of 38.

"Ah, Romilly!", he said brightly. "How are we this fine morning?"

"I'm fine, Neil", she said, smiling sweetly. 'Sweet' was a relative term - at least to someone who knew Romilly. To Luana or Pola, the smile would've had a clear shard of ice running through it, but it was lost on Neil. To him, she was a smartly-dressed, slightly enigmatic, undoubtedly easy-on-the-eye young woman he was too intimidated to flirt with. Best keep

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that for Penny in Accounts, who he was sure didn't mind it, he always thought. Not worth risking the pretty ones getting upset. The whole office would turn.

Intimidated or not, he had tasks to delegate, though he kept things jocular and formal in the hope there would be no refusals. "I've a couple three issues for you to deal with, Ms Habert".

Romilly inwardly rolled her eyes at the phrase. "What would a Monday morning be without some?", she quipped.

Neil let out an exaggerated laugh. "Better to be busy than not in this economic climate!" As he straightened up, the hems of his shirt were pulled up from below his cheap belt, riding up to display an oval of pasty flesh beneath the lowest button.

"Yes, indeed!", she said, pulling her best attempt at an amused expression. He said that nearly every time. Perhaps he didn't realise it. Perhaps he did.

"Well! I emailed you the details earlier. Off to a meeting now, joy of joys!" He gave a conspiratorial eyebrow raise, and gambolled off towards his meeting. Probably disciplinary minutiae he'd rather avoid, she thought. It usually was.

Switch & Co had been Romilly's workplace for nearly 18 months now. She was one of two middle managers of her department working under Neil Tennison, and had moved sideways from a sister company into her current position. The work was dull, but allowed Romilly to indulge her need for order and exactitude.

The main office for Romilly's department was largely open plan, but any divisions only amounted to head-height glass panels, so there was no privacy, even in a designated cubicle. Only managers were allowed the privilege of chest-high wood boarding in addition to floor-to-ceiling glass, but there was no hiding. Good, thought Romilly. Everyone a mere glance away. This was a 21st century office environment. Literal transparency. Someone somewhere had been having paranoid ideas. Trust gets things done eventually, with a team comfortable enough to dawdle into the bargain. Fear gets things done *quickly*.

The other manager - one James Bernard - was stalking across the office, a curled-lip of a sneer gradually creasing his face into a tense mass of rivulets as he became aware of her presence. A wiry man in his late-20s with a square jaw, designer stubble and close-cropped hair, his slightly undersized charcoal Paul Smith suit bunching up as he stiffly strode towards her.

"Habert - meeting room 1C, five minutes", he growled as he passed her.

"I've emails to check on first", she replied icily.

"Haven't we all, *Uppie*. You can just be late, if you want", he smirked, voice fading as he turned into the corridor.

'Uppie'? And that was short for what? 'Up Yourself'? 'Up Yours'? 'Uptight'? Whatever it was, she imagined the halfwit had spent all weekend thinking up that one, in what she hoped



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was a damp-choked bedsit in a dark corner of a sink estate. Bernard had given her the brute force bully-boy treatment from the moment she'd walked through the door, largely because he'd been hoping that one of his cronies would be promoted to the position she filled, thus shoring up his obvious intentions to run the department some day. Romilly had delighted in making mincemeat of his slights and schemes against her. There really was nothing like a little conflict to stimulate a working day, she pondered. Not strategically impressive conflict, but conflict all the same. It was the closest thing to fun she experienced at work.

She perched her bag on her glass-topped desk, and quickly rounded it to check her inbox. Scrolling through the mass of pointless round robins, she found Tennison's email. She quietly swore - yes, there were some minor disciplinaries, a number of filing errors to get to the bottom of...and an imminent meeting on the floor below, now in roughly two and a half minutes. The dimwit could've told her. She grabbed her bag again, and made her way hurriedly across the office. She supposed that sometimes, it's wise to believe the malicious idiots of this world.

After clattering down the stairs, nearly losing her balance twice and clipping a junior as she took the corner, she clattered to a halt. She hated unnecessary exertion and discord, but not as much as she hated being late. After smoothing her skirt down once again, pushing her hair back behind her ears and catching her breath, she breezed in through the door with as much composure as she could manage. Straight into a meeting chaired by the managing director.

**Chapter 4 - Office Politics**

Located at the head of the table, the hulking form of Desmond Tiller glanced up from his notes. “Ah, Miss...Habert? Grand you could join us. We are just about to start.” Romilly noted the presence of several people she didn’t recognise, as well as Tiller’s two deputies, Margaret Scholtz, and Jawed Rashid, both wearing airs of indifference, and dressed in check and tweed respectively.

Desmond Tiller was a gruff bear of a South African in his mid-sixties, straining at the seams of his suit whenever he leant forward - a bulbous, pitted nose, two tufts of white hair at his temples connected by a grey expanse, and an ability to be louder than anyone without ever raising his voice. He was not the main founder of Switch & Co, but he was certainly the man who made it what it was today. His gold watch clanked on the tabletop as he shuffled his notes.

Romilly cursed inwardly. Promotion had been on her mind for reasons besides naked ambition. How could she have forgotten? The email about Tiller wanting to gather all middle management from Switch & Co HQ and its satellites had gone round the office on Friday. Romilly knew that it was a chance to make an impression, and she supposed that the shock of Pola and Luana's news had driven it from her head, at least on a conscious level. On reflection, the both of them arriving near-simultaneously had been serendipitous. One gave the other focus. Getting some momentum before Father arrived was important. She knew him.

"Well, now we are all present" - Romilly felt a faint prickle at her temples - "let's not waste time", he said, tapping a meaty finger on the desk for each of the last three syllables.

"Switch & Co is on the rise, let's be frank", he intoned, glancing from person-to-person. "Claims adjustment is a booming market, and when I say that we will not stand idly by while our competitors get to choose what piece of the pie they get, I bloody well mean it. We've been cautiously expanding up until now, but the time is ripe to ramp it up with a co-ordinated expansion into several new territories simultaneously. Gut punch the opposition! No Queensbury rules here, aheheh". He grinned widely, but his eyes held no trace of humour, pin-sharp severity reflecting back on the room. His tapping finger jerked back forward erratically like a cornered venomous snake, and his nostrils flared, each movement revealing more wiry hairs.

Bernard's eyes had lit up, Romilly noticed. He was breaking out that vaguely unsettling and unconscious habit where he wrung his hands whenever he was fired up. She wished he wasn't in her field of vision whilst trying to paying attention to Tiller.

"There are expansions happening abroad, but I shall leave the relevant offices to brief you on the particulars of those plans. The new sites in the United Kingdom include a second site in London to service expanding sectors in the city, one in Newcastle, and one in Glasgow to ease the workload on the Edinburgh branch". Romilly caught Bernard shifting in his seat a little, and glancing back at her to gauge her reaction. She felt an inner snarl of irritation.

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“Mr Tennison is an object lesson here - no, it’s not that Neil is moving on”, he added when Neil started suddenly. “ Or, for that matter, any of the other directors - it’s a question of which of you can prove that you can perform at his level. Scouting for internal talent is the way forward here”. Also the cheapest option, Romilly thought.

“All branches will need operations managers, human resources managers and accounts managers, excepting the London branch, which is parachuting an accounts manager in from Dusseldorf. You see? They all want to come here! The place where it all started!” He glanced around him for obliging chuckles that Scholtz and Rashid quickly offered up.

“Anyhow, I expect a certain amount of ambition from all of you! It shall be interesting to see which of you fancy stepping up. Yes, indeed. Meeting is...over!” On that flourish, he slapped the table, sending a shockwave through the wood.

Romilly knew this was an opportunity to get ahead, and coupled with the news about her father, a reason too. The final piece of the puzzle was a long-term plan, and after what she’d experienced during her encounter with the unfortunate Karen Carnall, she may even be on the verge of one. The next move would be...field research. Romilly hadn’t felt in this good of a mood since she discovered Pola had put her teaspoons back in the incorrect drawer.

As the meeting dissolved, she found herself walking alongside Desmond Tiller. He towered over her, a good six-foot-four to her five-foot-seven.

“Thinking of applying for any of these positions, Ms Habert?”, he boomed with a twinkle in

his eye.

“That would be telling, sir...”, Romilly replied with a wry look, to Tiller’s evident amusement, as he let out a throaty laugh.

She knew from experience that a little coyness tended to work wonders with self-important men. Well, any self-important person, but especially men. Too much open ambition from a businesswoman, and they would feel threatened, which was the easiest route to active demotion. Much of the old boy network already considered itself embattled by progressive gender politics, and Romilly was not interested in being a standard-bearer for feminist advances, even though she accepted she was a beneficiary of it. To her, she simply happened to be female, and did not see any reason why that should prevent her from getting to where she wanted to be. It wasn’t malicious, just a necessary deception. Like conversational blandishments, no-one was really any the worse off. Some people just simply had to be taught. She wasn’t sure whether Tiller was one of those, but while he was a powerful potential obstacle, it paid to think tactically.

"Only half of what goes inside should come back out, I always say! I see you've learned that lesson already, Ms Habert!" With another craggy grin as a parting shot, he strode ahead.

She saw James Bernard stride into her peripheral vision. Romilly had decided to canvas this idiot the moment he laid contemptuous eyes on her in the introductory address to staff, and then deliberately contradicted her stated intentions in his follow-on. Here was a man composed of and powered by hostility, conflict and frustration. He would grow up to be a

consummate old-boy misogynist, and no mistake.

He pulled up alongside her, and said in a low hiss, “who else are you going to flutter your eyelashes at to get this job then, Habert? Tennison? Rashid? Or go for a real challenge with Scholtz?”

“All of them, Bernard”, Romilly replied airily, pronouncing his name with a deliberate stress on the first syllable, as she knew it infuriated him - ‘BURR-nudd’ as opposed to ‘Buh-NARD’. His face screwed up with contempt, and he shoved past her, and down the corridor. Romilly smiled.

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James Bernard angrily strode onwards, pride wavering in the breeze of his last exchange. That skinny, pain-in-the-arse bint! If she would just react to one his barbs in the way he wanted, he would know he'd gotten to her, punched a hole in the icy calm facade. He was used to breaking a rival down by degrees, shifting the balance of power in his favour, but all his efforts seemed to be achieving recently was to paint himself as a sour-faced moron. Especially whenever some fuckwit staff member screwed something up, and the disciplinary became a one-sided berating session.

Where had all his aggressive charm gone to? He'd become tired of his junior Sam asking him what the matter was after the usual lethargic performance at the weeklies. Eighteen months since that woman stole the job out from under his buddy's nose in a surprise upset.

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Richard had been apoplectic too, calling Romilly every name under the sun. Rich had been earmarked for that role by Tennison months before the interview sessions, and James had put in extra work to ensure he was the frontrunner, including sending dizzy Carmen Hartnell to the wrong floor to make her fatally late for her shot at the position. Not that Carmen was a serious competitor, being as scatterbrained and changeable as a schizophrenic with a serious head-injury. It was basically cruel sport. Still, he got a laugh out of watching Carmen clatter back through the office, shooting him a panicked, disbelieving look as she flailed past his office door. Reflecting on it now though, Carmen would've been preferable to Romilly.

He'd always been taught that getting anywhere in life was a case of landing up in the right place at the right time. Not late nights at the office, not screwing your way to the top, not magic. Just having the right person's ear available when you needed it. If he'd put any hard work into his career, it had been finding those advantageous situations, and putting himself at the centre of them - being in the right meetings, helping the right people, and most importantly, being seen to *be right*.

But now, his senses had been scrambled, little-by-little. Doubt was forming a hard crust on his instincts. His dad had laughed at his ambitions. But then, dear old dad was a bitter ex-banker, who had been drummed out of his own career because of a sexual harassment suit when James and his brother were still a few years from their teens. A subsequent back injury while sailing had confined him largely to the family home, so whoever was unfortunate enough to be within reach at the time got a pinch of his simmering resentment. He was determined that no-one else should achieve anything in life. James' elder brother got a tongue-lashing on a daily basis, and he would pass the agitation down the line. It's why Leigh

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now had a wife who hated him, and a brat who bit other children. James had decided to get his rewards however he could, regardless of what that meant. It had gotten him this far.

After all the maneuvering and effort that went into getting Rich in line for the position, news had filtered down that the recipient was to be some unknown quantity from the London branch. Numb disbelief had set in until a slim, delicately-featured twenty-something brunette sashayed in through the meeting door as if she had staked a claim on the place, extended a finely-boned hand in greeting, and introduced herself as Romilly Habert. Acidic contempt rapidly replaced disbelief. Was this a deliberate move by Tennison to hobble Bernard's plans? Somehow, he couldn't accept that the ineffectual Neil had the nous to think *that* tactically.

So, who did she sweetly smile the smile of implied promise at to secure this position? Women like her got by on the strength of their looks, whether they intended to or not. Worse still, if they showed a little more leg or cleavage intentionally, they'd have your fucking job before you knew it.

It was at that exact moment that James Bernard had decided Romilly Habert needed putting in her place. A new face in an environment in which she was not welcome. So, why weren't his best efforts working?

One thing had occupied his thoughts lately - leaving at the right time. Should that be an option? He slowly realised he'd been slumped at his desk gnawing at the tip of his pen, lost in an angry reverie, and an unpleasant chemical fug was invading his taste buds. He dropped his



pen, and spat into the bin in disgust.