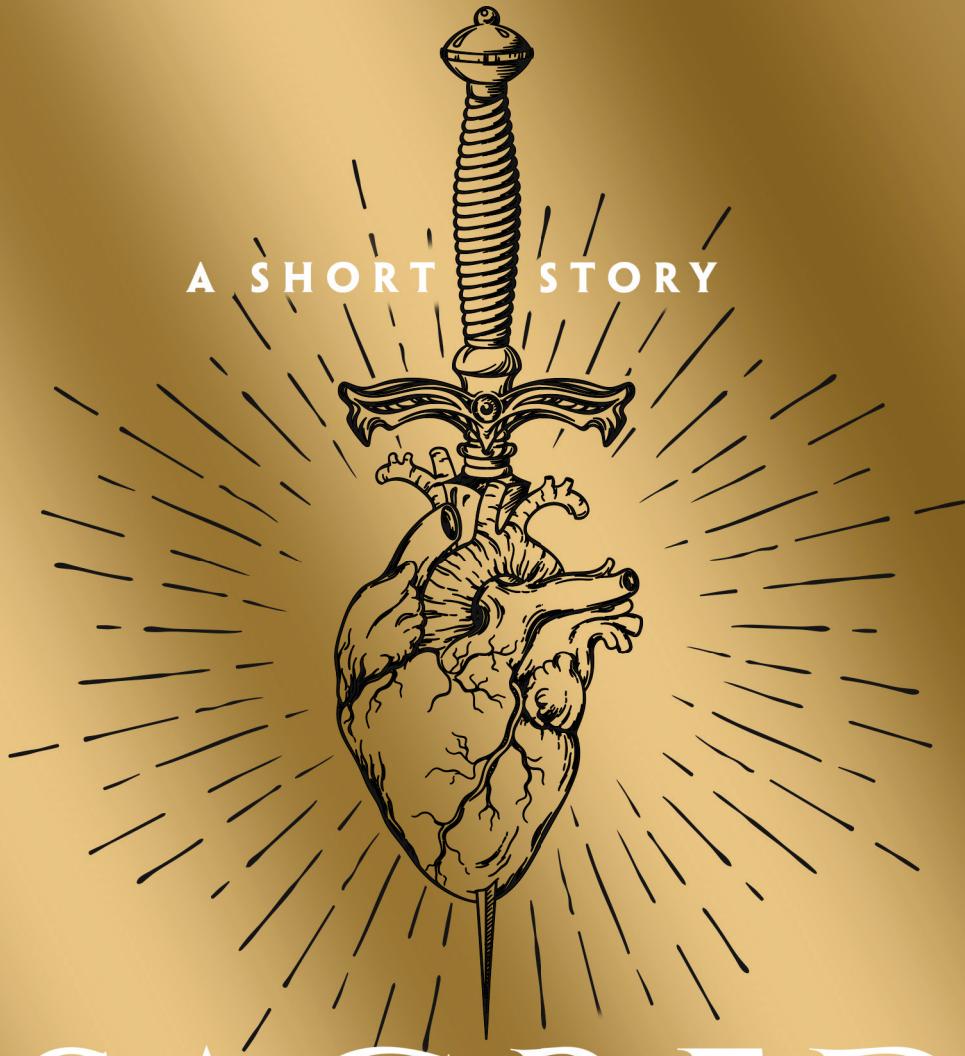


A SHORT STORY



SACRED

HOSPITALITY

OLIVIE BLAKE

**Hospitium** (Greek: *ξενία*, *xenia*, *προξενία*) is the ancient art of hospitality, defined as the sacred right of the guest and the divine duty of the host. For example, it would be indecent for the guest to set fire to the curtains of the host, or for the host to poison the meal of the guest.

Not that anyone abides by ancient traditions.

## SACRED HOSPITALITY

### ACT I, SCENE I: THE APARTMENT

*A Manhattan walk-up in general adolescent disrepair.*

#### THE PLAYERS:

*Gideon Drake: saintly referee*

*Nico de Varona: antagonist host*

*Libby Rhodes: antagonist guest*

*Mira Patel: well-meaning participant*

*Max Wolfe: true neutral*

“The game,” Max began, “is—”

“Not a game,” Gideon corrected for the benefit of the table. “Very much not a game. More of a learning exercise. Well, really it’s a sort of... code of ethics, if you will—”

“The game is *Taboo*, but personal,” Max finished for him.

“Really, we just hope both teams have fun,” said Gideon.

“False,” said Max. “There will be a loser.”

“Right,” Gideon agreed. “But in a fun way.”

“I thought we wanted them to work together?” asked Mira

tentatively.

“We do,” said Gideon. “But also, we’re realists. Optimists, one might say.”

“It’s pronounced idiots,” said Max.

The denizens of the apartment, which had seen better days—but also considerably worse ones—fell somewhat shy of impressed. Gideon occupied what could be considered the head of the dining table (actually a series of other articles of furniture pushed together, because the real table was groaning beneath the weight of an air conditioning unit that had been removed from the window one day and never put away, like the ghost of summers past). He had specified a seating arrangement that seemed more tennis court than social ritual. On the right side of the table was Nico de Varona, provocatively unkempt. Mira Patel was positioned behind him atop a stolen (“borrowed”) barstool, a sort of makeshift stadium seating arrangement. On the table’s left side sat Libby Rhodes, whose arms were folded in muted protest. Behind her, a half-attentive Max reclined (his chair, on the other hand, was an actual heirloom).

Nico looked dour. Mira looked interested. Gideon looked hopeful. Libby looked annoyed. And Max looked very dapper. Although relatedly, he could not have cared less.

Between the two rival parties sat several courses of untouched food and a blank document labeled *MEDEIAN THEORY 425: Spring Term Thesis*.

“This is your fault,” muttered Libby, ruffling her freshly cut bangs and tossing a glare across the table to where Mira was poring over a clipboard behind Nico. “*Take a theory course*, you said. *It’ll be fun*, you said—”

“Wait, sorry—point Varona, I think?” Mira cut in with a hint of bemused delay. She scoured the clipboard a second time, uncertain as the list in front of her took up several pages, before leaning over to consult the evening’s referee. “Really, Gideon, is that right?”

Gideon glanced over. “Well—”

“Aha!” exclaimed Nico, who up until that moment had been pretending to scrutinize his cuticles. “Who’s the difficult one now? Take *that*, Rhodes—”

“Point Rhodes,” announced Max. His list was considerably shorter than Mira’s.

“What?” Nico demanded, launching himself half out of his chair to glare across the table around Libby’s stubbornly unmoving form. “But I didn’t say any of the words Rhodes said.”

“Point Rhodes,” Max said again.

“What?” Nico’s squawk of protest grew audibly more indignant. “Impossible.”

“What word did I even say?” Libby demanded, frowning at Mira, who was in turn still frowning at the pages before her.

“Erm... ‘fault,’” Mira determined, before glancing up to spare Libby a shrug. “Sorry.”

“Right, well.” Gideon sighed. “In any case, the game—”

“The code of ethics,” Max corrected him with a smirk.

“—is really more of a precaution, mind you, since I’m hoping we can all manage the appropriate civility to eat before getting started on the evening’s group work,” Gideon said, drawing their attention subtly to the bar of taco toppings he’d laid out in the kitchen. “Anyone hungry?”

“This is absurd,” said Libby, arms folding ever more tightly across her chest. “There’s no reason we need to resort to some kind of childish bribe. If it were up to me this paper would have been written weeks ago,” she added with a sour look in Nico’s direction, “but then again, *I’m* not the one consumed by the need to be pointlessly unreasonable.”

“Points to Varona,” said Mira.

“*Bellissima*,” called Nico, punctuating the statement with a theatrical chef’s kiss.

“I don’t even care about this stupid game,” muttered a visibly devastated Libby.

“Oh, um. Sorry.” Gideon leaned over to Mira, pointing to the page. “Not to backseat drive, obviously, but—”

“Right, sorry Gideon,” Mira acknowledged, correcting herself. “It’s actually double points to Varona.”

“Patel, whose side are you on?” Libby growled.

“I would like to point out that I’m being extremely handsome and accommodating,” said Nico, flashing a dazzling smile to Gideon, and then Max, “and therefore I request to be dismissed.”

“Point Rhodes,” said Max.

“Fuck,” said Nico. “What did I say?”

“Handsome,” said Max.

“Who made this list?” Nico demanded.

“The point is,” Gideon went on as if he had never been interrupted, “all we have to do is get the two of you to compile five hundred words. A mere five hundred words,” he repeated plaintively. “Really, it’s—”

“Gideon obviously made the list,” said Max, reaching around Libby for a handful of tortilla chips.

“What I don’t understand is how Gideon is meant to be considered a neutral party,” said Libby, shifting in her seat. She was still stung by her double point loss.

“Frankly, Rhodes, you understand very little,” said Nico.

“Point Rhodes,” called Max.

“Fuck,” said Nico.

“I’m also not eating,” Libby added, lurching across the table to knock Mira’s hand away from the chip bowl. (Unsuccessfully, as a telling crunch resounded shortly thereafter.) “What if it’s been tampered with?”

“It hasn’t,” said Gideon.

“And this certainly isn’t neutral grounds,” added Libby.

“Point Varona,” said Mira.

“Fuck!” said Libby.

“Tacos?” Gideon offered.

“I don’t really see how this is supposed to make them behave, if I’m honest,” said Mira regretfully. “No offense, Gideon,” she added, reaching for the salsa. “I just don’t think they’re going to be able to write it. No matter how many—er—codes of ethics we make.”

“None taken,” said Gideon.

“Then why are you here?” Max asked Mira.

“Hello, free food,” she replied, who despite Libby’s macabre warning was already wrapping herself a burrito.

“At least Patel’s got a decent head on her shoulders,” Nico pointed out, waving a hand in Mira’s direction. “You’ll notice Rhodes can’t even be bothered to be grateful for my obvious attempts at compromise.”

“Point Rhodes,” said Max.

“Fucking really?” asked Nico.

“Which words are we saying that violate the game?” demanded Libby, talking over Max (“Code of Ethics!”) to insist, “I mean, how are we supposed to learn from any of this if we don’t even know the rules?”

“Point Varona,” said Mira, mouth full. “Gideon,” she added with a thick swallow, “this seasoning is *masterly*—”

“More to the point,” Libby argued, “how are we supposed to *complete the assignment*—”

“Point Varona,” said Mira.

“Okay, that one was obvious,” said Libby, still miffed, “but whereas I’ve at least done the reading—”

“Point Varona,” said Mira.

“—I... fine, fair enough,” said an increasingly flustered Libby, “but if Varona hasn’t even bothered t—”

“Point Varona,” said Mira.

“Mira, for the utter love of fuck,” said Libby.

Unhelpfully, Nico opened his mouth. “First of all, Rhodes—”

“Point Rhodes,” said Max.

“What? Wait.” Nico slammed a hand onto his portion of the table, which was in fact a disassembled bookshelf and therefore not entirely stable. The taco toppings shook, and a few bits of cilantro fluttered across the table. “Does she get a point every time I say her name?”

The occupants of the not-a-table glanced around in silence. Max in particular motioned a zip across his lips, tossing away the invisible key with a shrug.

“You do tend to misuse it,” Gideon explained gently in an aside to Nico.

“Does it apply to me, too?” said Libby, offering testily, “Varona.” Silence.

“Ha!” Libby said, crossing one leg over the other so sharply they nearly lost the pico de gallo. “As I suspected, Varona, you’re the only one here who’s enough of a child t—”

“Point Varona,” said Mira, helping herself to a heaping spoonful of guacamole.

“Well at least my rules make *sense*,” said Libby, pursing her lips in the direction of a smirking Nico.

“It’s interesting that *I’m* allegedly the child,” said Nico, “whilst *you* are in fact too insufferable to eat the dinner that Gideon has painstakingly prepared.”

Libby, liable to slip and lose a point, made a brief, profane gesture in his direction.

“Ha!” said Nico. “Nice try, Rhodes—”

“Point Rhodes,” said Max.

“Fuckety balls,” said Nico.

## ACT I, SCENE II: THE NOVA FAMILY HOME

*The formal dining room of a Grecian-style mansion nestled among the vineyards of the Western Cape.*

### THE PLAYERS:

*Dimitris Nova: patriarch*

*Johannes van der Bos: esteemed guest*

*Callum Nova: recalcitrant louche*

*Arista Nova: third daughter*

*The Mother: the mother*

*And an irrelevancy named Yiannis*

Callum Nova took his usual seat across from his father at the family's formal dining table, which had been set that evening for six. His older sister Arista sat to his left, alongside a very chin-forward man several decades her senior who was presumably a paramour. To Callum's right was his mother; to his father's left, beside the head of the table, was their guest, whose name Callum did not care to know but could not have reasonably avoided. Johannes van der Bos was not a trifling man, nor was his billion-dollar access to mortal consumer data about... hair products. Or something.

"Apologies on behalf of my son," said Callum's father, sparing a careless glance in Callum's direction as Callum, who was one or two courses late, decorously shook his napkin loose, draping it over his lap. "The boy is a recalcitrant louche, I'm afraid."

"Mine is no different. Spoiled, this generation." Johannes waved a

fork over his bowl. The Callum family china was ornate, and perfectly matched the color scheme of the large dining room. “Hard work means nothing to them.”

From Callum’s left, Arista cut him a rabbity glance. “My brother,” she offered to her companion, with a tiny, indecipherable gesture to somewhere in Callum’s vicinity (presumably Callum himself, although who could say). “I don’t believe you’ve met him yet? Unless you have,” she amended with sudden hesitation, “and I’ve stupidly forgotten—”

“Mate,” offered the companion, by way of apparent introduction. “Yiannis.”

“Quite an old name,” remarked Callum’s mother sullenly. She rapped her wine glass with a many-ringed hand, drumming her fingers idly. Her diamonds sparkled beneath the chandelier, and perhaps a different set of people would have been dazed. The six guests this evening, however, hardly noticed.

“She means classic,” Arista hurried to explain.

“I’m sure I do,” replied Callum’s mother. She raised her glass to her lips, finding it empty, and then signaled with practiced silence for another.

“Shall we talk numbers, then?” asked Johannes through a mouthful of something pickled.

“At the dinner table? How uncivilized,” said Callum’s father cheerfully. “Typically we save such things for dessert.”

Johannes retorted with a flighty motion of dismissal. “I appreciate the invitation, Dimis, but I should warn you, even you cannot tempt me after such a poor series of risks. You cannot conceal your year-end losses, however fine the cuisine,” Johannes remarked with a gesture to his plate.

“Ah, there’s that candor I so admire,” said Callum’s father. Much to Callum’s displeasure, the father and son looked remarkably alike. Or would, if not for certain conscientious illusions.

From behind Callum’s elbow, a steward set a bowl of insubstantial

soup in front of him before carefully pouring more wine into his mother's glass.

“More herring, then, Johannes?”

“I shouldn’t, of course. But yes, please—”

“You’re not eating,” observed Callum’s mother with a glance at his sister, whose cheeks reddened. Arista’s companion reached over to place a grizzled paw on hers.

“Eats like a bird, this one,” Yiannis said boastfully.

“Yes, I’ve always found it so impressive how proficiently my daughter can starve,” agreed Callum’s mother into her glass, puncturing her thick slab of crusty bread with a caviar fork. She laughed, then, and so did Arista, and so did Arista’s companion.

Callum spooned some broth into his mouth.

“—really see how the so-called wellness industry retains any noticeable market shares in the beauty economy,” Johannes was saying. “Or if it does, I have to assume it’s a passing fad. Isn’t that supposedly about health rather than vanity? Allegedly, anyway.” He scratched his formidable beard with a sense of unalterable certainty.

“Well, precisely.” Callum’s father sat back in his seat. “Genius, don’t you think?”

Callum shifted in his chair, crossing one leg over the other.

“I suppose it isn’t *not*,” Johannes acknowledged from his end of the table. “Though I must say, I was rather set against the proposal when I arrived.”

“Were you?” echoed Callum’s father, smiling. “Lucky it’s only a social invitation, then. Just a simple dinner among old friends.” He caught Callum’s eye, expression flickering with momentary distaste, and looked away, back to Johannes. (Callum’s relationship with his father was somewhat complex. On the one hand, Callum was useful. On the other hand, one could never quite be sure *when* Callum was being useful. Or on whom.)

“Like hell it is,” Johannes replied with a belch of a laugh. “In any case,” he continued, lips slick with sherry, “my board thinks your pet project’s something of an unnecessary risk, I’m sorry to say.”

“Well, by that logic all risks are unnecessary. But that is how men like us reap rewards.” Callum’s father glanced across the table again as the soup bowls were removed and replaced with a single orb of meat.

Callum picked up his fork.

“How is it?” whispered Arista to her companion, eyes darting up from her lap.

“Well enough, I suppose,” said a frowning Yiannis, nudging his meatball. “Though, when you join me next week I’ll have to take you out for something a bit more delicate.”

Beside Callum, his mother scoffed loudly, draining her freshly poured glass. She frowned, then lifted her hand to signal again to the steward.

Callum set down his fork.

Callum’s mother retracted her hand.

“That is remarkable,” Johannes commented thoughtfully to Callum’s father. “Still, I really had not meant to consider it. My board was quite insistent.” A slow, dazed frown. “Though perhaps our position on the matter was simply misinformed.”

“Perhaps it’s your board I need to treat to a little herring, then, eh?” joked Callum’s father.

“Actually, Yianni, I meant to tell you,” said Arista, turning delicately to her companion. “About next week—I think actually something’s come up.” She looked temporarily confused, but shook it away.

“Darling, please don’t be obstinate,” sighed Yiannis, with an air of great and laudable tolerance. “Everything’s been finalized for ages. The arrangements are made.”

Callum looked down, inspecting a thumbnail as Arista blinked.

“Yes, well, unmake them,” she suddenly suggested.

“Did you put something in the wine, Dimis?” chuckled Johannes,

pretending to inspect the bottom of his thoroughly empty glass. “I could have sworn I wouldn’t budge on this.”

“On what?” replied Callum’s father gaily. “As I said, this is purely social. You’re always welcome at my family’s table, Johannes. You do know,” Callum’s father added profoundly, “how well we eat.”

To that, Johannes laughed. “Well said, Dimis old friend, well said indeed—”

“—know what’s gotten into you,” Yiannis was hissing to Arista between pressed lips. “It was my understanding that you were far more mature than this—”

“If you wanted mature, Yiannis, then you probably should have chosen someone older than your glass of scotch,” said Arista, abruptly upending it in his lap.

The steward came by with more wine, dutifully observant. Grateful, Callum’s mother reached for her glass.

Callum stifled a yawn.

Her hand carefully retracted.

“It’s a deal then,” said Johannes from the head of the table. “God help me, but you drive a hard bargain, Dimitris Nova—”

“A bit of water, please?” Callum’s mother said in an undertone to the retreating steward. “Sparkling, of course.”

“—nonsense,” said Callum’s father. “I can hardly claim to have sold a thing. You, my friend, simply have an inscrutable eye and unerring judgment.”

“Truer words,” agreed Johannes, patting his gut in a congratulatory fashion. “Shall we do a round of champagne to close the deal, then?

“Actually,” said Arista, scraping her chair back over the suppressed mutters of her companion’s red-faced vitriol. “Yiannis was just leaving—”

“And I’m afraid I’ll have to decline as well,” announced Callum, abandoning his plate of meat. “Unfortunately I find myself with a bit of a

headache.”

“And of course he runs off,” tutted Callum’s father, glancing conspiratorially at Johannes beside him. “Some new revelry to attend, I imagine. Is yours much the same?”

“Worse, even. These sons of ours, I tell you,” confirmed Johannes with a morbid shake of his head. “They never take responsibility for learning the trade, the real art of it. Boy, do you really think there is nothing to be learned from your father?” he asked, leveling a patronizing glance at Callum that strayed almost immediately to the passing bottle of prestige cuvée. “This is how lasting business is conducted, my boy—not by shiny cars or pretty girls, but by honest conversation, long talks among loyal friends... Oh, but go on, then,” Johannes cut himself off with a shrug, moistening a sheen of anticipation as the glass was poured. “More for us, eh, Dimis?”

Callum spared a nod of parting to the room before turning to walk out the way he’d come. It was true, he disliked the necessity of family dinners and made any excuse to leave as soon as an opening presented itself. But at least that was last year’s dismal Q4 sorted, among other things, and fortunately his other sisters had not attended. Theirs were stronger personalities than Arista’s, exceptionally draining. (She seemed a touch bemused in his absence, but no matter. Someone else would surely come along and tell her what to do.)

Callum pressed a thumb to the pulsating behind his temples, trading the dull throb for the arthritic stab of his knee. An old injury, like a war wound, from the many family dinners he’d attended in the past.

The art of honest conversation indeed.

## ACT II, SCENE I: THE APARTMENT, AGAIN

“This is absurd,” said Libby, “and you’re impossible.”

“Point Varona,” said Mira.

“Mira,” Libby growled, “*so help me—*”

(An hour later, the food remained virtually untouched.)

“Where are we on the word count of the paper?” asked Max.

“Surely close to five hundred by now.”

“We’re at—” Gideon glanced at the screen. “Four.”

“Oh, so we’ll die here, I see,” said Max solemnly.

“So much for finding the whole thing hilarious, Maximilian,” commented Nico, who was attempting to appear disinterested but had not, in actuality, ceased peering across the table at Libby’s notes. “And as for Rhodes—”

“Point Rhodes,” said Max.

“Balls—*you there*, then,” Nico clarified with a self-righteous flail in Libby’s direction. “I thought we weren’t going to use logical determinism as one of our defenses?”

“Unsurprisingly, you thought wrong,” Libby retorted without looking up. “Gideon, are you sure I can’t just write this paper myself?”

“Ding, ding, ding, that’s a bonus round,” said Max, pointing to Mira, who remorsefully produced a sign that read LIBBY SUGGESTS SHE DO THE ASSIGNMENT ON HER OWN in Gideon’s neat script. “That’s a whole set to Nicolás—”

“Ha!” said Nico.

“—or something,” Max added with a shrug in Gideon’s direction. “I may not have actually read the rules.”

“Truthfully I don’t know why I bothered,” Gideon said.

“Shut up,” Libby advised Nico, who was busily typing into the open document.

“Rhodes, for fuck’s sake—”

“Point Rhodes,” said Max.

“Balls,” said an aggrieved Nico.

“Varona,” Libby announced, having stolen Nico’s tablet and looked over his contribution, “you can’t simply discard determinism as a theory because, quote, you *don’t like it*—”

“Well, I don’t,” sniffed Nico, unperturbed.

“I don’t either,” said Libby, “but that doesn’t mean I don’t consider it a plausible subject—”

Nico gave an irritable sigh. “If the future is fixed, then what’s the point?”

“It’s a *theory*, Varona, you idiot—”

“Point Varona,” said Mira before asking, “Gideon, is there dessert?”

“Yes,” said Gideon. “Tres leches cake.”

“What? Where?” said Nico, head snapping up.

“Not for you,” said Gideon. “Not until you finish. But it’s in the fridge.”

“*Tres leches?*” Mira marveled, already on her feet to the kitchen.

“In this economy, even,” Max placidly agreed.

“Okay, but what if—and hear me out,” Nico said loudly, which was met with a deathly glare from Libby. “What if, instead of completing this assignment, we simply... fail the course and never again make contact until one or both of us dies?” he asked hopefully.

“Mm, sorry Nicky,” said Max, producing two signs: one that read NICO SUGGESTS THEY SIMPLY FAIL THE COURSE and another that read NICO REFERENCES THEIR INEVITABLE DEATHS AS IF THAT WOULD SUCCESSFULLY SOLVE ANY OF THIS.

Nico moved as if to argue, but relented. “It’s true,” he conceded, shrugging. “I would go full poltergeist.”

“Ah, mate,” said Max sympathetically, producing a sign that said NICO IMPLIES HE WOULD HAUNT LIBBY AS A MEANS OF FURTHER TORTURING HER.

“These are oddly specific,” Libby commented. (It was unclear whether she meant to sound appreciative.)

“Gideon is a man of many talents, Rhodes,” said Nico, collapsing into a chair.

“Point Rhodes,” said Max.

“Balls.”

## ACT II, SCENE II: A PARISIAN BISTRO

*A secluded table at a dimly lit restaurant, late.*

### THE PLAYERS:

*Manon: enlightened modern woman*

*Parisa Kamali: well-dressed obstacle*

“I’ve decided to forgive you,” said Manon, reaching across the white tablecloth for Parisa’s hand.

It was unfortunate that telepathy did not imply omniscience. Parisa did not know *everything*, which was frankly a pity. And a nuisance. If she had known what sort of evening this was she would not have accepted the invitation.

“*Forgive me?*” Parisa echoed warily. But Manon’s pale hand trembled with a vulnerability that suggested Parisa would pay for her mistake if she declined to take it, so she placed her own neutrally atop Manon’s.

“Yes, forgive you. I’ve decided that I must accept love for what it is rather than what I wish it to be.” Manon spared her a doe-eyed look of something Parisa supposed was meant to be reassuring. “And I’ve chosen to stop allowing you to hurt me.”

“It’s a pity you didn’t choose that sooner.” Parisa’s eye wandered, which was partially the reason they were having this conversation to begin with.

“You see? It’s in your nature. You simply do not know what it means to be emotionally intimate with another person. I cannot hold that against you, Parisa. Truly, I can’t.”

How generous of her. “So then this is... closure, I suppose?” Parisa asked with a sigh. Disappointing. Manon had taken great care to dress well, and Parisa had noticed. There was something about the two of them entangled in bed that lit a twin flame of vanity and desire for Parisa. At the moment, though, she felt almost neither. Manon’s thoughts were swirling with narcissism, gilded unhealthily by an increasingly anxious attachment.

Sitting at the table behind Manon was an interesting conversation, however. A company on the brink of public offering. A remarkable valuation, with a competitor’s shares sure to tank overnight. Well. That little tidbit ought to cover the remainder of the deposit on Parisa’s new flat very neatly. She hadn’t meant to overspend, but really, who could resist a herringbone floor? And original moldings, too. There, now the desire was back. Not that Parisa tended to salivate over architecture, but Manon would fit into the decor so perfectly. Not a flaw in sight.

“—who can understand my needs very clearly, and—Parisa, are you listening?”

Something, something, something about what’s best for herself moving forward, as if Manon had chosen those particular strappy heels for her health and not to be mislaid on Parisa’s new nineteenth-century floors.

“I’m very happy that your new podcast has been helping you to feel... well, let’s call it empowered,” Parisa offered generously, setting down her glass. “But just so you know, Manon, my behavior has nothing to do with you being fundamentally unlovable and everything to do with me being restless and difficult to please, so there’s really no point continuing to obsess over whether you’ll die alone. It really wasn’t personal, and there was nothing you could have done to prevent it.”

Adorably, Manon’s brown eyes widened. “I—”

“Here is the truth, since your new therapist is overcharging,” Parisa

said, leaning forward to tighten her fingers around Manon's slender wrist. "I've been cheated on, too, Manon. Of course I have. Because it's not about beauty. It's not about love, or desire. It's about power. Sex is always about power."

She could have lit a match on the dryness in Manon's throat. "I'm not talking about sex, Parisa."

"No, you're not, but I am." Parisa rose to her feet, lifting her coat from the back of her chair and gesturing for Manon to follow. "Are you coming?"

"Parisa." Manon did her best to look stern, which was appealing if not effective. "This dinner... it's meant to be a peace offering. An olive branch."

"Yes," Parisa said impatiently, "and I'm upgrading it to a proposition. Are you coming or not?"

Manon hesitated. The new boyfriend, probably. Some routine tedium of guilt and bad choices that was Manon's general status quo. Poor Manon, Parisa thought with genuine sympathy—though of course this dinner was partially Parisa's fault. She had not been entirely honest, because actually, there was quite a lot that Manon could do to prevent herself from being hurt, and it began and ended with choosing someone who didn't remind her of her father. Unfortunately, Parisa was not that person.

If Parisa wanted to help Manon find closure, she could do so gently. Even kindly. But the problem was that Parisa did not want to help her, or anyone really, and Manon was going to say yes anyway, so really, in the end podcasts and therapists were not all they were cracked up to be.

"I have to be up early," said Manon, eyes darting to her lap.

Nail, meet coffin. Not that Parisa typically cared to be morbid.

Her shoulders did look splendid in that dress.

"You can leave late," Parisa assured her. It wouldn't be bad or even unkind. She would run Manon a long bath, massage the anxiety out of

her hair, perfume her with expensive bath products and praise. And then after she would block Manon's phone number, which was almost like doing her a favor.

So perhaps telepathy was not entirely unlike omniscience after all.

## ACT II, SCENE III: OSAKA HIGH STREET

*Somewhere, at some point.*

### THE PLAYERS:

*Who's asking?*

From Reina's pocket, her mobile phone buzzed. She dug around in her coat and glanced down, eyes quickly scanning the text.

*You are a difficult one to track down, child. But I don't give up so easily.*

A second check mark appeared below the text bubble as she opened the app, watching another message appear on the screen.

*What do you say to dinner this evening? My treat.*

Reina paused beside the reflective windows to her right, peering beyond her own silhouette to the delicate patisserie-style pastries inside. The candy-colored sweets were lined neatly, an endless sea of promising pastel. It had been such a long time since she'd tasted one of the treats from her childhood, or received a message like this one.

The second check mark recorded the message as read and received, unavoidable. On her next phone, she would have to change the settings.

Reina deposited the mobile phone in the nearest refuse bin and stepped into the patisserie for something to appease her cravings.

## ACT III, SCENE I: THE APARTMENT.

AGAIN.

“What’s the word count now?” Mira asked the room (or a higher power) from where she was lying prostrate on the living room couch.

“Get up from there, Mira, it’s probably filthy,” said Libby, who was chewing on the ends of her hair.

Nico lifted his head from the kitchen tiles. “It’s not filthy, you graceless barbarian. Gideon cleans every day. And I believe we’re close to the end, aren’t we?” he estimated, or pleaded. “In that I can’t remember a time before this evening started.”

“Max?” called Gideon tiredly from the armchair in the corner. The clock beside him read 2:01 AM.

“Ninety-four words,” said Max, who was unwisely downing his fifth espresso. “And impressively, they all contradict each other.”

“Wonderful. So as I expected, this has been an enormous waste of time.” Libby rose to her feet, pacing beside the makeshift table before suddenly rounding on Nico. “And also, I’m *starving*.”

“Then eat, you shameless hussy,” said Nico, before looking around. “Really, no points for that one?”

“I can’t be expected to predict everything out of your mouth,” said Gideon.

“I find that a bit hurtful, actually,” Nico said before turning back to Libby. “But the point remains that there’s plenty of food.”

“Enough to sustain us for weeks,” added Max.

“Please don’t threaten us,” said a pained Mira, lifting her head

again. “We’re good people, mostly.”

“I’m not touching this.” Libby prowled around, eyes never lifting from the platter of food that still remained in the center of the table beneath a thin crust of the evening’s merriment. “Even if Gideon actually made it—which I only half believe,” she added with a scathing glance at Gideon, which immediately turned sheepish in the face of his utter Gideonness. “—that *still* wouldn’t stop Varona from poisoning it.”

Mira groaned preemptively into the sofa cushions. “Libs, sorry, but—”

“Oh, for *fuck*’s sake,” said Libby, snatching the sign LIBBY ACCUSES NICO OF POISONING from Mira’s hand and tearing it into small pieces. She paused briefly, as if considering whether or not to eat the torn pieces of sign, when Nico suddenly leapt to his feet.

“You know what, Rhodes?” he trumpeted with a wild look in his eye.

“Point Rhodes,” said Max.

“Oh shit, are we still doing that? Oops,” said Mira.

“I *did* make the food,” Nico announced, as Libby pointedly whirled to face Gideon, who shrugged.

“I’m not technically allowed to use the stove,” Gideon admitted.

“And you know what else?” Nico bellowed. “I *did* poison it!”

Hastily, Mira sat up from the sofa with a start.

“Oh, sorry Patel. I meant with violent ill-wishing,” Nico clarified. “And extremely malevolent vibes.”

“Is that all? Please.” Mollified, Libby reached for the tray of Spanish rice with a serving spoon. “Like I care what you do with your precious *vibes*, Varona—”

“Don’t even think about it,” snapped Nico, slapping the spoon out of her hands. “You’ve been hereby uninvited from the provenance of dinner.”

“Oh?”

With her eyes locked rabidly on Nico's, Libby reached into the dish of rice with a single clawed hand.

“Don’t,” Nico threatened.

“Or else what?”

Libby clutched a handful of the rice, grains squishing between her fingers.

“Please,” said Gideon, stumbling to force himself between Libby and a rapidly purpling Nico as Max and Mira leaned forward, breaths simultaneously withheld. “Remember the points,” Gideon panted desperately. “The essay. The... the *carpet*—”

“*Dale*,” said Nico, beckoning Libby like a bullfighter. “Make my day, Rhodes.”

Beneath Nico’s widened stance, the floor rumbled; the knuckles of Libby’s fingers sparked. The rice caught fire. The air conditioning unit threatened to topple and fall. The room fell silent, and Libby’s eyes glittered as she raised the burning handful of rice to her mouth and began, belligerently, to chew.

“Point Rhodes,” Libby forced through a mouthful of Nico’s abuela’s recipe.

At which point Nico launched himself across the makeshift table, upending the bowl of guacamole directly onto Gideon’s head.

ACT III, SCENE II: THE OFFICE OF TRISTAN CAINE

*An immaculate corner office of the Wessex Corporation's London Headquarters, top floor.*

THE PLAYERS:

*Tristan Caine, host*

*Rupesh Abkari, "best mate"*

*Eden Wessex, fiancée, heiress, surprise guest*

“Oi, look who I found,” called Rupesh cheerily, bursting into Tristan’s office without knocking (as he was generally wont to do).

Behind the floor-to-ceiling windows, the sun was beginning to set. Tristan Caine did not notice, nor did he lift his eyes from his screen as he replied.

“Busy,” he said, gesturing to the pile of applications beside his monitor.

“Too busy for me?”

Tristan’s head snapped up at that, observing the ever-beguiling silhouette of his fiancée.

“Eden.” Helplessly, Tristan pushed his chair back from his desk. Eden swayed into his office and sat herself with a plop on his leather sofa. “What are you doing here?” he asked warily, choosing not to comment when Rupesh fell onto the sofa beside her.

“I was hungry,” Eden said with a shrug, “and lonely, and my father’s working you far too hard. Rup was kind enough to let me in.” She spared Rupesh a wink before turning her attention back to Tristan. “Pad Thai?” she offered, holding up a carton of takeaway with a dazzling smile.

“I’m—” Tristan paused to watch Rupesh accept a carton of food from

Eden, who, undeterred by Tristan's hesitation, continued withdrawing what seemed to be a veritable buffet from her bag. "Not hungry," Tristan finished under his breath. Rupesh accepted a proffered pair of chopsticks and began tucking into a dish of woonsen salad.

"Come on, Tris," Rupesh beckoned through a mouthful of glass noodles. "Have dinner, for once."

"Yeah, come on, Tris." Eden smiled adoringly at him. "We don't have to discuss the wedding, if that helps. Rup here's already volunteered to join me at the flower mart," she added, nudging Rupesh playfully.

"Has he, then." Tristan lowered himself into the chair opposite the two of them on the sofa, observing the way Rupesh's knee very carefully did not brush Eden's, even when the innocence of proximity suggested it should. "How... generous of you, Rupesh."

"I know it's not your thing, mate, but I've got sisters." Rupesh shrugged, then grinned up at Tristan. "I know what's what in the botanical arts."

"I have sisters as well. And no pressing opposition to florals." Tristan crossed one leg over the other, shifting back in his chair as Eden held a plate of dumplings out to him.

"Bite, sweet?" she asked him, batting her lashes.

Tristan glanced at Rupesh, whose smile faltered only a breath before broadening with a fraternal *go on, then*.

"Right. Yes, thanks." Tristan leaned forward, allowing Eden to place a bite of dumpling on his tongue. She smiled, brushing the sheen of oil away with her thumb before replacing her thumb with her lips, soft and warm with promise.

"Good, isn't it?" she murmured in Tristan's ear, adjusting his tie as she settled herself back against the sofa.

Tristan chewed and then swallowed the flavorless mouthful. "Very.

Did you try a new place?"

"Oh, you know me, I'm impossible." She turned a little shrug on Rupesh, who busied himself with a mouthful of prawn curry. "I just get so easily bored with the same places."

"It's true, she does," Tristan agreed, observing the iron stiffness of Rupesh's arm in his continued avoidance of Eden's. "It's incredible, actually, how quickly Eden can decide something's gone stale."

"Really? Oh, I'm such a bore," said Rupesh, too quickly. "Dad's gone to the same place for decades and I'm a chip off the old block." (The place in question being in possession of a Michelin star, not that Tristan felt such things worth mentioning. It was funny how many things were unworthy of mention. For example, the lipstick stain that had been so poorly illusioned on Rupesh's sleeve, or the fact that Eden's perfume layered them both.)

"You'll have to come out with us next time," Eden said to Rupesh, brushing his sleeve with her fingertips and prompting his gaze to flick to Tristan's and away. "Tristan and I'd love to take you around sometime."

"Ah, but three's a crowd, isn't it, darling?" said Tristan.

"Or is it a party?" offered Rupesh playfully, which was just a hair too far for Tristan's taste.

He rose to his feet, leaning over to brush a kiss to Eden's forehead. "Thanks, babe," he offered with genuine sincerity, since in fairness, it would be this or whatever mediocrity was left in the shop downstairs. "I'll eat later."

Eden's expression faltered, taken aback. "Back to work so soon?"

Translation: *You've lost interest already?* The only thing Eden couldn't stand to hear—and the only thing that kept Tristan interesting—was his careful, calculated use of no, which Rupesh was obviously not doling out with appropriate caution.

"Have to, love. It's why they give me the good offices."

Tristan looked up to lock eyes with Rupesh. Translation: *Enjoy it while it lasts.*

Then Tristan returned to his desk, donning his noise-canceling headphones and opening up the latest valuation file, drowning out the subtext and the sunset until all that remained were his notes.

## ALL'S WELL THAT ENDS WELL: THE APARTMENT, AT LAST

“So,” Gideon said, surveying what remained of dinner. “Despite your friends’ very generous efforts to volunteer their time and patience on your behalf, you two decided to destroy the kitchen table, set Max’s pile of term papers on fire, and traumatize Señora Santana’s Chihuahua, all rather than write five paragraphs about the philosophies of naturalism in medeian studies.”

Chagrined, Libby picked indiscriminately at the dried tomato sauce in her nail beds. Nico did the opposite, staring at the ceiling and choosing not to acknowledge the shredded cilantro in his hair.

“Never mind that you were given every possible opportunity to succeed.” Gideon folded his arms over his chest, lips pursed. “Frankly, I think you owe Mira and Max an apology. Not to mention Señora Santana, and undoubtedly the Mukherjee brothers downstairs.”

“Sorry,” Libby and Nico mumbled in unison, refusing to look at each other. The bottom of Nico’s T-shirt had been singed up to his lower ribs while Libby continued to tilt her head at odd intervals in service to her inner ear, which was suffering recurring waves of vertigo.

“I’m not mad,” Gideon concluded wearily. “Just disappointed.”

“Sorry,” Libby and Nico muttered again, exchanging a huffy glance between themselves before Libby finally let out a burst of a sigh, turning to Nico.

“Here. You write an argument for determinism,” she said, shoving his tablet at him and holding out a hand for her laptop. “I’ll write one against. In twenty minutes we’ll swap.”

“Fine.” Nico reached gruffly for the tablet and slapped the laptop into her hands. “Use good words.”

“God, I hate you.” Libby bent her head, furiously typing, while Nico, not to be outdone, snatched his bluetooth keyboard and began doing the same.

By the time the two had swapped and shown signs of possible argument, the sun was already close to rising. Mira, who had been nodding off into Max’s shoulder, hastily snatched the laptop from Libby before further conflict could bleed into breakfast.

“I’ll submit it for you, okay? Let’s just end this. Please.” Mira motioned something to Libby that could only have been the enactment of a secret sororal code, which Libby accepted with a grudging sigh.

“Fine. I can’t feel my face anyway.” Libby rose to her feet, swaying, and looked around the room with exhaustion. “Can I just... come by later to take care of... all of this?”

By “this,” she meant the dismantled bookshelf and upended trays of food that littered the post-war apartment like shrapnel.

“No,” said Gideon. “Nicolás will be cleaning this up. Won’t he?” he prompted, arching a brow in the direction of Nico, who appeared poised for argument.

“I... fine” said Nico, finally recognizing the signs of defeat. Instead of arguing, he curled up, exhausted, on the floor. “Whatever.”

“Great. Bye.” With a final glare in Nico’s direction, Libby was successfully dragged out the door by Mira.

The moment the latch clicked—Nico’s snores already obscuring the sound of the Mukherjee brothers getting ready for work—Max turned to Gideon with a contemplative frown.

“Aren’t you part of their group?” asked Max.

“It’s called delegation,” Gideon replied.

He and Max observed Nico’s sleeping form in silence, watching as he flung one arm over his head and into what remained of the tres

leches cake.

“He’s so cute when he sleeps,” remarked Gideon fondly, and Max slung an arm around Gideon’s neck, the two of them turning with a sense of satisfaction to watch the rosy beams of sunrise brighten the still-smoldering drapes.