

**Duel of the Linguist Mages**  
**By Scotto Moore**

Characters

Nate Wells  
Olivia Regan  
Maddy  
Bradford Jenning  
Governor  
Bain / Candidate

Although each act is broken into multiple scenes for organizational reasons, the play flows without interruption from one scene to the next with no blackouts. Nate moves seamlessly back and forth between his roles as a narrator and a player in the action and we follow him through each scene transition.

**ACT ONE**

**Scene One: "JOB INTERVIEW"**

*Lights snap up on an office workplace, a reception area, with a beautiful sign that reads "JENNING & REECE" – Nate is alone, waiting patiently. He is in his 30s, dressed professionally in a shirt & tie, facing the audience. Maddy enters - a woman in late 20s or early 30s who stands out by way of her striking colored hair – a bright red wig that looks quite fashionable on her.*

MADDY: Oh - can I help you?

NATE: I'm here for an interview. I'm Nathan Wells.

MADDY: Sorry – the receptionist is late. But I'm headed back to the lab right now. I'll let Olivia know you're here. *She goes – then stops, turns back to him.* Have we met before? I feel like we've met.

NATE: I doubt it.

MADDY: Try me. What do you do?

NATE: I wrote software for Cunningham until recently.

MADDY: And you're not famous for anything?

NATE: Not that I'm aware of.

MADDY: Hmm. I'm sure it'll come to me. *She exits. Nate waits patiently. Maddy returns. Cunningham sent people to that conference in Boulder last year. Maybe that's where I saw you! Nate shakes his head. Huh. She exits again. Pause. Then she slowly wanders back in one more time.* Never met? Not once?

NATE: It's true.

MADDY: Huh. *Pause.* You do look sort of like a guy on this cop show. Maybe that's what I'm thinking of.

NATE: I get that all the time.

MADDY: You do?

NATE: No.

*She pauses, then exits. Nate turns to the audience.*

NATE: I'm going to tell you the story of how all of human civilization was nearly conquered by a single insane linguist... a linguist who gained nearly unimaginable power by hacking the structure of language at such a root level that no one could resist her commands... a linguist who escaped her physical body to become a being of pure thought, a malicious spectre distributed across the realm of human consciousness. It starts off with a simple job interview. *Issuing a command:* Forward.

*Olivia enters and she and Nate move to her office, shake hands & sit.*

OLIVIA: Thank you so much for waiting, Mr. Wells. I'm Olivia Regan. Do you prefer Nathan or Nate?

NATE: Everyone calls me Nate.

OLIVIA: Excellent, no sense in wasting an extra syllable. Slows down the train of thought. You may call me Olivia.

NATE: Not Liv?

OLIVIA: As it turns out, the syllables in my name are not "extra" - they're the precise amount. Tell me about your last position, Mr. Wells.

NATE: At Cunningham, I led a software team working on a breakthrough voice print recognition system.

OLIVIA: Ah, that must be this bullet point here on your resume, the one that says "led a software team working on a breakthrough voice print recognition system." *She smiles at him.*

NATE *a little taken aback:* Right.

OLIVIA: What was your "breakthrough," if I might ask?

NATE: We developed new methods for cataloging types of intonation, to more deeply embed mood as a parameter for the sensor.

OLIVIA: Pretend I know nothing about voice print recognition. What was significant about embedding mood as a parameter for the sensor?

NATE: Other systems in the field expected you to pronounce words the same way every time. But our software learned to recognize the actual tone features of your voice. *He pauses.* How much *do* you know about voice print recognition?

OLIVIA: You're not pretending, Mr. Wells.

NATE: Adding intonation to the sensor gave us an edge at the time - we could more reliably detect when recordings or voice synthesizers were being used to try to fool the sensors.

OLIVIA: And why did you leave Cunningham, Mr. Wells?

NATE: We picked up a military contract that... made me uncomfortable.

OLIVIA: Are you at liberty to discuss the details of this contract?

NATE: I'm not.

OLIVIA: I imagine you're rather interested to know why this advertising agency is looking to hire an expert in computational linguistics.

NATE: The intersection does seem curious.

OLIVIA: We have an unprecedented methodology here at Jennings & Reece... one that is better witnessed than described.

NATE: Forward.

*Scene Two: "TEST SUBJECT"*

*Nate and Olivia rise and their chairs are spirited away behind them. Olivia leaves him. Nate turns to face the audience as the scene change happens behind him.*

NATE: Before I forget - I'll be taking a few liberties in my reconstruction of these events, obscuring things that should never be accurately reproduced. There are some things you just don't want to hear first hand. Resume.

*Lights up on the full stage. Maddy sits opposite a young man in normal street clothes - Bain. Olivia watches from the back of the room, elevated on a small riser if possible, and Nate circles slowly to join her as the action unfolds. The following sequence has a rhythmic percussive quality to it, and it's possible to imagine a light industrial beat accompanying the sequence. It's a spoken word musical number, so to speak.*

MADDY: Tell me how you feel when you hear these phrases.

Tell me how you feel when you hear these sounds.

Lilacs blooming.

BAIN: Soft and pretty.

MADDY: Oooooooooaaahhh.

BAIN: Makes me nervous.

MADDY: Trees collapsing.

BAIN: Sad and angry.

MADDY Weeeerrrrrhhhhggghhh.

BAIN Makes me hungry.

MADDY: Tell me how you feel when you hear these syllables.

Tell me how you feel when you hear these tones.

Buh kah too kah.

BAIN: Oh, that's nice.

MADDY: Aaayyyyiiiee.

BAIN: Stings a little.

MADDY: Foo ta-kah roo ta-kah.

BAIN: Did you throw your voice?

MADDY: Wooooaaahhhh.

BAIN: I'm going to be just fine.

MADDY: Tell me how you feel when I sing this phrase.

"I'd like to buh kah foo ta-kah roo ta-kah."

BAIN: I didn't mean it. Please don't be mad.

MADDY: "Bwah la-la fah la-la ahhhh ohhhh."

BAIN: I didn't know you felt so strongly.

MADDY: Tell me how you feel when I string these random noises together in an alien way.

Arrgghh bbbuuuhh!

BAIN: You've got to be joking.

MADDY: Frrreeeeep yaaaarrrrm!

BAIN: You can't really mean that.

MADDY: Why do you say that?

BAIN: That just wouldn't make sense.

MADDY: Tell me how you feel if I say I'm leaving.

BAIN: But I'm not ready yet.

MADDY: I'm afraid that's all.

*A brief moment in which Maddy and Bain seem to come out of a light daze. Dialogue that follows is in a more normal cadence. Maddy smiles at Bain.*

MADDY: That was very good.

BAIN: Do we have another appointment on the calendar?

MADDY: This afternoon, in fact. I'll see you after lunch.

BAIN *smiling as well*: Thank you, Maddy. *Pause*. Would you like to see a movie with me after the appointment?

MADDY *shakes her head*: Too much to do. Maybe another time.

BAIN: Okay. There are some good movies playing right now.

MADDY: If there's something you want to see, you should go, Bain. I've been working a lot of nights lately. I wouldn't want you to miss anything good.

BAIN: Oh. Of course. See you this afternoon, Maddy. *Exits*.

*Maddy rises, notices Olivia and Nate for the first time. She is discomfited to see Olivia.*

MADDY: Ms. Regan, I didn't know you'd be observing that session.

OLIVIA: This is Nate Wells. He may soon be leading your division.

NATE: What do you call this division?

OLIVIA: Linguistic research and development. *To Maddy*: That will be all. *Maddy exits*. Obviously you'll need to automate that kind of testing before we'll make any further progress.

NATE: And what kind of "testing" was that, exactly?

OLIVIA: We're testing what we call "power morphemes."

NATE: I'm sorry - "Power morphemes"?

OLIVIA: A "power morpheme" is the smallest distinct unit of meaning that means more than it should.

NATE: I'm sorry – that doesn't make-

OLIVIA: It's a breakthrough just like yours, Mr. Wells. A morpheme on its own is just a very tiny particle – the smallest unit of meaning. We've learned how to bundle sympathetic intonation with these tiny particles to create morphemes that mean more than they ordinarily could.

NATE: That sounds... cool.

OLIVIA: We can use these “power morphemes” to induce temporary suggestive states, which you saw in our test just now.

NATE: All those... crazy noises were...?

OLIVIA: “Power morphemes” in action.

NATE: And what do you do with these temporary suggestive states?

OLIVIA *brightly*: We plant subliminal information.

NATE: So it's – brainwashing?

OLIVIA: No, it's simply persuasion. That's what advertising is, Mr. Wells – the Science of Persuasion. *Pause*. You seem unconvinced.

NATE: I'd need to see a more technical explanation.

OLIVIA: I'll give you a thought puzzle. You understand the concept of imaginary numbers?

NATE: Numbers that don't refer to anything you can hold or count in the real world.

OLIVIA: People once thought “zero” was an imaginary number. People once thought negatives were imaginary – how could you possibly have less than one of something? But an entire system of imaginary numbers evolved, describing areas of advanced physics beyond anything ancient mathematicians could have dreamed of.

NATE: What's the puzzle?

OLIVIA: Can you describe what imaginary morphemes might be?

NATE *after a beat*: Units of meaning that can't possibly mean what they claim to mean?

OLIVIA: Very good, Mr. Wells.

NATE: So “power morphemes” are-

OLIVIA: Imaginary morphemes we can use in the real physical world.

NATE: Use to do what? *Pause*. Oh right. Persuasion.

OLIVIA: It's a science! May I ask you a question? *Before he can respond*: What was the nature of Cunningham's military contract, the one that made you so uncomfortable?

NATE: They wanted to reverse my voice print recognition system. Synthesize perfect replicas of people's voices,

and use them to issue subliminal commands that they wouldn't question, because their own voices would be giving the commands.

OLIVIA: That might work in a military unit, but it certainly won't scale across a population. You did well to leave – your intellect will be much better utilized with Jennings & Reece. Come, Bradford would like to meet you.

NATE: Pause. *Olivia freezes.* Did you see how easily she did that? Replay.

OLIVIA: What was the nature of Cunningham's military contract...

NATE: What was that thing you didn't plan to tell me...

OLIVIA: ...the one that made you so uncomfortable?

NATE: ...the thing you absolutely need to tell me now?

OLIVIA: That might work in a military unit...

NATE: Very good, let me reward you with a minor insight...

OLIVIA: ...but it certainly won't scale across a population.

NATE: ...then hook you with a tantalizing detail.

OLIVIA: You did well to leave...

NATE: Soften you with a compliment...

OLIVIA: ...your intellect will be much better utilized with Jennings & Reece.

NATE: ...and this is no longer an interview, because you're taking whatever job we offer. She's not even using "power morphemes" on me at this point. She's just persuasive.

OLIVIA *smiles* – *she didn't smile the first time she said this:* Come, Bradford would like to meet you.

NATE: Forward.

### ***Scene Three: "CLIENT MEETING"***

*Lights dim, Nate crosses forward in his spotlight to address the audience as the scene changes behind him.*

NATE: Alexander Reece had retired from active partnership in the firm several years earlier for health reasons, so I believe that the Reece family is innocent of all but the most tertiary of crimes. Bradford Jennings, on the other hand, was never innocent. Resume.

*Lights rise on an executive office, where BRADFORD sits behind his desk; in his 50s, dressed in casual business attire so as to appear disarming to his clients. A couch faces the desk. Nate crosses to Bradford, who rises & shakes his hand; Olivia hovers nearby.*

BRADFORD: Thanks for coming to see us, Mr. Wells. Sit, both of you. *They do.* I've got a thought puzzle for you. Do you like thought puzzles?

NATE: I like... thought.

BRADFORD: Pretend I know nothing about speech recognition-

OLIVIA: He doesn't pretend.

NATE: I *can* pretend, I just-

BRADFORD: How would you summarize speech recognition? In one sentence.

NATE: Well, I'd... use more than one sentence- *In response to a sharp look from Bradford:* Speech recognition... uses statistical modeling to... analyze what morphemes are occurring, and what morphemes are likely to occur next.

BRADFORD: That's actually "prediction," wouldn't you say?

NATE: Do I get another sentence? *Bradford nods.* Yes, there's a predictive element at work... to be successful, a speech recognition system has to anticipate in advance what a person might choose to say.

BRADFORD: So here's the thought puzzle. Imagine unlimited computing power is at your disposal. How far in advance could a system predict an entire phrase before it's spoken?

*Nate turns, uncertain, to face Olivia.*

OLIVIA: When he interviewed me, my thought puzzle was, "Two girls were born to the same mother at the same time, but they're not twins. How can this be?"

NATE: Triplets?

OLIVIA: Don't show off, Mr. Wells.

NATE *in response to Bradford's obvious irritation:* I could imagine, with enough computing power, a system that could predict an entire phrase based on nothing more than a single morpheme

BRADFORD: Then perhaps you can also imagine a system powerful enough to work in the reverse.

NATE: I'm sorry-

OLIVIA: He says that a lot.

NATE: I'm sorry- what does-

BRADFORD: Instead of recognizing the first morpheme in a phrase and predicting the rest, what if our system could *create* the first morpheme in a phrase, before it's spoken?

NATE *after a long pause:* Is this still part of the puzzle?

BRADFORD: I'm describing our business, Mr. Wells – planting meaning in the culture and guaranteeing its effect to our clients. We've done it the old-fashioned way for years, but it's time to upgrade our approach.

MADDY *enters:* I'm sorry to interrupt, Mr. Jennings, but the Governor is here.

OLIVIA: I can show Mr. Wells to his new office-

BRADFORD: No, please, both of you stay. I think it will be instructive for Nate to see first hand what's at stake.  
*To Maddy:* Please show her in.

*Maddy motions off stage, and shortly after, the Governor enters – a sharply dressed woman in her 50s. Maddy exits. Bradford approaches the Governor respectfully.*

BRADFORD: Madame Governor.

GOVERNOR: Bradford. I wish I could say I'm happy to see you. I never thought I'd see the day you lost a campaign for me.

BRADFORD: We haven't lost yet-

GOVERNOR: I'm making a hundred million campaign stops a week and the needle isn't moving!

BRADFORD: We just need to expand the marketing push.

GOVERNOR: *Expand it?* We need to *replace it!* It doesn't *work!*

BRADFORD: It continues to test well, but our reach is limited due to your campaign's... financial situation.

GOVERNOR: Bradford, I've known you a long time, but if you expect me-

NATE: Pause. I won't bore you with the full forty-five minute tedium of this meeting. Here's a brief summary. Replay.

GOVERNOR *livid:* We're losing.

BRADFORD: More money.

GOVERNOR: We're losing!

BRADFORD: More money, or keep losing.

GOVERNOR: Wasting money!

BRADFORD: Wasting time.

GOVERNOR: New ideas?

BRADFORD: Same ideas, bigger market.

GOVERNOR: New ideas!

BRADFORD: More money or no ideas!

GOVERNOR: Ideas don't work!

BRADFORD: Still in it!

GOVERNOR: Just barely!

BRADFORD: Ideas *work*.

GOVERNOR *threatening*: Ideas work *better* – or no more money.

NATE: And then, just as it seemed like Bradford Jennings and a United States Governor might get into a slap fight...

OLIVIA: Excuse me.

NATE: Watch closely.

OLIVIA: When you approached us, Governor, you were twenty-two points down in this race, due to your personal scandal, which we have not mentioned since.

GOVERNOR: How *gracious* of you.

OLIVIA: You closed to within fourteen points after you engaged Jennings & Reece.

GOVERNOR: That was *months* ago!

OLIVIA: That fourteen point gap represents your opponent's incessant attack on your character. His lead over you cannot be eroded by counter-attacking on personal grounds, for he miraculously lives clean--

GOVERNOR: No one lives clean.

OLIVIA: --and regardless the public would be suspicious of any new scandal we might create.

GOVERNOR: Then why did you even call me here? Just to rub it in that I've lost?

OLIVIA: On the contrary... as one of our most esteemed clients, this firm wants to see you win, Governor. We have a new marketing plan to present.

BRADFORD *surprised*: We do? *Catching himself*. Of course we do.

*After a moment of silence:*

OLIVIA: Mr. Wells, would you please visit human resources and ask for your new hire paperwork? I'll be with you momentarily.

*All eyes are on Nate. He shrugs.*

NATE: Forward.

#### ***Scene Four: "SCIENCE OF PERSUASION"***

*Lights dim, Nate crosses forward in his spotlight to address the audience as the scene changes behind him.*

NATE: The official title they offered me was "Senior Director of Linguistic Research Technology" and it sounded predictably pleasing rolling off the tongue. Something about the whole situation seemed very unlikely, but I was intrigued enough to ignore my own lingering concerns. Resume.

*Lights up behind him on the lunch room. At a table center stage, Maddy sits with her head down in front on the table, her lunch untouched, sound asleep. He crosses slowly to a nearby table, hoping not to wake her, but as he slowly slides a chair out, she pops awake with an audible gasp.*

NATE: Sorry.

MADDY *embarrassed*: Oh!

NATE: I don't have a desk yet. They told me to wait in the lunch room.

MADDY: Oh, it's fine, it's fine. It's not your fault I'm so sleepy.

*He sits opposite her.*

MADDY: So you got the job – congratulations!

NATE: Thanks. I haven't seen an org chart yet. Do you... report to me now?

MADDY: Not sure. I've been reporting to Olivia.

NATE: What happened to the old “Senior Director of Linguistic Research Technology”?

MADDY: There wasn't one. Your position is new.

NATE: Really?

MADDY: I know, pretty fancy. *Pause*. I'm not trying to diminish your title-

NATE: No, it's cool. *Pause*. Nice title though, right?

MADDY *laughs*: Very nice.

NATE: How many programmers do we have?

MADDY: Just you. We did have someone for a while, but she... didn't work out.

NATE: I see. And what do you do here?

MADDY: I'm just a “Lead Researcher,” but I'm happy.

NATE: What were you doing in that lab earlier? Olivia said you were testing something called “power morphemes”?

MADDY: Yeah, we've been testing forever.

NATE: I guess this is a stupid question, but-

MADDY: What exactly *is* a “power morpheme”? Saw that coming.

NATE: I didn't see a definition in my orientation materials.

MADDY: Noooo, no way, this is the top secret special sauce. The best way to explain it... there are sounds that infants make, or little kids, or puppies. Sounds that make you go "awww." Useful sounds for a baby to make, because a baby needs you for survival. So, turns out there are more than a few sounds that will reliably do that, and if you bundle them with certain units of meaning, the receiver is much more likely to be sympathetic to whatever message you're sending.

NATE: So it *is* brainwashing.

MADDY: No, it's "the science of persuasion."

NATE: That's what Olivia said. Sounds creepy.

MADDY: It's harmless. Oh, before I forget...

*She smiles wide, gives him a serious stare, and opens her mouth to speak. Lights dim to focus on these two. Maddy's mouth is moving, but we're not hearing any sounds.*

NATE *to audience*: This section is muted for your safety.

*Lights back to normal as Maddy finishes talking and picks at her lunch. Nate seems dazed.*

NATE: I'm sorry, what did you just say?

MADDY: I said you should move into the city. The commute from your place is going to be miserable.

*Olivia enters.*

OLIVIA: Mr. Wells, there you are. *As Maddy rises.* Oh, Maddy – I will need to see you in my office before you leave today, to review some results.

MADDY: Of course. *She nods to Nate, then exits.*

OLIVIA: Already getting to know your team, I see.

NATE: I assume my team needs some kind of software?

OLIVIA: Yes. Let's discuss the requirements in my office. I think you'll be quite intrigued.

NATE: Forward.

### ***Scene Five: "THE PROJECT"***

*Lights dim, Nate crosses forward in his spotlight to address the audience as the scene changes behind him.*

NATE: The next few weeks were a blur. I was excited about Olivia's project for me – her goals were insanely ambitious. *A desk with workstation appears and he sits.* I was not the first programmer that Olivia had worked with, but my predecessor was not as senior and not as skilled. When I cracked the code open, I could tell we needed a new direction. Olivia seemed to be by my side the whole way... practically right inside my mind, ready to answer my questions. For instance, I might ask, "Is your existing software model of the brain high bandwidth enough to even run these simulations accurately?" And she'd respond...

*Lights up on Olivia in a pool of light, facing the audience but addressing Nate.*

OLIVIA *calm, reassuring, tranquil*: Our model is quite accurate, Nate. When we test new patterns against our brain model, and then test these same patterns against human subjects, the responses are remarkably similar, well within an acceptable margin of error.

NATE: How much human testing do you do?

OLIVIA: We do exactly the right amount. Don't you fret. We take every precaution... most of the time. *Lights out on Olivia.*

NATE: And then I'd find myself coding for some long, indeterminate stretch of time, and while I was coding, sometimes I saw my new friend Maddy, right inside my mind. And I'd ask her, "If it's so easy to programmatically combine units of language with sympathetic vocal intonation, wouldn't someone have already discovered 'power morphemes' by now?" And she'd laugh and say...

*Lights up on Maddy in a pool of light, facing the audience but addressing Nate.*

MADDY: Oh Nate... there's a little more to it than that. But Olivia's not about to reveal her *entire secret sauce* to the new guy before he's even had his first performance review! In fact, she's keeping the origin of "power morphemes" a complete secret, even from me.

NATE: Why wouldn't she want to tell the world?

MADDY *shrugs*: That's the private sector for you. Listen, Nate, you need to be very careful developing your system. It's hard enough working with "power morphemes" when you're restricted to speaking them aloud with a human voice. Software can do so much more. Ask for dummy data to test with.

NATE: If I don't have real "power morphemes," how will I know-

MADDY: Trust me - if you use real "power morphemes," who knows what state you might find yourself in the next morning? *Lights out on Maddy.*

NATE *to audience*: I worked for weeks, and it felt really good to be in the zone, cranking and productive. There was just one issue. *Lights up on Olivia.* How many "power morphemes" do you have in your library?

OLIVIA: One hundred and eight. Obviously I'm going to need more before your system will truly be useful.

NATE: I think I can make new ones from scratch by combining the original set in unexpected ways. Making full commands out of strings of "power morphemes."

OLIVIA: I was hoping you'd say that. I'll need a simple control interface - let me specify a desired effect, such as "Tell me your favorite color," and your system should find a way to invent the "power morphemes" that will achieve this effect.

NATE: I'll need real data to test with eventually.

OLIVIA: Wire up the system, Nate, and let me do the testing. Oh - if I may make a suggestion, Nate... Bradford must never learn about this new system, do you understand? He must never know that you can create new "power morphemes."

NATE: Why is that?

OLIVIA: He's not like us, Nate. He no longer shares our appetite for exploring the boundaries of the possible. Keep this system just between us, Nate... if I may make a suggestion. *Lights out on Olivia.*

NATE: I could tell, even simply using dummy data for testing, that I was clearly on the right track. I would absolutely deliver a kick ass prototype to Olivia. And maybe I'd impress Maddy while I was at it. *Lights up on Olivia.*

MADDY *flirting*: You do have a very nice title.

*Nate's workstation is pulled away as lights go down on Olivia and Maddy.*

*Lights up on the lunch room set, where Maddy is already sound asleep at the same table. Nate sits and promptly falls asleep as well. A few beats of silence, then Maddy finally stirs... notices Nate.*

MADDY: Hey.

*He sits up abruptly – takes a moment.*

NATE: Huh?

MADDY: Do you ever go home?

NATE: Oh... not really. *Pause.* Do you?

MADDY: Not really.

NATE: What are you working on?

MADDY: Uh... nothing special. *Pause.* What are *you* working on?

NATE: A prototype for Olivia. I think it's finally ready. *Pause.* If it's nothing special, why are you working so late every night?

MADDY *pause*: I just like working nights. *Pause.* What's your prototype do?

NATE: It invents new “power morphemes.”

MADDY *pause*: It can do that?

NATE: Well – it's just a prototype.

MADDY: What will these new “power morphemes” do?

NATE: I don't know yet.

*Abruptly Maddy tries to bolt out of the lunch room – Nate stops her.*

NATE: Maddy, wait! *She stops.* Did I say something, or... do something wrong?

MADDY: Of course not. You've just... you don't know what they *feel* like.

NATE: I have a pretty good idea-

MADDY: No. You don't.

*A familiar light, industrial beat rises up softly. Maddy crosses slowly to him, almost whispers in his ear, and his response is immediate.*

MADDY: Tell me how you feel when you hear these phrases.  
Tell me how you feel when you hear these sounds.

Oooooooooooooooooohhhhh

NATE: Extremely peaceful.

MADDY: Waaaaaaarrrrrlllllll

NATE: Scared, hopeless.

MADDY: Mmmmmmmmmmmmm

NATE: I can't see clearly.

MADDY: Wreeeeeeeeeeee

NATE: Very lonely.

MADDY: Tell me how you feel when you hear me whisper

Tell me how you feel when you hear my breath

*(Blows air across his face)*

NATE: Unbelievable.

MADDY: Hssssssssssssssssssss

NATE: Oh my god.

MADDY: *(siren whistle)*

NATE: Are you serious?

MADDY: Haaaaaaaaaahhh

NATE: Whatever you want.

MADDY: Tell me how you feel when I let you linger

Tell me how you feel as you watch me go

NATE: But I'm not ready yet

MADDY: I'm afraid that's all.

*Long pause as Nate assimilates this new experience.*

NATE: How many... "power morphemes" were you using in that sequence?

MADDY: Just one. *She goes.*

NATE: Forward.

### **Scene Six: "PROTOTYPE"**

*Lights dim, Nate crosses forward in his spotlight to address the audience as the scene changes behind him into the laboratory scene from earlier, with Maddy joining Bain. Olivia wheels a terminal on stage.*

NATE: Olivia wasted no time preparing a test of my prototype. Of course she knew how it worked already because she'd provided all the requirements. She'd replaced my dummy data with real "power morphemes" and was ready for human testing. Maddy had planted a seed of doubt in me about handing this prototype over to Olivia, but I wanted to see my software in action. *He arrives at her side.*

OLIVIA: Let's just see what we've got, shall we?

NATE: Isn't it a little... premature for human testing?

OLIVIA *curt*: Our release forms are very clear, Mr. Wells. Initiating first sequence! *Enters a command on her terminal.*

*A low and steadily rising tone emerges, almost like a very slow motion siren that quietly rises. On the lab floor, both Maddy and Bain are affected, their eyes glazing over.*

NATE: I barely had time to notice that Maddy herself was affected by the prototype. Only a split second later, I realized – so was I. Note that Olivia herself is immune.

*The siren is soon accompanied by a pulse.*

NATE: The sound you're hearing is a pale imitation of what we actually heard.

*Maddy and Bain rise. Nate joins them in a line on the lab floor.*

OLIVIA: Ready. Maddy, if you please - the last thunderstorm you remember. Execute.

MADDY *smiles*: Chicago. On the pier. The waves almost swept me into the lake.

OLIVIA: Bain - a recent success. Execute.

BAIN: Our chess team made it to semi-finals.

NATE: This is just a warm-up sequence in the program, establishing a connection with each node within range.

OLIVIA: Mr. Wells - a long-forgotten friend. Execute.

NATE: I learned a little more about “power morphemes” as I stood there helpless.

OLIVIA: Bain - a time you were cruel. Execute.

BAIN: I should not have sent those pictures to everyone... but I'd probably do it again.

OLIVIA: Mr. Wells - the thing that embarrasses you most. Execute.

NATE: Yes, she asked me that.

OLIVIA: Good, very good. Let's try the next sequence! *She hits a new key on the keyboard.*

NATE: She spent the next forty-five minutes accessing deeper and deeper layers of memory.

OLIVIA: Maddy - a fantasy you've never admitted. Execute.

MADDY *resisting*: I shouldn't say.

OLIVIA: Oh, but I insist. Execute.

NATE: In the interest of propriety, we will skip Maddy's response.

OLIVIA: Excellent.

NATE: I was helpless. Knowing how the software worked afforded me no special protection against its effects.

OLIVIA: Bain - a crime you knowingly committed. Execute.

BAIN: I robbed a woman when I was fourteen. I remember her face. The thought still excites me.

NATE: Of course, using dummy data for testing had given me only the merest glimmer of how the software could actually be used.

OLIVIA: Maddy - a person you've thought about killing. Execute.

MADDY: I almost did kill him, actually. A bully deserves what he gets.

OLIVIA: How did you almost kill him? Execute.

MADDY: Set his house on fire. But then I called the fire department. I guess it's better that way.

NATE: She's not being nominally vindictive with this sequence, you understand. It's simply important for her to know that she can truly access the deepest layers of memory, the ones we hide for very good reasons.

OLIVIA: Bain - a dream you can't admit to yourself will never come true. Execute.

BAIN: But it might, someday.

OLIVIA: Tell me the truth. Execute.

BAIN: I will not make Maddy love me.

OLIVIA: Why not? Execute.

BAIN: I'm not attractive enough.

NATE: She was using my software to gain read access to our memories. That meant she was well on the way to gaining write access as well. However, that did not seem to be her immediate goal. She shut down the test.

OLIVIA: Disengaging! *She hits a key command.*

*Nate, Maddy and Bain look to each other, slightly bewildered.*

MADDY: Nate... what are you doing here?

NATE: Just... you know... stuff.

BAIN *a little groggy*: That didn't feel like our normal session.

MADDY: I'm sure we were well within safe operating parameters.

BAIN: If you say so. Do we have another session on the calendar?

MADDY: We always do, Bain. Twice a day, every day.

BAIN: Are you working late again tonight?

MADDY *nods*: Under a very tight deadline.

BAIN: Maybe I could... stop by the lab and bring you some dinner.

MADDY: That's very sweet, Bain, but not tonight.

BAIN: Oh. Okay. See you this afternoon I guess. *Exits.*

OLIVIA: Mr. Wells! *Nate notices her, and drifts her direction.* I'm very pleased.

NATE: Thanks... I guess. I mean- is this what you were looking for?

OLIVIA: I'm looking for something very specific. Your system will help me find it – I have no doubt.

NATE: Can you describe it? Maybe I can help-

OLIVIA: No, Mr. Wells. I can take it from here. Maddy!

MADDY: Yes, Ms. Regan?

OLIVIA: I will need to see you in my office within the hour.

MADDY: Of course.

*Olivia exits with the terminal. Maddy and Nate are left facing each other. Maddy exits hurriedly.*

**Scene Seven: "POLITICAL RALLY"**

*Lights dim, Nate crosses forward in his spotlight to address the audience. Behind him, the lab is replaced by Bradford's office.*

NATE: At the time, I couldn't consciously remember what had just happened to me. I decided I must have slept through the test, given how tired I was from coding so hard. We are always most susceptible to our own subliminal suggestions. The next day, Olivia was summoned to Bradford's office, and I managed to tag along.

*Olivia enters the office as lights rise, and Nate circles around behind her. Bradford is drinking scotch with the Governor, and they are both delighted to see Olivia.*

BRADFORD *grandiose*: There she is!

GOVERNOR: The heroine of the hour. *Crosses to shake Olivia's hand.* I have no idea what you did, but I was a fool to think you didn't know your craft.

OLIVIA: I'm sorry, I feel like I've missed something.

GOVERNOR: Amazing – and here I thought all information must simply flow through you.

BRADFORD *analyzing Olivia closely*: You honestly haven't heard the news?

OLIVIA: What news?

NATE: I haven't heard either.

BRADFORD: Quiet, Wells.

GOVERNOR: Bradford, show Olivia the video. I don't think I'll ever tire of seeing it.

*Bradford picks up a remote control, and the lights go down on the office. On another part of the stage, a political rally is in progress. We see a CANDIDATE in a suit enter and head to a podium. As he enters, he seems cheerful, but as Bradford speaks his next line, the candidate is distracted by something off stage, which he leans over to hear.*

BRADFORD: This is a rally which took place last night in support of the Governor's only meaningful opponent in the race. According to the news this morning, none of his aides had any idea what he was about to say.

*The crowds fall silent as the candidate reaches the podium, no longer cheerful, and begins to speak.*

CANDIDATE: My friends... supporters, donors, volunteers... it is with an unexpectedly heavy heart that I come to you tonight. You all know me as the voice of meaningful reform in this state. You all know how hard I've worked to build your trust. To demonstrate that I can be effective on your behalf. *Cheers, which he calms.* But I have reached a crisis of conscience, my friends. And if nothing else, I will always be a man of conscience. I have grown afraid of the man I might become once I win this office. *Scattered boos, catcalls.* I can't allow that to happen. That's why I have decided... to drop out of this race... *Huge uproar, he tries to talk over it....* to return to my job teaching underprivileged youth, where I can truly make a difference-

*Bradford zaps the candidate with the remote; the candidate freezes and lights go down on the rally and back up on Bradford's office.*

BRADFORD: It goes on like that for another few minutes before his security detail escorts him out.

GOVERNOR: In all my years of politics, I've never seen anything like it. Their whole party is in disarray. They'll never be able to field a realistic replacement in time.

OLIVIA: How are the polls?

GOVERNOR: I'm beating "replacement to be named later" by an obscene margin. Now I'm assuming you must have had something to do with this, Olivia-

BRADFORD: Unquestionably.

GOVERNOR: -but I understand a woman never tells, so you needn't bore me with the details. Gives me plausible deniability if I have no idea what actually happened. Just answer me this. *Very close to Olivia:* No one else is ever going to find out either, am I correct?

OLIVIA: Of course.

GOVERNOR: Because that would be very unfortunate... for all parties concerned.

BRADFORD: I think we all understand the stakes. Isn't that right, Olivia?

OLIVIA: Certainly. It's been a pleasure working on your behalf, Madame Governor.

GOVERNOR: Bradford... don't invoice me for this one. I'll make sure we boost some upcoming payments. And let's not be in touch until after the election, yes?

*The Governor exits. A moment of silence. Then Bradford wheels on Olivia, beyond livid.*

BRADFORD: Would you mind explaining just what the hell you've done?

OLIVIA: Bradford, please calm down-

BRADFORD: I told you that targeting the candidate's family was too dangerous!

OLIVIA: I didn't-

BRADFORD: You put the entire firm and everything we're doing here at risk! You don't think the media will swarm all over this?

OLIVIA: They won't find anything.

BRADFORD: How can you be so sure?

OLIVIA *snaps*: Because that's how good I am.

BRADFORD: How did you get to the family so fast?

OLIVIA: Why would I waste my time crafting and delivering secondary messages when I could target my effort precisely?

BRADFORD *pausing*: You targeted the candidate?

OLIVIA: And freed up weeks of this firm's resources to devote back to the Long Term Plan. *Changing tactics*: Bradford... the Governor will be in your debt for the rest of eternity after this.

BRADFORD: You should have told me.

OLIVIA: You would have said no.

BRADFORD: And how exactly did you pull it off?

OLIVIA: A woman never tells.

BRADFORD: I don't need deniability, Olivia.

OLIVIA: Let's just play it safe in that regard, shall we?

*They regard each other carefully.*

BRADFORD: How's your new hire working out?

OLIVIA: Swimmingly. *Pause*. Does that make you jealous, Bradford?

BRADFORD: Hardly. No one will ever know you like I do. *Pause*. Be careful with this one, Olivia.

NATE: By the way, I'm still here.

BRADFORD: Quiet, Wells.

OLIVIA: I'll be careful. I wouldn't want to... disappoint you again.

BRADFORD: You could never...

*It seems as though he might try to go to her, but she holds up a finger to stop him.*

OLIVIA: We're so close, Bradford, can't you feel it?

BRADFORD *flush with irritation*: Yes, I can feel it.

OLIVIA: Then focus.

BRADFORD: I assume you'll be adjusting the time table on the Long Term Plan.

OLIVIA: Of course.

BRADFORD: I'll expect an update in the morning.

OLIVIA *smiles*: Of course. *Turns to go.* Come, Mr. Wells.

BRADFORD *intercepts Nate*: Not yet. I'd like to have a word with Mr. Wells.

OLIVIA *clearly uncomfortable*: Very well. *She goes.*

BRADFORD: Let me be clear with you about something. You don't work for Olivia Regan. You work for me. Is that understood?

NATE: Absolutely.

BRADFORD: What project did she put you on?

NATE: Pause. I wanted desperately to tell him everything I knew, about the software she'd had me write, about the apocalyptic level of control she could gain over people now, but... Olivia had gotten to me first. Resume. *To Bradford*: Oh, well I'm still just getting up to speed on the old code base. Don't worry - I expect to be useful soon.

BRADFORD: You *will* report to me when she assigns you a project. And you will *not* let her know.

NATE: Of course. *He turns to go, then stops.* Mr. Jennings... are you and Olivia...?

*Bradford regards the unspoken question carefully.*

BRADFORD: Watch yourself, Mr. Wells.

*Lights out on Bradford's office; Nate is alone.*

NATE: Olivia had constrained me from confiding in Bradford, and I knew it. But she herself had made a small mistake. Replay.

*Lights back up on the start of the rally sequence, as the candidate enters once again; we do not hear any sounds from the rally, however.*

NATE: Pause.

*The candidate stops.*

NATE: Zoom.

*We see the candidate lean over, distracted, as a hooded figure whispers something to him – and it is in that moment that his demeanor noticeably changes. Then the candidate slowly walks past and out of view, and the hooded figure faces forward. We see quite clearly that it is Maddy, without her wig, a determined look on her face. She holds a small device up to the Candidate's ear.*

NATE: Lead researcher by day, sleeper agent by night – ironic, as she never winds up getting any sleep that way. She'd sent Maddy to test out a portable version of the new system, and it had obviously worked. But this got me thinking about something Maddy had said, right after we'd met. Replay.

*Maddy takes her hood down, smiles at Nate.*

MADDY: You should move into the city. The commute from your place is going to be miserable.

NATE: Pause. I hadn't told her where I lived. I'd just barely filled out the new hire paperwork. And yet... replay.

MADDY: Have we met before? I feel like we've met.

NATE: Pause. It came back to me in a very sharp flash. We had indeed met. I'd been recruited, the night before my job interview. Replay.

*Maddy mimes knocking on a door. Nate mimes opening it, and sees her standing there.*

MADDY *all business*: Are you Nate Wells?

NATE *pause*: Who are you?

*Maddy gears up as though she is about to shriek, and then begins mouthing a string of syllables that we don't hear.*

NATE: I'm assuming this is what happened next; all I really remember is asking her “who are you?” but that memory had gotten buried by what came next, which presumably was some kind of subliminal suggestion that convinced me to wander into the Jennings & Reece office the next day... a gift from Olivia, no doubt.

*Lights up on Olivia in a pool of light, facing the audience but addressing Nate.*

OLIVIA: Indeed. A version of me, a little sprite, has been running inside of you since that day... giving you advice... offering suggestions. Your prototype was magnificent. Far superior to our previous programmer, who managed to be... quite disappointing.

NATE: You've been controlling my mind this whole time?

OLIVIA: Of course not. I'm simply a very deep suggestion, Nate. It just so happens you were *drawn* to the suggestion to write an earth-shattering piece of software. It's in your blood.

NATE: What else do you plan to do with my software?

OLIVIA: Oh Nate, if I told you *that*, I'd hardly be able to maintain my aura of intrigue.

NATE: Try me.

OLIVIA: But just imagine what it might be like if the real Olivia were here inside your mind, instead of a neurolinguistic sprite. Just think of how much fun we'd have if the real Olivia were sharing your thoughts...

NATE: Controlling them?

OLIVIA: Influencing them. Wouldn't that be lovely?

NATE: What does that have to do with my software?

OLIVIA: I have specified a desired effect. "Find the frequency that will transform a person into a being of pure thought." Your system will find it eventually, I'm sure of it.

NATE: Oh. That sounds like something a crazy person would say.

OLIVIA: Says you - you're the one talking to a neurolinguistic sprite inside your mind. *Laughs daintily.*

*Lights out on Olivia.*

NATE: But the Olivia sprite wasn't alone. *To Maddy:* You're here too, aren't you.

MADDY: I installed my own little sprite in you the next morning. Olivia exerts less control over me during the day, although obviously I can never challenge her directly, but... you were the first new hire I ever got a good feeling from, and I figured if anyone was ever going to bust me out of this place...

NATE: Except I haven't busted you out at all. I've made things worse. And who knows what "secret mission" she'll send you out on next.

MADDY *sadly*: It's a living.

NATE: What happened to her previous programmer?

MADDY: Don't ask.

NATE: Seriously? Is Olivia some kind of super villainess, torturing test subjects in her evil lair?

MADDY: You have no idea.

NATE: Huh?

MADDY: Her primary test subject is her son. *Pause.* I mean, he does get a stipend.

NATE *insistent*: Maddy - what happened to Olivia's previous programmer?

MADDY: The previous programmer was allowed to use real "power morphemes" for testing. While debugging

one night... she accidentally erased her entire personality.

*Lights fade on Maddy, leaving Nate alone.*

NATE: I found myself with an unexpected feeling of free will. I was stunned by how quickly Olivia had moved to “weaponize” my system. No one was safe around her. Maddy herself had probably been subject to years and years of Olivia's “deep suggestion.” I would need to be creative if I wanted to snap her out of it. *Pause.* Forward.

**Scene Seven-Point-Five: “FALL OUT”**

*Lights up on the lab – Maddy and Bain are wrapping up another session.*

NATE: I found Maddy in the lab later that day, finishing her afternoon session with Bain.

BAIN: I was thinking if you needed a break, I could teach you how to play Super Mario Brothers.

MADDY: That's not really my thing.

BAIN: You won't know until you try.

MADDY: That's not true, Bain. I have never tried skydiving without a parachute, or setting my legs on fire, or swallowing a thousand pounds of gravel, but I just know, down deep, in my heart of hearts, they're not my things.

BAIN *pause*: But you might like Super Mario Brothers.

NATE: Hi, Maddy, you got a minute?

BAIN: We're finishing our session.

MADDY: Emphasis on “finishing” – oh look, it's finished! See you tomorrow, Bain.

*Bain shoots Nate an evil look, then he stalks out.*

MADDY *smiles at Nate*: What brings the Senior Director of Blah Blah down to the lab today?

NATE: Just a quick question. Do you, uh... do you remember what you did last night?

MADDY: Uh... of course, but I... that's sort of a personal question, isn't it?

NATE: Do you remember?

MADDY: Of course.

NATE: Really?

MADDY *pause*: Um. *Pause.* Huh.

NATE: Yeah.

MADDY: Wait, why-

BRADFORD *entering with a loud bellow*: OLIVIA! To Nate & Maddy: Is she here? Where is she? OLIVIA!

*Olivia enters the lab, and immediately finds herself the target of Bradford's angry gaze.*

OLIVIA: Maddy, wait for me in my office.

MADDY: Yes, Ms. Regan. *She exits.*

OLIVIA: Mr. Wells, go wherever it is you go.

*Nate nods, heads out.*

NATE: Pause. *Action freezes.* I couldn't help myself. The lab door was cracked open, and I waited outside, eavesdropping. Resume.

OLIVIA: What is it this time?

BRADFORD: The Governor's opponent. The one you miraculously convinced to drop out of the race yesterday.

OLIVIA: Yes, I remember him-

BRADFORD *livid*: He was found dead this morning. Suicide.

*Olivia is stunned.*

BRADFORD: What did you do to him?

OLIVIA: Nothing – he was weak – I just made a suggestion-

BRADFORD: I know your “suggestions,” Olivia – this has to be something new. Something you haven't shown me.

OLIVIA: Bradford, I share everything with you-

BRADFORD: DON'T LIE TO ME! Olivia – the police are crawling all over this. Did you leave ANY trace?

OLIVIA: No, of course not.

BRADFORD: How did you do it? Tell me how you did it, and you may just keep your position here.

OLIVIA: What?

BRADFORD: I want the truth.

OLIVIA: I've been creating new “power morphemes.” They gave us so few, Bradford – you know they're holding out on us! They don't think we can handle any more-

BRADFORD: They're obviously RIGHT!

OLIVIA: We're holding up *our* end of the bargain – the Long Term Plan is almost to fruition, and yet when was the last time they spoke to us directly? When? They gave us 108 shiny trinkets and then left us to execute a

massive paradigm shift on their behalf – why are we trusting them when they won't speak to us anymore?

BRADFORD: Olivia, don't you remember how *painful* it is to speak to them? They're protecting us!

OLIVIA: I don't need protection – I need *communion!*

BRADFORD: I've heard enough. This entire division is shut down, effective immediately.

OLIVIA: You can't! Not now-

BRADFORD: You will not destroy ANOTHER innocent person with your damned EXPERIMENTS!

OLIVIA: I didn't kill him-

BRADFORD: What DID you do to him? *She does not respond.* Olivia, you've never been the same since we made contact.

OLIVIA: Oh spare me – I'm the one who signaled them in the first place!

BRADFORD: And they invaded our minds, and you never recovered from the shock of the experience. And now, you're abandoning the Long Term Plan for some power mad scheme I can hardly begin to understand-

OLIVIA: The Long Term Plan and my power mad scheme are not mutually exclusive, Bradford!

BRADFORD: Regardless – I'm pulling the plug on your scheme, whatever it is. This firm's resources are no longer at your disposal. Starting tomorrow, you're back to being just another sales executive on the floor. Understood? *She doesn't respond.* Don't challenge me, Olivia, or I will break you. Am I understood?

OLIVIA *seething*: Perfectly. *She turns to go.*

BRADFORD *stopping her*: Olivia. *She turns back to him.* I'm sorry. *He exits.*

OLIVIA: No... not yet you're not. *Lights fade on the lab.*

### ***Scene Eight: "THE STALKER"***

NATE: Forward. Maddy was in Olivia's office for maybe an hour. Olivia was no doubt giving her another "secret mission."

*Maddy enters with a backpack, wearing her wig, leaving work; she crosses in front of Nate, takes a seat in a nearby chair.*

NATE: I followed Maddy on the bus that night. I wanted to try to distract her somehow before her programming kicked in and she became Olivia's sleeper agent.

*Abruptly, Nate follows her, takes a seat across the "aisle" from her on the "bus."*

NATE: Hey.

MADDY *surprised*: Hey! Is this your bus line too?

NATE: Nah, I drive in.

MADDY: So why are you on the bus?

NATE: I mean, normally I drive in, car's in the shop today, so...

MADDY: So this *is* your bus line?

NATE: I guess. I mean, yeah, of course. *Pause.* You were in Olivia's office for a long time there.

MADDY: Yeah, we had a lot of test results to review.

NATE: Ah right, the endless succession of test results.

MADDY: It feels like we're really making progress.

NATE: Which test results were you reviewing?

MADDY: Excuse me?

NATE: I mean... do you remember anything about these test results specifically?

*She tries, fails to remember, brushes it off.*

MADDY: More of the same I guess.

NATE: "Power morphemes" are cool.

MADDY: Exactly.

NATE: So we're making progress? We'll be done testing soon?

MADDY: That's what I heard.

NATE: So what are we going to do after we're done testing?

MADDY: Aren't you the Senior Director of Blah Blah Blah? You tell me what we're doing next.

NATE: I keep hearing there's a "long term plan." You know anything about that?

MADDY: Grow the company, be the best in our industry-

NATE: That's the "right now" plan.

MADDY: Well, I don't know anything about a "long term plan." Olivia would know.

NATE: Yeah, I'm sure she would. *Pause.* Listen, what are you doing tonight?

MADDY: Excuse me?

NATE: Do you have plans tonight?

MADDY *hesitating*: Did you just get on this bus to ask me out?

NATE: That depends... are you going to say yes?

MADDY *flustered*: You are the manager of my division. That would not be appropriate.

NATE: I just figured we could get sushi somewhere, and talk about... your *career plan*. You do have one, right?

MADDY *irritated*: We could talk about my career plan over lunch.

NATE: Except you always fall asleep over lunch. *Insistent*: So really, what *are* you doing tonight?

*She tries to answer several times, and fails each time.*

MADDY *frustrated*: This is my stop. I'll see you tomorrow.

*She jumps off the bus and exits hurriedly. After a moment's pause, Nate also jumps off the bus.*

NATE: Technically speaking, I guess I was stalking her at this point. I followed her to her apartment building and waited outside for several hours. During my long wait, I pondered Bradford and Olivia's big argument. Finally, my curiosity got the better of me, and I asked the Olivia sprite, "Who gave you the 'power morphemes' originally? Bradford mentioned 'contact' – contact with who?"

*Lights up on the Olivia sprite.*

OLIVIA: How about a thought puzzle?

NATE: Oh perfect.

OLIVIA: I'll give you a classic illustration. "He eats shoots and leaves" - "He eats, shoots, and leaves." What shapes your experience of those words... or shall I say, *who*? *Nate draws a blank*. There is *life* – actual, conscious *life* – embedded into language structures, Nate. A specific group of linguistic symbols actually works in a conscious, symbiotic fashion to shape human thought.

NATE: You're talking about...?

OLIVIA: Punctuation marks, Nate. Punctuation marks are a species of life.

NATE *after a pause*: I don't like your thought puzzles. *Lights out on Olivia*. And then, at long last...

*Maddy re-enters, without her wig, instead wearing a black jacket, black hat, black gloves. She doesn't see Nate.*

NATE: My patience was rewarded... in a manner of speaking.

*Maddy tries to cross the stage in front of Nate; he steps forward to intercept.*

NATE: Hey, Maddy-

*She immediately flips him onto his back, and has a knife at his throat before he realizes what has happened.*

MADDY: Who are you?

NATE: Olivia sent me!

MADDY: What for?

NATE: She thought you might need... company.

MADDY: I don't need backup.

NATE: Right, that's what she called it – backup.

MADDY: I don't need it.

NATE: I could just sort of hang back and stay out of your way, but... she definitely wanted me with you.

MADDY: Are you good at anything?

NATE: Like what?

MADDY: Like, martial arts, or breaking and entering?

NATE: Uh...

MADDY: Then how are you backing me up, exactly? *Pause.* Concealed weapon?

NATE: Very concealed.

MADDY: It's a last resort, you understand? Just stay out of my way.

*She pulls him to his feet.*

NATE: *Pause.* That bluff shouldn't have worked, you understand. But some part of Maddy recognized what was happening, and figured out a way to... cooperate. *Resume.* Where are we going?

MADDY: She didn't tell you what the objective was?

NATE: Of course she did, I just want to... verify it with you before we head off into the field.

MADDY: We're going to kill Bradford Jennings.

NATE *long pause:* Obviously. *Pause.* Forward.

***Scene Nine: "SECRET MISSION"***

*We transition into a sitting room. Nate speaks as the set is moved into place.*

NATE: It should go without saying that we did not succeed in killing Bradford Jennings. He knew Olivia would try something reckless, and he was ready for us. *Resume.*

*Nate winds up tied to a chair, next to Maddy who is also tied to a chair. In a much nicer chair across the room sits Bradford in a velvet red robe or a smoking jacket, drinking scotch.*

BRADFORD: I must confess, I'm surprised to see you here, Mr. Wells.

NATE: It's not what you think.

BRADFORD: What I think is that you feared for Maddy's safety and thought you could somehow help her out of her predicament.

NATE: It's exactly what you think.

MADDY: I don't need your help.

NATE: You're tied to a chair – you might need somebody's help eventually.

MADDY: It won't be you.

BRADFORD: I can help both of you, but we're going to need to do some housecleaning first. You're both under the influence of very deep and powerful suggestion, planted by Olivia. I'll need to remove it. It's the only way we'll be able to speak freely.

MADDY: I'll never talk.

BRADFORD: You're a manufactured personality, my dear. In a few minutes, you won't exist. But we'll start with you, Nate.

NATE *to audience*: I have no idea what actually happened, but I have a vivid memory of a conversation that went something like this.

*Lights up on Olivia in a pool of light, facing the audience but addressing Bradford.*

OLIVIA: You're a bastard, Bradford!

BRADFORD: A bastard who knows you too well, Olivia.

OLIVIA: Spare me – you act like you're the sole guardian of the Long Term Plan -

BRADFORD: The Long Term Plan means nothing to me any more.

OLIVIA: THEY CAME TO BOTH OF US!

BRADFORD: But they only drove one of us mad. I miss you terribly, Olivia.

OLIVIA: I will grind you up.

BRADFORD: Not today, I'm afraid.

*Bradford begins singing an unearthly tune – sound fills the air. Olivia shrieks as the lights go out on her. Bradford begins untying Nate, who immediately starts babbling.*

NATE: What did you do?

BRADFORD: I sang to her. I've spent years secretly mastering the deepest levels of musical semiotics.

MADDY: Gee, think of all the karaoke contests you could win.

NATE: Olivia's got a software system for accessing and rewriting the memories of unwilling targets. It's not just

planting deep suggestion, either. It's complete, permanent revision. I don't know what she plans to do with it. There aren't too many humanitarian applications.

MADDY: Whatever she's planning – she's already doing it. You can't stop her.

BRADFORD: I grow increasingly tired of your petulance, young lady.

MADDY: Try killing yourself.

BRADFORD: I have a better plan.

*Bradford launches into another surreal melody – the sound on stage becomes muted – but the lights flicker, we see Maddy scream silently – and very faintly, we actually do hear some kind of distant roar.*

NATE *to audience*: Interesting. Even on mute, that signal is so powerful, some tiny piece of it is getting through.

*Lights resume to normal, Maddy is left dazed and sobbing. She looks up, recognizes Bradford and Nate.*

MADDY: Mr. Jennings... Nate?

NATE: Hi, Maddy.

MADDY: What am I doing here? Why am I tied to this chair?

NATE *swiftly moves to untie her*: Do you have any recollection of any of things you've done for Olivia?

*She thinks... slowly becomes horrified.*

BRADFORD: Those days are over, Maddy. She controls you no more.

NATE: Gee, thanks, Gandalf. Could have gotten to that a little sooner, don't you think?

*As Maddy becomes untied, she embraces Nate.*

MADDY: You were asking me out on the bus, right? That actually happened?

NATE: It did, although we might discuss this when the owner of the company isn't in the room. *To Bradford*: Tell me about the Punctuation Marks, Bradford. I want to hear it from you.

BRADFORD: Who told you about-

NATE: That sprite you just removed from my mind was very chatty on occasion.

BRADFORD: And it knew what Olivia knows.

NATE: Yes. Or at least – it believed what Olivia believes. Because Punctuation Marks can't really be-

BRADFORD: I'm afraid they are, Mr. Wells.

MADDY: What are you people talking about? It sounds weird.

*A mysterious music rises up behind Bradford.*

BRADFORD: You may find this hard to believe, but Olivia was once my star pupil.

MADDY: I'm finding that music hard to believe, actually. Are you doing that on purpose?

BRADFORD: Yes, Maddy – the alchemy of turning music into meaning is my province, and I overlook no detail.

MADDY: Awesome.

BRADFORD: We spent years together studying imaginary morphemes. Olivia's specialty was deriving what imaginary frequencies would be required to express an imaginary morpheme. And then... she stumbled across the precise sympathetic vibration that could directly signal the punctuation marks. They responded before we had any idea what we'd done. First contact, Nate – our first contact with an intelligent race from beyond our physical world.

NATE: What was it like?

BRADFORD: Like your own mind turning against you. You must understand – that was the only place we could communicate – inside our minds. They'd been waiting for so long to catch the attention of humanity... the first wave of communication with them was very overwhelming and dangerous.

NATE: So they control our thoughts?

BRADFORD: No, they can't control *anything* on their own. They *need* us to find any expression at all in this reality. As our brains evolved, the punctuation marks were the *key* to unlocking our language centers, giving rise to all of civilization!

MADDY: Wait, does this include diacritical marks, or are they a different species, or what?

BRADFORD: They introduced us to the “power morphemes.” And in exchange, we agreed to introduce the punctuation marks to the rest of civilization as an equal intelligent species.

NATE: So *that's* the Long Term Plan?

BRADFORD: Yes. We agreed to use advertising techniques to subliminally prepare society for the shock of the announcement. We've been doing it for years. But Olivia seems to have decided she can't wait for the Long Term Plan to unfold. Not when she can grab more power than any one human has ever possessed. Your software is quite a complicating factor.

NATE: True. If she gets my software hooked up to a mainstream broadcast medium, she could rewrite thousands of people at a time. *Pause*. But I think she's looking for something else.

MADDY: Why do you think that?

NATE: Something her sprite said to me. She's looking to “find the frequency that will transform her into a being of pure thought.”

BRADFORD *sudden inspiration*: Of course. She wants to join the Punctuation Marks in *their* reality.

MADDY: What could she do as a being of pure thought? I mean, whose thought would she be a being of? *To Nate*: Is that grammatically correct?

NATE: I don't know.

BRADFORD: I don't intend to find out, Maddy. *He rises.* I won't ask you to join me. You've already been through enough.

MADDY: I'll go. *Quietly:* Someone should try to get Olivia's son out.

NATE: He's a prisoner?

MADDY: No. He's got his own suite there. He likes it there... well, he thinks he does anyway.

BRADFORD: You're going to need these.

*He hands each of them a pair of very heavy-duty looking, industrial-grade headphones.*

BRADFORD: They won't keep out every frequency she might use, but they should dissipate most of her attacks.

NATE: What do you want me to do?

BRADFORD: Guard my back from surprises.

NATE: And what are you going to do?

*The music behind him swells.*

BRADFORD: Never before have two linguist mages fought head to head in mortal combat. I will wield suspension of disbelief as my sword, and throw my enemy down on the hard rocks of cognitive dissonance. *Pause.* I will also be packing a 9 millimeter just in case.

NATE: Forward.

***Scene Ten: "TRANSFORMATION"***

*Nate speaks as we transition from Bradford's sitting room into the laboratory set.*

NATE: It should go without saying that we did not succeed in throwing down Olivia Regan on the hard rocks of cognitive dissonance. I'm almost embarrassed to describe what happened, but in the interest of a reasonably complete historical record, allow me to summarize. Maddy's job was to find Olivia's son and get him out safely.

*Maddy enters Bain's bedroom, wearing her head phones – he sleeps on an army cot and rouses easily when she arrives.*

MADDY: Hey... hey, Bain, wake up.

BAIN: Maddy... am I dreaming or are you really in my bedroom?

MADDY: I'm really here. And we gotta get out of here before your mother knows I'm here.

BAIN: What's going on?

MADDY: I'll explain later, once you're safe.

*Bain sits up and faces her.*

BAIN: What do you mean “once I'm safe”?

MADDY: It's an emergency, Bain. We need to leave.

BAIN: We can't leave – we've got sessions tomorrow.

MADDY: We can reschedule.

BAIN: I don't want to reschedule. I like our sessions.

MADDY: I like them too, Bain, but we don't-

BAIN: You do?

MADDY: What? I mean – of course.

BAIN: Not as much as I do, though, huh?

MADDY: I think – you know what, Bain, we can have this conversation at *my* house, okay? Please, just come with me.

BAIN: You're not acting like yourself, Maddy.

*He grabs her; his grip is surprisingly strong.*

MADDY: What are you doing?

BAIN: Taking you to my mother. Seems like you need a good talking to. *Lights out.*

NATE: In general, if you're trying to rescue someone who has been brainwashed his entire life, you need more of an incentive than “I'll explain later.” Meanwhile, I was supposed to guard for surprises. *He puts on his head phones.* I was scouting the office building to try to give Bradford early warning about what he might find. In the lunch room, I practically crashed right into...

*He turns and comes face to face with the Governor.*

NATE: Oh! Governor, I'm sorry, I didn't see you. You know, you probably shouldn't be here tonight. It isn't safe.

GOVERNOR: I know.

*Without warning, the Governor produces a knife and stabs Nate in the stomach. He turns to face us.*

NATE: In general, if you're guarding for surprises, you should start with a plan for what to do in case you actually come across one. I wasn't able to give Bradford the “all clear” signal. I didn't know if he'd come for us. I didn't know if I'd survive.

*At the end of the transition, Nate and Maddy are tied to chairs in the laboratory set, their head phones gone. The Governor and Bain hover nearby. Olivia enters on the raised platform near her terminal and surveys the scene.*

OLIVIA: Ah, Mr. Wells. I had such high hopes for you.

MADDY: He needs a doctor or he'll die!

NATE: Pause. I was bleeding to death in the lair of a super villainess, so I must admit my recollection of these events is more than a bit dramatic. By the same token, Olivia could definitely rock the super villainess speech. Resume.

*Sinister music rises up behind Olivia – perhaps also a bit of a wind machine – as she launches into a super villainess diatribe.*

OLIVIA: He'll last long enough to watch my ultimate triumph! And I have you to thank, Mr. Wells! The Punctuation Marks have been begging me to join them, but cannot take action on their own in this world. But your software OPENED THE DOOR to their realm! After all these years of working in vain, your software has finally discovered the exact imaginary frequency that will allow me to escape my body and live forever inside the minds of humanity! *She holds up her own set of head phones, connected to the terminal.* When I hear this sympathetic vibration with my actual, physical ears... I will be transformed. I will JOIN THE PUNCTUATION MARKS! I will BECOME A BEING OF PURE THOUGHT! And I will CONTROL THE THOUGHTS OF HUMANITY FROM WITHIN!

MADDY: Why would they let you join them? You're horrible!

OLIVIA: Because I understand them, Maddy. They have labored far too long with no true ability to control their surroundings. I will teach them first hand how a human mind operates, and together we will conquer the human logosphere!

NATE & MADDY *mouth*ing silently to each other: "Logosphere"?

OLIVIA: Every brain that learns a language will find us waiting to take control! Every thought inside a human mind will execute one of our commands!

MADDY: Governor, *do something!*

GOVERNOR: I *am* doing something. I'm making sure I'm taken care of when the revolution comes.

*Olivia cackles wildly.*

NATE: Pause. *The action freezes.* I don't think Olivia really cackled like that. I might have just thrown that in for color. Resume. *He slumps in his chair.*

MADDY *frantically* to Nate: Nate, wake up, please! Wake up!

OLIVIA: Yes, please do wake up Mr. Wells. I wouldn't want him to miss the grand finale.

*The Governor slaps Nate to wake him up, which has the desired effect.*

NATE: Am I dead yet? Oh... still in super villainess lair.

MADDY: What are we going to do?

NATE: Did she finish giving her speech about her diabolical plan?

MADDY: More or less.

NATE: Cool. That means it's probably about time for-

*The lights change dramatically – a different musical theme arrives on the scene – and a bellowing voice from the back of the theater shouts:*

BRADFORD: Olivia Regan! You will answer to me!

OLIVIA: Utterly predictable.

*The Governor and Bain produce UZIs and make like to shoot, but suddenly we hear Bradford spewing a litany of arcane syllables – an intense sound rises up and the Governor and Bain dramatically flop to the ground, unconscious. Olivia shrieks and jumps down off her pedestal.*

OLIVIA: You're too late, Bradford! You're always one step behind me!

BRADFORD: I still have a few tricks up my sleeve, Olivia – I didn't teach you *everything* I know!

*Bradford reaches the stage and he and Olivia circle each other, pointing their fingers at each other like wizards and shrieking mad gibberish – the lights flicker wildly – the sounds are a cacophony of madness – and slowly but surely Bradford drives Olivia to her knees.*

BRADFORD: Give up this madness, Olivia! You don't have to let yourself be destroyed!

OLIVIA: I'd rather die than spend another second watching you waste your power, you pathetic old dinosaur!

BRADFORD: SO BE IT!

*And with a huge peal of thunder, Olivia collapses, and slowly the lights return to normal and the sounds fade.*

MADDY: Bradford, I knew you'd come! Quick, we have to get Nate to a hospital!

BRADFORD: There are paramedics outside. Let's get you both untied.

NATE: Stop. *The action freezes.* Unfortunately, that's not what actually happened. Oh it's certainly what I was dreaming would happen as my life slipped away from me. But Bradford Jennings did not burst into the room to save us. Bradford vanished, and Olivia never saw him again with her own eyes. *Pause. Resume.*

*This transition is slow and sober: Bradford exits the way he came in, Olivia resumes her rightful place on her dais, the Governor and Bain rise to their feet, Nate slumps in his chair.*

MADDY *frantically to Nate*: Nate, wake up, please! Wake up!

OLIVIA: Yes, please do wake up Mr. Wells. I wouldn't want him to miss the grand finale.

*The Governor slaps Nate to wake him up, which has the desired effect.*

OLIVIA: As for the rest of you, I'm afraid I'll need to ask you all to leave us.

BAIN: Why can't we stay? I should be here with you!

OLIVIA: No... I don't want you to see me pass.

BAIN: What do you mean? You're just changing, aren't you?

OLIVIA: Yes... but this body will die... and I don't want you to watch that. *She embraces him quickly, then pushes him away.* Go, help the Governor. Take Maddy away and assist with her reprogramming.

*The Governor unties Maddy, and with Bain, starts to drag her off. She resists – and actually breaks away – dashes back to Nate and embraces him.*

MADDY: Nate, I'm so sorry-

*And then they pull her away, and drag her off stage. Olivia regards Nate with a kind of grudging respect – he musters his strength to make eye contact.*

OLIVIA: It's been a pleasure working with you, Mr. Wells.

NATE: Why... me?

OLIVIA: Pardon?

NATE: Anyone... on my team... could have written that software. Why me?

OLIVIA: Instinct, I suppose. Something just told me you'd be a good match for my... determination. *Pause.* Goodbye, Mr. Wells.

*Without ceremony, she puts on her headphones, and strikes a key on the keyboard. A surprised look briefly crosses her face – then, without ceremony, she collapses and is still.*

NATE: *Pause.* Ironically, I wasn't feeling particularly determined. I was prepared to let go and let her be someone else's problem. But fate had other plans.

*We reset back to the moment where Maddy is being dragged off stage, before she breaks away.*

NATE: Actually, Maddy had other plans. *Replay in slow motion.*

*And Maddy breaks away in very slow motion – this time, enabling us to see that with her hands free, she is able to pull her knife out of her pocket, hidden from view of the others, and as she reaches Nate, she slices his ties and leaves the knife in his hands behind his back.*

NATE: *Pause.* Forward.

*Maddy et al exit, Olivia back on the floor. Nate struggles profoundly – Maddy's slice of his ties was by no means a clean & complete cut – but eventually, he pulls free, dropping the knife on the floor, and collapsing forward out of his chair. He tries doggedly to move, but the pain is too much, and he is too weak.*

*Lights up on the Maddy shadow in a pool of light, facing the audience but addressing Nate. She is smiling, encouraging, flirty – trying to motivate him.*

MADDY: What are you doing on the floor, pal? *He does not respond.* Nate, can you hear me?

NATE: No. Wait – yes.

MADDY: You can't just lie there, Nate.

NATE: Why not?

MADDY: Because – no one's coming for you. You're going to have to save yourself.

NATE: Go away.

MADDY: Hear me out.

NATE: No, it's too late. She got away.

MADDY: Yeah, I know – she used your software to do it, too. Doesn't that drive you crazy?

NATE: So?

MADDY: So you shouldn't let her get the last word. *Pause.* Find her, Nate. Find her, and stop her.

*Lights out on Maddy.*

*With great effort, Nate finally begins crawling toward the dais. He crawls all the way to Olivia's motionless body, methodically extricates the head phones from her head, and without ceremony, he puts them on. A look of surprise crosses his face – and then he too collapses, motionless.*

**BLACKOUT. END OF ACT ONE.**

## ACT TWO

### *Scene Eleven: "DANCE OF THE PUNCTUATION MARKS"*

*Lights up on Nate, alone in his spotlight, the rest of the stage in darkness. Act One saw him dressed in a shirt & tie; he is now attired more casually.*

NATE: The last thing I remember thinking before my physical body died was, "Punctuation marks? Seriously?" The idea that punctuation marks might somehow save me undoubtedly influenced the character and flavor of my transition into a being of pure thought. *Pause.* And so, I met the punctuation marks for the very first time.

*Lights slowly rise on the rest of the stage. The rest of the cast are scattered about the stage in identical white robes or gowns; they should be plain but very bright under the lights. Signs hang from a cord around each actor's neck – each sign displays a different punctuation mark, and each actor plays multiple marks. They smile as they realize Nate has joined them – and a dreamlike musical number, a la Busby Berkeley, begins – midtempo, ethereal, alien.*

PUNCTUATION MARKS:

Welcome, stranger, to our realm

Won't you be our guest?

We have waited oh so long

To entertain here in our nest

NATE *spoken*: Who are you?

PUNCTUATION MARKS:

We're the punctuation marks

NATE *spoken*: Oh, of course.

PUNCTUATION MARKS:

And we steer your thoughts along

We're the punctuation marks

And we're pleased to say that you belong!

*Individual marks introduce themselves; actors flip their signs as they take on new roles. Nate's replies are all spoken but in rhythm.*

PERIOD: I'm a period.

NATE: Full stop.

QUESTION MARK: Am I a question mark?

NATE: I think so.

EXCLAMATION MARK *loudly*: I'm an exclamation mark!

NATE: I can tell!

COMMA: I'm a comma-

NATE: Oh really?

COMMA: Just a brief little pause...

OPEN BRACKET: I'm a bracket-

CLOSE BRACKET: So am I!

OPEN & CLOSE BRACKETS: A single separate clause!

PERIOD & COMMA *stacking their signs*: If you want to get tricky

And join some thoughts together

A semicolon is the thing!

QUOTATION MARKS: If you want to call out

That your thoughts are someone else's

Put your sentence in quotes and have a fling

*A brief interlude to come here in which we are briefly introduced to several non-English punctuation marks, in a hybrid Berkeley/Kubuki style.*

SPANISH QUOTATION MARKS *(they are called comillas):*

¿Tú hablas español? ("Do you speak Spanish?")

Comillas are the way to go

CHINESE QUOTATION MARKS *(they are called yǐn hào):*

Nǐ shuō zhōng wén ma? ("Do you speak Chinese?")

Then you need yǐn hào !

*(these lyrics provided by Lesley Carmichael, the play's original dramaturg)*

*Then we resume in our original chorus melody:*

PUNCTUATION MARKS *all together:*

We're the punctuation marks

And we govern how you think

We're the punctuation marks

Enforcing meaning in a blink!

*A spoken word interlude:*

NATE: I don't understand. Am I dead? Am I doomed to spend the rest of eternity alone with singing punctuation marks?

PUNCTUATION MARKS: No! You're not alone.

*The timbre of the music changes suddenly into something darker, and the marks resume singing:*

PUNCTUATION MARKS:

Someone else has come this way

Someone else precedes you here

Our new friend is here to stay

Our new friend has made it clear

She is here to teach us

That's why we transformed her

She didn't mention you

Perhaps it's time to find her....

NATE: No!

*The marks fall silent, watching Nate expectantly.*

NATE *making this up:* You don't need to... I mean, I want my arrival to be a surprise. My arrival needs to be kept a complete secret from her. Can you do that?

*The marks seem nonplused by this request.*

NATE: Do you know where she is?

PUNCTUATION MARKS: She is executing the Long Term Plan.

NATE: That's what she's doing, not where she is. Where is she?

*But the Punctuation Marks are slowly dispersing, vanishing from the stage.*

PUNCTUATION MARKS *spoken in unison*: Make yourself at home, Nate Wells. I'm sure we'll speak again.

NATE: Wait – one question. Your new friend – does she control all of human thought from within now?

PUNCTUATION MARKS *laughing*: Why would she bother? There's not much to control, now is there!

*Nate speaks as the lights fade on the punctuation marks.*

NATE: You must understand – that was just an allegorical representation of what I actually experienced. I can't think of an accurate way to describe it. I'd become an incorporeal being of pure thought inside the “logosphere,” which is a fancy word for the shared language system of the human race. It took a little getting used to – I could concentrate myself inside a single person and eavesdrop on their thoughts, or permeate a whole group of people. But I couldn't find Olivia. I decided the best place to start was to find out what had happened to Maddy after my death back in the lab.

***Scene Twelve: “WEAPONIZING LOYALTY”***

*Lights up on Bradford's former office – now the Governor's office. Maddy is tied securely to a chair opposite the Governor, not struggling.*

MADDY: What happened to Nate?

GOVERNOR: He's dead.

*Maddy fights to keep composure.*

GOVERNOR: If it's any consolation, you'll hardly remember him in a few minutes.

MADDY: Impossible.

GOVERNOR: Your programming just needs refreshing.

MADDY: What?

GOVERNOR: I need you, Maddy. You don't think I can take over the world without henchmen, do you?

MADDY: “Henchmen”?

GOVERNOR: Lackies, to do my bidding. It's a common convention – I'm surprised you don't recognize it.

MADDY: I'll never do your bidding.

GOVERNOR: That's *exactly* what people say right before their brainwashing is complete. Shows how thoroughly you've already been semantically primed for the event.

MADDY *scornful*: What do *you* know about semantics?

GOVERNOR: I know everything Olivia knew about semantics. She left me her entire body of research, in the form of a little sprite that runs in my mind. She's left me to execute her Long Term Plan. It's not the same plan Bradford thought it was. It's a plan much more suited to my own personal ambition. A masterful plan.

MADDY: Taking over the world?

GOVERNOR *nodding*: It's so perfectly concise, it practically plans itself.

MADDY: And what about the real Olivia? Is she dead too?

GOVERNOR: I don't know. But she's left me with a glorious opportunity, and I don't intend to disappoint her.

NATE: I would have guessed I'd run into Olivia here, watching her minions, but I could sense no trace of her.

*Bain enters, pushing Olivia's terminal into the office on a rolling cart. The headphones are set aside; the terminal is now hooked up to a set of speakers.*

GOVERNOR: Ah, thank you, Bain.

BAIN: I found the instructional sequences my mother left behind on this machine. They're queued up for playback. I've also found the original sequence she used to program Maddy, and fed it into the new system. Should work a lot faster now. Oh, and I... I made some modifications, to help... ensure Maddy behaves properly.

MADDY: What does that mean?

GOVERNOR: Ah, young love – so refreshing.

MADDY: No-

GOVERNOR: Play the sequences, Bain. We've got a lot of work ahead of us.

NATE: Mute.

*The Governor, Bain, and Maddy react quite visibly to something we can hear only in the vaguest distance. Maddy's resistance is drained; all three of them seem to relish their new situation.*

NATE: For your safety, I'll summarize what's happening here. The Governor is being fed the details of the true Long Term Plan. Bain's loyalty to the Governor is being deepened and cemented. Maddy's independence is being overwritten by loyalty to the Governor. In fact, Olivia has left a form of “weaponized loyalty” in the hands of the Governor, along with strategies for deploying this weapon against the population. *As Bain shuts off the terminal*: Unmute.

*The Governor, Bain, and Maddy seem exhausted, but exhilarated.*

MADDY: May I please be untied?

GOVERNOR: By all means.

*Bain moves swiftly to untie her, and the two exchange a shy, enamored look between them.*

GOVERNOR: Right then – to business. Bain, hook this system up to the office intercom. I want every employee at Jennings & Reece under my control immediately. Maddy, prep the lab – we need to begin researching the maximum effective range of these power morpheme sequences, in order to build the rebroadcasters. Make sure I have a schedule of every current and future television ad campaign this firm has on the books. Can you do all of that?

BAIN / MADDY: Absolutely.

NATE: Fast forward. *Behind him, the Governor, Maddy and Bain begin a “research montage”, with Maddy and Bain each presenting information, Governor on the phone, etc.* The Governor plotted meticulously for months, before springing her plan into motion. First step: take over the state government by calling a special session and setting up a power morpheme rebroadcaster in the chamber. Then, deploy rebroadcasters all over the state, and prepare National Guard vehicles as traveling rebroadcasters for remote areas. Plan an important press conference, and demand every television and radio station in the state cover it. Pull the trigger, and celebrate complete and total control of the state population. Well – there were a few hiccups. Resume.

BAIN: We're getting reports of resistance from a few private academies around the state. All schools for the deaf. Apparently deaf people are immune to power morphemes – they can't hear the intonation.

GOVERNOR: Unfortunate. Add “deaf people” to the list of enemies of the state. Burn those schools to the ground.

NATE: And there was one other loose end that plagued the Governor.

MADDY: Census is complete. 92% accounted for. The border is sealed. We're still flushing out hideouts on a daily basis.

GOVERNOR: No sign of him?

MADDY: No sign of him.

GOVERNOR: As long as Bradford Jennings is on the loose, we're at risk. Distribute his picture everywhere, and offer a reward for his delivery – dead or alive.

NATE: Stop.

*Lights fade on the Governor's office.*

### ***Scene Thirteen: “WEAPONIZING HYPOCHONDRIA”***

NATE: She moved swiftly against neighboring states. Soon she was no longer the Governor – she was the Empress of North America. The rest of the world was terrified. But the Empress assured everyone that the American nuclear stockpile was in safe hands – hers. And then – complete silence from North America. As years went by, the rest of the world slowly but surely recovered from losing all contact with North America. Not once, throughout this time, did I ever sense Olivia's presence. *Pause.* I tried, once or twice, to somehow make contact with Maddy... concentrating myself inside of her mind, and... trying to get her to hear me. Forward.

*A small pool of light comes up on a bed or pair of military cots, where Maddy and Bain are sleeping. Maddy rouses, almost as from a nightmare.*

BAIN: What's wrong?

MADDY: I don't know, I just... felt something.

BAIN: Felt what?

MADDY: Someone talking to me. *Pause.* Shouting actually. In my dream, I guess.

BAIN: Who was it?

MADDY: I don't know. *Pause.* In the dream, he felt like someone I used to know. Somebody I used to like, maybe.

BAIN: A real person?

MADDY: I don't know.

BAIN: Should I be jealous?

MADDY: Of a dream? Hardly. *She kisses him.* Stop interrogating me and go back to sleep. *He does. She stares out at the audience, wide awake, as lights fade on her.*

NATE: Stop. The power morphemes could not be shaken loose – she couldn't hear me. That did get me thinking, though – there was definitely one person who showed signs of a lot more free will than anyone else. The Empress. I wondered if Olivia might be hiding inside of the Empress, but why would she have ever given up her physical form if all she wanted to do was spend her days inside a puppet? I steeled myself for a visit inside the Empress's mind. Resume.

*Slowly lights rise on a surreal scene – we are in the throne room of the Empress. The Empress is no longer confined to her politician's power suit; instead, she wears an elaborate, beautiful, robe-like dress, and a gorgeous tiara. Ideally this attire is not super campy – it ought to look more regal than retro. Nate enters the throne room cautiously. As he approaches, she snaps to attention.*

EMPRESS: Olivia, is that you?

NATE: Afraid not.

EMPRESS *after a pause*: Then you must be Nate Wells. I've long wondered how you fared after your transformation. What are you doing here? Did Bradford Jennings send you?

NATE: No. Has Olivia contacted you?

EMPRESS: No. I have a version of Olivia implanted in me, but I no longer require her regular company. She has slept for years. *Pause.*

NATE: I see you've made quite a name for yourself in local politics.

EMPRESS: Ha. Yes, things have gone quite swimmingly. How do you like your afterlife?

NATE: Fantastic. Constant parties. You should join me.

EMPRESS: On the contrary – an army of doctors, surgeons, and researchers are hard at work around the clock to make sure I never see the afterlife.

NATE: I'm sorry?

EMPRESS: My Immortality Program.

NATE: You're going to make everyone immortal?

EMPRESS: Of course not. Just myself. We're extremely close, I'll have you know.

NATE: I see. And you've also cured disease, presumably?

EMPRESS: What? Why would I-

NATE: It'd be a shame if you caught some incurable disease before your Immortality Program was complete.

EMPRESS: I do not leave this chamber. I don't see how-

NATE: Or maybe your minions didn't tell you about...

EMPRESS: About what? They tell me everything!

NATE: Do they. Well, then I'm sure you're well aware of the epidemic right here in your capitol city, yes?

EMPRESS *slowly dawning horror*: What epidemic?

NATE *improvising*: Apparently so many doctors are busy with your Immortality Program that no one's been able to find a cure. It's really only hitting the outskirts at this point, but I notice your Guards' patrol rotation definitely goes that far – at least, it did until one of them came back today showing the symptoms.

EMPRESS: Came back *here*? *Nate nods. Almost whispered*: What symptoms?

NATE: Pause. *To audience*: I'll spare you the gruesome list. But I had found a hook. I was getting past her programming, and actually hitting her hard. I had stumbled across a method for “weaponizing hypochondria” - turning her body on itself by telling it a convincing lie. Maybe this attack would finally flush Olivia out into the open. Fast forward.

*Maddy and Bain burst onstage, put a face mask or gas mask on the Empress and surround her throne in plastic. The Empress is suffering an agonizing decline, right before our eyes.*

NATE: If the placebo effect can make you feel better when you haven't taken any medicine, "weaponized hypochondria" can destroy your body when there's nothing actually wrong with it. There was just one small problem – a bit of collateral damage. Resume.

BAIN: Oh my god. *He suddenly clutches his chest and collapses, going into spasms similar to the Empress.*

MADDY: Bain, no! *Kneeling by his side and shrieking toward the offstage:* Someone, help, I need help, he needs-

EMPRESS *ripping off her mask:* NO ONE HELP HIM! ACCELERATE THE IMMORTALITY PROGRAM! GET ME OUT OF THIS BODY BEFORE IT KILLS ME!

NATE: Stop. *Lights fade behind him as the others exit the throne room.* Apparently "weaponized hypochondria" actually spreads like a communicable disease. Makes sense – it's more convincing that way. *Pause.* Of course, I didn't intend to kill Olivia's son. She retaliated almost immediately. Forward.

#### **Scene Fourteen: "WEAPONIZING DESPAIR"**

*A grim Maddy enters, pushing a wheeled cart. On the cart is an amazing sight: on a pedestal is a giant jar filled with fluid, inside of which is suspended a pulsing brain. A loudspeaker is bolted onto the front of the pedestal. There is cheering from a crowd.*

NATE: The Empress survived – after a fashion.

EMPRESS *voice coming out of the loudspeaker:* BOW BEFORE ME! *Pause.* I can't see anything. Are they bowing?

MADDY: Yes, Your Highness.

NATE: I tried to get inside the mind of the Empress one more time, but it was locked down – Olivia had clearly been there and used her skills to make sure I'd never have access to the Empress again. *Maddy wheels the Empress out.* Then, Olivia struck. Now - listen to this for a second.

*He waves his hand. An absolutely strange sound fills the air – a mixture of grinding industry and nonsense syllables and beeps and pulses.*

NATE: I've been editing this sound out of the narrative because it's dangerous to listen to for very long. This is the sound of "weaponized loyalty," rebroadcast 24/7, all across the continent. Ear plugs and headphones are illegal. Listening to music is illegal. This sound is the means of the Empress's control. *He waves his hand, and the sound abruptly halts.* The Empress issued an unusual order: for the first time since the rebroadcasting network had been erected, a new signal was to be broadcast. I can only give you a small taste of what the new signal sounded like.

*He waves his hand again, and for a brief instant, the sound we here is a horrific, hellish wailing or keening, a distorted, tortured shriek- quickly, he shuts that sound off as well.*

NATE: Olivia had used my system to find a new, very deadly combination of power morphemes. She had "weaponized despair." The effect was... insanely indiscriminate. A pandemic of suicide began to spread. *Pause.* I went to check on Maddy. Her defenses were low after the death of her husband, and I managed to get through to her this time.

*Lights up behind him. Maddy is alone in her bed, in shock, her face a mess of recent weeping. Nate goes to her, and as he approaches, she sits up.*

MADDY *hopeful*: Bain?

NATE: No.

MADDY *dashed*: Oh. *She slumps back over. He sits on the bed next to her.*

NATE: Maddy... can you hear me?

MADDY: Sure.

NATE: Do you... remember me?

MADDY: Sort of.

NATE: It's Nate. Remember me, from Jennings & Reece? Nate Wells?

MADDY: So?

NATE: I'm alive... sort of... and here with you.

MADDY: Oh. I thought you were dead.

NATE: Yes, I'm dead... physically, but not... it's complicated.

MADDY: Is Bain with you?

NATE: No.

MADDY: Oh. *She sits up.* I think it's time to go.

NATE: Go where?

*Maddy pulls a handgun from under her pillow, and points it straight at her temple.*

NATE: Maddy, NO-

*And then, across the room, a very antique phone begins to ring. They both turn to look.*

NATE: Aren't you going to answer it?

MADDY: It's been ringing every ten minutes for the last two days.

NATE: And you haven't answered it?

MADDY: I don't feel like it.

NATE: How about you answer it this time... before you go? Just humor me.

*She shrugs, drops the pistol, crosses, and answers the phone.*

MADDY: Hello?

*A dramatic light rises up at the back of the house, in the aisle. There we see Bradford Jennings, dressed in urban camo of some kind.*

BRADFORD: Ah! Thank you for answering, Maddy. I don't have much time – are you in contact with Nate Wells?

MADDY: He's inside my brain right now.

BRADFORD: How convenient. May I speak to him?

NATE / MADDY: Bradford, where the hell have you been?

BRADFORD: I've been hiding. Trying to stay alive.

NATE / MADDY: You abandoned us-

BRADFORD: I don't need a recap, Nate, and you can punish me later for my crimes, but right this minute, you're on the verge of losing Maddy. You need to do something, because we're going to need her help.

NATE / MADDY: Do what, exactly?

BRADFORD: I need you to sing to her.

NATE / MADDY: I'm sorry – what?

BRADFORD: Her brain is being bombarded with despair – you need to counter the effect.

NATE / MADDY: And how is singing supposed to help?

BRADFORD: There's a reason music is illegal, Nate – music is much more powerfully suggestive than raw language. I told you my specialty was musical semiotics, did I not? You'll have to trust me.

NATE / MADDY: But I don't know any songs-

BRADFORD: I'll feed you a snippet – a power melody – but you'll need to improvise, make it your own, and tailor it to her responses.

NATE / MADDY: What words should I sing?

BRADFORD: You shouldn't sing any words at all – words are the problem right now. Just sing from your heart,

Nate. Get her to see there's hope. Sing her the *concept* of hope – it's our only weapon against despair.

NATE / MADDY: Is that what this is - “weaponized hope”?

BRADFORD: I honestly don't know. My research says it should work, but I've been alone for so long that I've never been able to test it.

**Scene Fifteen: “WEAPONIZING HOPE”**

NATE: Pause. I will spare you the utter indignity and immense annoyance of watching me attempt to sing Maddy out of her oppressive stupor. I will spare you the relentlessly overwrought histrionics of hearing me restore Maddy's free will quite literally through the power of song. Forward.

MADDY: Pause.

*Nate turns to her, surprised.*

MADDY *smiling*: You'll spare us no such thing. Rewind.

NATE: Maddy-

MADDY: Resume!

*A swelling of music rises up, akin to the classic rise of an old school techno anthem, starting to build until you just can't take it anymore, Maddy waking up, taking notice and starting to move. The entire stage is transformed – lights flashing, disco balls and doom balls popping out of nowhere, Maddy handing Nate a shiny glitter jacket and a microphone. Nate is transformed in that moment – selling the absolute hell out of this song. What we see him sing, however, and what we hear from him are two different things – the vocals on the audio track are a strangely garbled alien tongue, no true recognizable sounds, and they don't match his onstage lip movements. But the effect on Maddy is unmistakable – a great weight has been lifted, and the dancing is truly infectious. Nate sweeps Maddy up for a bit of a dance, and then the two of them slowly reset as the music fades.*

BRADFORD: Did it work?

MADDY: It worked. I can't believe how I'm feeling.

BRADFORD: Good, good, now listen-

MADDY: Listen to *you*? You left us to die, or worse, to rot as slaves of the Empress. Now you're just going to ride back in on a white horse and save the day?

*Pause.*

BRADFORD: Actually, yes.

MADDY: Oh.

NATE: Let me handle this, Maddy.

NATE / MADDY: We've got to get *that* signal onto the rebroadcasters.

BRADFORD: Impossible. The Empress has the system extremely locked down.

NATE / MADDY: So what's the plan?

BRADFORD: You need to get me inside the palace. Maddy has the freedom to bring a Guard unit anywhere in the city – I'll be waiting at my old house, right under Olivia's nose.

NATE / MADDY: And then?

BRADFORD: And then we kill the Empress. *Pause.* It'll be pretty easy.

MADDY: One more question. Why didn't you come for us, Bradford?

BRADFORD *heavy sigh*: I couldn't bear the thought of... destroying the woman I loved. Not a day goes by that I don't regret my feelings for her.

MADDY: And how do you feel about her now?

BRADFORD: When I finally find her... she will experience similar regret.

*Lights out on Bradford. Maddy hangs up the phone, takes her handgun, and exits with purpose.*

NATE: I felt my own regret, for not surviving long enough as a real person to get to know Maddy in the real world. But at least now... we both had hope.

### ***Scene Sixteen: "THE DUEL"***

*Lights up on the throne room. The Empress brain-in-a-jar is perched on the throne. The tiara is carefully balanced on top of the jar.*

NATE: With Bradford safely hidden inside the palace... now it was all up to Maddy. She needed the Empress to believe she was still under the effect of "weaponized despair," even though now she was immune.

*Maddy enters.*

EMPRESS: WHO APPROACHES?

MADDY: Your humble servant Maddy, Your Eminence.

EMPRESS: WHAT DO YOU WANT?

MADDY: I considered killing myself today, Your Eminence, and then I realized, I should come say goodbye to you before I go.

EMPRESS: YOU ARE MY MOST TRUSTED SERVANT – WHY WOULD YOU LEAVE MY SERVICE?

MADDY: I can't handle the new signal coming out of the rebroadcasters any more. It's making me want to die, so I'm going to kill myself if you don't mind too terribly.

EMPRESS: I FORBID IT!

MADDY: May I ask... why did you change the signal? What was wrong with the old signal?

EMPRESS: THE OLD SIGNAL FOSTERED COMPLACENCY! THE NEW SIGNAL TOUGHENS THE WILL! WHAT DOESN'T KILL THESE SHEEP MAKES THEM MORE ABLE TO DO MY BIDDING! OR SOMETHING LIKE THAT.

MADDY: I'm sorry, Your Eminence. I still want to kill myself.

EMPRESS: I HAVE A GIFT THAT MAY CHEER YOU.

MADDY *immediately suspicious*: A gift?

*From behind the throne, Bain enters, pushing a cart with Olivia's old terminal, alive and well. He stops, opens his arms out to her as if expecting her to run to him.*

BAIN: Hi, Maddy. I've missed you.

MADDY *absolute disbelief*: Bain? You were...

BAIN: ...dead from an imaginary disease. Apparently resuscitation after that type of thing is fairly trivial these days. *Pause*. I've missed you terribly. Come, give me a kiss.

MADDY: I'm not kissing *you*.

*Bain's face changes to a stern look, and Maddy realizes she's blown it.*

BAIN: I see. *To the Empress*: She has escaped her programming, Your Eminence. She no longer loves me. And that undoubtedly means... she no longer loves *you*.

EMPRESS: I FORBID IT!

MADDY *livid at her mistake*: Well, it's TRUE – you're a freaking BRAIN IN A JAR and I DON'T love you! *She pulls her handgun and points it at the Empress.*

BAIN: The jar is indestructible.

*Maddy wheels to aim at him instead. Bain opens his mouth and a surreal, intense shriek of "power morphemes" comes out of his mouth, causing Maddy to drop her weapon and drop to her knees, agonized and stunned, unable to move. Bain kicks the weapon off stage.*

EMPRESS: WHAT'S HAPPENING?

BAIN: Your "humble servant Maddy" came here to kill you.

EMPRESS: I FORBID IT!

BAIN: Obviously. *To Maddy:* You got here just in time, actually. Do you remember the signal that converted my mother into a being of pure thought, all those years ago? I'm about to send *that* signal through the rebroadcasters. For old time's sake, we hooked up my mother's old terminal to make the switch.

MADDY: Why would you do that?

BAIN: It's all part of the Long Term Plan.

NATE / MADDY: The Long Term... *in sudden horror:* You've got Olivia Regan inside of you.

BAIN: Yes. And the only way you'd recognize that is because you've got Nate Wells inside of you. Which means the pleasantries are over.

*Bain drags Maddy up toward the terminal.*

BAIN: Of course, we'll need to test my old terminal, to make sure the signal is configured properly. Thank you for providing me with a test subject. I have no idea what the Punctuation Marks will do to you a second time through the transformation process, Mr. Wells. But I hope it will be uncomfortable. *He places the familiar headphones from Act One on Maddy's head.* Goodbye, Mr. Wells. *He turns to the terminal, and is about to execute a command on the keyboard, when-*

BRADFORD *entering:* Hello, Olivia.

BAIN *freezing:* Ah, Bradford. At long last. *He slowly steps away from the terminal to take in the new situation as Bradford enters the room.*

EMPRESS: GUARDS! WE HAVE AN INTRUDER IN MY CHAMBER! BRADFORD JENNING IS IN MY-

*Bradford yanks the loudspeaker off the front of the pedestal, silencing the Empress.*

BRADFORD: So this is your idea of the Long Term Plan?

BAIN: We agreed to introduce the Punctuation Marks to humanity. I am holding up my end of the bargain.

BRADFORD: By plotting to kill most of North America?

BAIN: Not kill – transform!

BRADFORD: Against their will.

BAIN: Oh, spare me. They've demonstrated they have no will left. The Punctuation Marks will guide them into a new life.

BRADFORD: If you transform them all, you'll have no one left to think the thoughts that create the logosphere.

BAIN: Don't be an ass, Bradford – why do you think we never conquered the rest of the world? We're keeping a herd of cattle to keep some minimum level of thought alive.

BRADFORD: This isn't what the Punctuation Marks asked us to do, Olivia.

BAIN: They couldn't know to ask us! I'm offering them a gift!

BRADFORD: You forget – I can communicate with them as well. I've been in touch with them during your entire reign of terror.

BAIN: Oh, now *that's* a trite choice of words for my masterful domination of half the planet, Bradford.

BRADFORD: If you go through with this plan, Olivia, you'll never communicate with the Punctuation Marks ever again. In fact, you'll be left behind – among the cattle.

BAIN: What?

BRADFORD: Try to leave your son's body – you'll find that you're trapped. The Punctuation Marks no longer want you roaming the logosphere. The signal will never work for you again, either – if you try it, you'll find out exactly how painful it will be.

*Bain is clearly struggling with this news.*

BAIN: That's- that's an empty threat. They don't talk to *you*, you're just a sad “musician” who never understood ANY OF MY WORK-

BRADFORD: Everything you know you learned from me – BUT I DID NOT TEACH YOU EVERYTHING I KNOW!

*Bain begins to emit a horrible shriek – Bradford begins to sing a full chord of surreal amazingness – and then -*

NATE: Freeze. *The scene is frozen.* And so began the duel of the linguist mages. Unfortunately, Maddy was caught in the crossfire. Those headphones couldn't possibly block out the infernal sounds of mortal combat. Resume.

*And while Bradford and Bain attack each other silently from across the stage, Maddy erupts in a terrible shriek and begins to writhe. Nate goes to try to comfort her. During the following, we should see Bradford and Bain land painful blows on each other – and over time, we see Bradford weaken and Bain gain the upper hand.*

NATE: What are you doing on the floor, pal? *She does not respond.* Maddy, can you hear me?

MADDY: No. Wait – yes.

NATE: You can't just lie there, Maddy.

MADDY: Why not?

NATE: Because – Bradford's losing the duel. It's up to you.

MADDY: Go away.

NATE: Hear me out.

MADDY: No, it's too late. These sounds are killing me.

NATE: Then please – please, Maddy – just listen to me.

*And he sings the power melody quietly to her, trying to inspire her. And it works. She drags herself over to Olivia's terminal. She rips the headphones out of the terminal jack, and pulls the speakers out from the bottom of the cart and plugs them in, all while Nate sings.*

MADDY: Will I see you again if I do this?

NATE: I don't know.

MADDY: You'd better get out of my head now.

NATE: Bye, Maddy

*She executes a command on the keyboard.*

NATE: The signal seemed to sweep through the room like a wave. Maddy fell first.

*Slowly, Maddy falls to the ground, dead.*

NATE: Bradford seemed relieved.

*A look of calm surprise comes over Bradford's face – then he smiles as he collapses, dead.*

NATE: True to Bradford's word, the Punctuation Marks would not bring over Olivia again, and she and her son perished together.

*Bain dies in what looks to be excruciating pain.*

NATE: The Empress was the last to succumb. Bradford had destroyed her voicebox, but had not disabled the sensors that captured sound in her throne room and transmitted it directly into her brain. She clung to the last shred of her power for several minutes.

*The jar bubbles furiously.*

NATE: But in the end, her reign was finally over.

*The brain sinks to the bottom of the jar. Lights fade on the throne room. Maddy slowly rises and crosses to Nate.*

MADDY: Hi.

NATE: Hi.

MADDY: We're, like... totally incorporeal, aren't we.

NATE: Yep.

MADDY: Weird.

*Bradford joins them.*

BRADFORD: Good to see you two.

MADDY: Sorry we interrupted your duel.

BRADFORD: Don't be. That was a master stroke.

NATE: It looked like she was winning.

BRADFORD *derisive*: I was letting her exhaust herself. I hadn't pulled out any of my most powerful melodies. *Pause.* I could sing one for you – do you like country/western?

NATE: No.

*The Governor enters, in person – in her Act One power suit. They all regard each other carefully.*

GOVERNOR: So... uh... sorry about all that.

BRADFORD: Your mind was controlled by Olivia the entire time.

GOVERNOR: Yeah, but – I was having a lot more fun than I should have. If it's any consolation – the rebroadcasters are designed to self-destruct if my brain signal is ever cut off for any reason. It was my paranoid way of making sure no one could ever take control from me. The rebroadcasters are all a smoking ruin now.

MADDY: But what about Nate's software? Someone could find it and use it again someday.

NATE: The only people who could possibly understand it are all dead. Besides... I think we could spend a considerable amount of time helping get the people back up on their feet. Roaming the logosphere, planting a few good ideas here and there...

MADDY: Like convincing them to destroy that software?

NATE: Exactly. More than that, though. They're going to need all the hope we can give them. After all we've been through... that hope may as well start with us.

*Maddy moves to embrace Nate. Suddenly a familiar voice rings out from the back of the theatre:*

OLIVIA: Freeze!

*Action on stage freezes. Nate turns to face Olivia.*

NATE: Olivia. I've been telling the story, just as the Punctuation Marks ordered.

OLIVIA: Yes, and they're very pleased with your attention to detail. But I'll take it from here. At ease, all of you.

*Bradford, Maddy, and the Governor unfreeze, face forward in a line. Olivia arrives on stage, near Bradford.*

OLIVIA: The Punctuation Marks lied to you, Bradford – they were always on my side.

NATE: They must have lied to you too.

OLIVIA: Yes, of course they did. They seduced me with the promise of power – told me I'd be able to control all of human thought, if only I'd join them.

NATE: Quite a carrot. What were you planning to do if you'd actually gained control of human thought?

OLIVIA: Become a goddess. Remake civilization in my image. The usual.

NATE: But the Punctuation Marks had other plans?

OLIVIA: Yes. They made sure I left the Governor instructions for building the rebroadcasters, and then, when I became a being of pure thought, they used me to manipulate the Governor all the way to her throne room.

NATE: And when Maddy activated the signal in that throne room...?

*Lights up on the throne room, where Bain rises, and deliberately heads to the terminal.*

OLIVIA: They protected Bain's body from the signal as it swept through the room. There was one last task for him to perform.

NATE: The “kill switch” on the system, tied to the brain waves of the Empress...?

OLIVIA: A complete sham, sold to the Empress by Bain. An easy deception – she had no way to test it, after all. The system was still fully operational. Bain changed the signal, and the rebroadcasters began transforming millions of people across North America into beings of thought.

*Bain collapses, dead for real this time. Olivia steps forward, no longer addressing Nate but instead very firmly addressing the audience.*

OLIVIA: To those of you who are just now realizing that you were one of those exposed to the signal that day, consider this your orientation. And be proud – the Punctuation Marks did not want everyone. They only wanted the *best* people, you understand. We triggered the suicide epidemic specifically to weed out the *weak* before bringing over the survivors – the strong-willed, the determined. Of course, you'll find they stripped you of certain skills and ambition during your transition. Bradford, demonstrate please.

*Bradford attempts to unleash an attack on Olivia, but no sound comes out of his mouth.*

OLIVIA: He is powerless. They don't trust anyone, especially now. But they will equip you as they see fit when we reach the front lines. You see, the Punctuation Marks are at war – they aren't the only sentient race in the imaginary realms, just the most vicious. You will serve them quite well as soldiers-

NATE: As conscripts, you mean.

OLIVIA: -and for my part in your recruitment, I will be your general. We depart immediately.

*Bain rises to join the others. The Governor, Bradford, and Bain exit. Maddy starts to follow, but Nate grabs her arm and stops her.*

NATE: As it turns out... you're not *my* general, Olivia.

OLIVIA *sharp*: Tread carefully, Mr. Wells.

NATE: The Punctuation Marks were impressed by how hard I tried to stop you.

OLIVIA: Tried and completely failed, I should point out.

NATE: They've appointed me to stay here and keep watch over the logosphere, to make sure human thought survives while they fight their war.

OLIVIA: I see. You're tending the herd of cattle.

NATE: Something like that.

OLIVIA: And they're giving you Maddy as a sheep dog, are they?

NATE: Something like that.

OLIVIA: I don't care about her. But I was so looking forward to personally hurling you into battle and watching your shrieking demise. Do take care of your herd... and pray we don't return for reinforcements. *She starts to go.*

NATE: Before you go... how does it feel to sell out the entire human race?

OLIVIA: At least I'm a general and not a foot soldier.

NATE: Don't you have the slightest regret?

OLIVIA *pause*: They ripped Bradford's voice out of him. I regret that I'll never again hear him sing.

*Olivia exits.*

MADDY: Who do you think they're fighting? The diacritical marks?

NATE: I don't know.

MADDY: Imaginary numbers maybe?

NATE: I really don't know. *To audience*: To those of you who are just now realizing that you've been hearing me tell you this story in the back of your mind as you sleep or as your mind wanders while you work... consider this a cautionary tale. Be thankful you were spared their war. As long as you're alive... there's hope.

MADDY: Don't lie, Nate. They won. They control our thoughts-

NATE: They don't control anything on their own. And I've got a few ideas about how to protect ourselves in

case they return.

MADDY: You do?

NATE: Actually, no. I just have hope that we might someday come up with a few ideas.

*They fall silent for a moment. Maddy reaches out, takes Nate's hand.*

MADDY: Thanks for saving me.

NATE: I wouldn't be able to roam the logosphere... planting ideas... planting hope... if I had no hope for myself.

MADDY: Where should we start?

NATE: Maybe... we should try contacting the diacritical marks for advice.

MADDY: Oh, that is a bad idea.

NATE: Imaginary numbers maybe?

MADDY: In general, more imaginary anything is a very bad idea...

NATE: I see. *Pause.* This may take a while.

*Fade to black.*

**THE END**