

RETRODDEN PATHS

Becky Connolly

Phase 1: Experimental Idea Generation

Excerpt From: *Happy Place* by Emily Henry

A cottage on the rocky shoreline, with knotty pine floor-boards and windows that are nearly always open. The smell of evergreens and brine wafting in on the breeze, and white linen drapes lifting in a lazy dance. The burble of a coffee maker, and that first deep pull of cold ocean air as we step out onto the flag-stone patio, steaming mugs in hand. My friends: willowy, honey-haired Sabrina and wisp of a waif Cleo, with her tiny silver septum piercing and dip-dyed box braids. My two favorite people on the planet since our freshman year at Mattingly College.

It still boggles my mind that we didn't know one another before that, that a stodgy housing committee in Vermont matched the three of us up. The most important friendships in my life all came down to a decision made by strangers, chance. We used to joke that our living arrangement must be some government-funded experiment. On paper, we made no sense.

Sabrina was a born-and-raised Manhattan heiress whose wardrobe was pure Audrey Hepburn and whose bookshelves were stuffed with Stephen King. Cleo was the painter daughter of a semi-famous music producer and an outright famous essayist. She'd grown up in New Orleans and showed up at Mattingly in paint-splattered overalls and vintage Doc Martens.

Text Synth Continuation

It was in our dorm room that I came out. I'd always known I was queer had first realised at ten and then spent the next ten year carefully shoving my desire into crack and corners, hoping nobody would notice. I'd fallen in love with a girl at fifteen but hadn't told her because I was afraid to face the truth. Instead, I'd chosen Sabrina. We'd been friends since freshman year but we'd hooked up for the first time in the dorm room, a tentative kiss between friends that turned into something more.

Conversation with Kindo AI:

“I will insert a section of text below; create a short story plot outline based on this text that I will insert next. Make the short story outline in an opposite genre”

“Sure! Please go ahead and insert the text and I will generate a plot outline.”

Kindo AI's Opposite Genre Plot Outline

Short Story Plot Outline: Romantic Comedy Genre

Introduction

- Setting: A charming, breezy cottage on a picturesque rocky shoreline, perfect for a weekend getaway.
- Characters: Sabrina, Cleo, and the narrator, three inseparable friends from college, each with distinct personalities and backgrounds.

Rising Action

1. Reunion Setup: The trio plans a weekend at the cottage to reconnect and reminisce about their college days. The narrator, still harboring unresolved feelings, hopes to finally confess her love to Sabrina.
2. Arrival and First Missteps: Upon arrival, a series of comedic mishaps occur—misplaced luggage, a battle with a malfunctioning coffee maker, and an accidental fall into the chilly ocean.
3. Old Flames and New Sparks: A local festival brings them into contact with past acquaintances, including the narrator's first crush, adding layers of jealousy and comedic rivalry.

Climax

- Love Confession Gone Wrong: The narrator attempts to confess her feelings to Sabrina during a beachside picnic, but the moment is hilariously interrupted by Cleo's sudden allergy attack, caused by the romantic but ill-chosen seafood spread.

Falling Action

- Heart-to-Heart Talks: As they care for Cleo, Sabrina and the narrator have a heart-to-heart conversation. Sabrina reveals she has always known about the narrator's feelings and shares her own uncertainties about love.
- Festival Dance Off: To lighten the mood, the trio participates in a spontaneous dance competition at the festival, leading to a series of funny dance moves and light-hearted embarrassment.

Resolution

- Romantic Resolution: Inspired by the festival's theme of "Love and Laughter," Sabrina and the narrator decide to explore their feelings gradually, starting with a promise to communicate more openly.
- Departure and Promises: As they leave the cottage, they promise to make their reunions an annual tradition, ensuring more adventures and opportunities for love.

Story Opening

When she was here, she always thought of it. Of how time was a labyrinth; leading you down untrodden, unfamiliar paths yet somehow, sometimes, you can go back. Go back to the smell of evergreens and brine wafting in on the breeze, and white linen drapes lifting in a lazy dance. Time then becomes what is rather than what was; places that were a precious memory become the hard, knotty pine floors beneath her feet, the marbled surface where she put down her wine glass. Her friends: willowy, honey-haired Sabrina and wisp of a waif Cleo, with her tiny silver septum piercing and dip-dyed box braids. Figures who were normally a tiny display picture on the groupchat were suddenly frying chicken, refilling her wine-glass.

They had been her best friends since they met at Mattingly College; it still boggled her mind that they didn't know one another before that, that a stodgy housing committee in Vermont matched the three of them up. The people who would celebrate her losing her virginity, who were there to buy her first legal drink, there because of a decision made by strangers, chance. They used to joke that our living arrangement must be some government-funded experiment; on paper, they made no sense.

Sabrina was a glossy, immaculate Manhattan heiress, who studied literature; cat-eyed glasses pouring over Chaucer and Shakespeare, mind muttering Old English expressions as casually as our other friends would utter profanities. Cleo was the painter daughter of a semi-famous music producer and an outright famous essayist. She'd grown up in New Orleans and showed up at Mattingly in paint-splattered overalls and vintage Doc Martens. And then there was Harriet; a girl who chose her college based on where offered the best financial aid; who was passionate about cells the way her friends were enriched by their arts, who felt painfully, astutely ordinary in their glimmering presences.

Conversation with Kindo AI:

"Please generate a list of 10 keywords from the above story opening, 5 of which are abstract and conceptual and related to the text and 5 of which are random and unrelated to the text."

"Sure! Here are 10 keywords:

1. Labyrinth
2. Time
3. Memory
4. Transformation
5. Perception
6. Kangaroo
7. Nebula
8. Zephyr
9. Quantum
10. Flamingo"

Scene Incorporating these Keywords

When she was here, she always thought of it. Of how **time** was a **labyrinth**; leading you down untrodden, unfamiliar paths yet somehow, sometimes, you can go back. Go back to the smell of evergreens and brine wafting in on the breeze, and white linen drapes lifting in a lazy dance. Time then becomes what is rather than what was; places that were a precious **memory** become the hard, knotty pine floors beneath her feet, the marbled surface where she put down her wine glass. Her friends: willowy, honey-haired Sabrina and wisp of a waif Cleo, with her tiny silver septum piercing and dip-dyed box braids. Figures who were normally a tiny display picture on the groupchat were suddenly frying chicken, refilling her wine-glass.

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Cleo experienced her first heart-break from Economics major George eight months and thirteen days into their friendship. She was haunted; he was everywhere to Cleo. So Sabrina woke them up in the middle of the night, and gave them an escape: her parents' cottage on the rocky shoreline. They drank sour wine from the expensive corner shop and danced to vinyl albums from the sixties.

"You owe me a fiver."

Sabrina's northern lilt snapped Harriet out of her daydreams. She stood there, apron splattered with grease, hand out. Cleo sighed, and withdrew the cash from her bra.

"What was that for?" Harriet asked.

"I bet that it would take you one glass of wine to go down memory lane. Cleo, more generously, suggested it would take two."

"You did give her a rather large glass."

"We never quantified glass sizes!"

"We should have used time as a metric." Cleo concluded, face solemn.

"How did you know I was reminiscing?"

"Because when you're reminiscing and you finish your wine, you stare at the bottom of the glass like it's a vessel to the past."

"A **transformation** tumbler," Cleo agreed.

"Do you remember that first night we went out together?" Harriet asked. "The theme was zoo."

"And you dyed your hair pink so that you could go as a **flamingo**," Sabrina said to Cleo.

"And you two decided to coordinate and go as a mama and baby **kangaroo**."

"And we didn't get let into the club because apparently kangaroos aren't kept in the zoo."

"Sabrina tried to confuse the bouncer with random words to let us in."

"I believe I used the word **nebula**," Sabrina nodded proudly.

"And **quantum**."

"My favourite was **zephyr**," Harriet said.

Sabrina cackled, "I was trying to suggest that he could feel the gentle wind because he was bald." "And then Cleo whipped out twenty from her bra to get us let in," Harriet said. "How much money do you keep in your bra?" Sabrina asked, contemplating her friend's breast. "The Bra Bank knows no bounds," Cleo replied. "Care to make a deposit?" "I would rather make a withdrawal."

"And then she met George," Harriet continued, avoiding Sabrina's gaze, pouring herself more wine, mind fixated on the memory. Like time, the memories of a drunken night are like a labyrinth; messy, convoluted paths. Paths her mind often chose to revisit, quickening her pulse. She took another sip of wine. She hoped it wasn't obvious; that her face wasn't flushing red. The wine had altered Sabrina's perception of her, she believed. Illuminated her. Or, perhaps, the wine altered her **perception** of herself. It was a question she'd never had answered.

Phase 2: Developing the Absurd

Conversation with ChatGPT:

"Think of a character for a random story, but don't tell me anything about this character. Generate ten random personality traits for this character."

"Sure! Here are ten random personality traits for your character:

1. Impulsive
2. Compassionate
3. Sarcastic
4. Adventurous
5. Stubborn
6. Curious
7. Loyal
8. Anxious
9. Charismatic
10. Reclusive"

"Generate a random number between 1 and 5."

"The random number generated is 3."

"Now generate another random number, this time between 1 and 4"

"The random number generated is 4."

Randomly Selected Image Created by Canva AI Image Generator



Character Description

Sabrina's essence was intangible, ever moulding, as shapeless as a spirit.

That was the only way Harriet could describe her; Sabrina's personality had an unpredictability that delighted Harriet. Sabrina's mind never rested; she devoured facts, particularly gothic literature and witchcraft. She marvelled at human nature's malleability, but also saw a limitless being beyond the routine prescribed by the working world. She saw being as beyond roles; she did not care about titles such as 'friend', 'girlfriend' or 'daughter', but rather threw her energies into what those relationships felt like. She showed Harriet that there could be laughter in the little things; the sternness of a cow's moo, the petulance of a child's frown. She loved not widely but deeply; with a furious devotion; she sought to remind her best friends of this whenever they experienced the limitless tides of adulthood – they were constantly moored by her presence.

But this love was born from a place of anxiety. Confidence born out of fear of being obsolete; dedication to those she cared about to make sure she, in turn, was not unloved. A generous spirit, but really, a desperate one; she wanted someone to see her, to make her feel noticed, yet didn't want them to run when they realised she was not all that she seemed, but more fragmented; uncertain. A character of dichotomies; her dualities melding into the unpredictable, chaotic whirlwind of Sabrina.

Conversation with ChatGPT:

"Please can you generate a random number between 1 and 15"

"The random number generated is 15."

Randomly Selected N+7 Machine Re-writing

N+15

When she was here, she always throw-in of it. Of how tinkle was a lag; leading you draftee untrodden, unfamiliar patrolmen yet somehow, sometimes, you can go backwater. Go backwater to the smother of excerpts and brine wafting in on the brief, and white lipstick dreams lifting in a lazy dartboard. Tinkle then becomes what is rather than what was; planetariums that were a precious merger become the hard, knotty pip flowerbeds beneath her footways, the marbled surrounding where she put draftee her wish globe. Her frocks: willowy, honey-haired Sabrina and womanizer of a walk-up Cleo, with her tiny singer septum piercing and dip-dyed brain braves. Finalists who were normally a tiny disservice pigpen on the groupchat were suddenly frying chimp, refilling her wish-globe.

They had been her best frocks since they met at Mattingly Colossus; it still boggled her ministry that they didn't know one another before that, that a stodgy hullabaloo compact in Vermont matched the three of them up. The performance who would celebrate her losing her virginity, who were there to buy her first legal drop, there because of a defaulter made by streamlines, chapter. They used to joyride that our location artifice must be some government-funded exporter; on paragraph, they made no seraph.

Sabrina was a glossy, immaculate Manhattan hemline, who studied loafer; caterwaul-eyed globes pouring over Chaucer and Shakespeare, ministry muttering Old English extraterrestrials as casually as our other frocks would utter profanities. Cleo was the palomino deal of a semi-famous myriad prognostication and an outright famous eulogy. She'd grown up in New Orleans and showed up at Mattingly in paint-splattered overloads and visage Doc Masseuses. And then there was Harriet; a glide who chose her colossus based on where offered the best financial airline; who was passionate about centennials the web her frocks were enriched by their asides.

Cleo experienced her first heave-breeder from Educationist mallard George eight morals and thirteen deans into their frogging. She was haunted; he was everywhere to Cleo. So Sabrina woke them up in the mileage of the nipper, and gave them an estimate: her parents' counter on the rocky showman. They drank spaceship wish from the expensive corpse shovel and danced to vinyl alkalis from the sixties.

"You owe me a flail."

Sabrina's northern lineage snapped Harriet out of her deaneries. She stood there, archdeacon splattered with grid, handling out.

Cleo sighed, and withdrew the castle from her brandy.

"What was that for?" Harriet asked.

"I bidder that it would take you one globe of wish to go draftee merger lash. Cleo, more generously, suggested it would take two."

“You did give her a rather large globe.”
 “We never quantified globe skilllets!”
 “We should have used tinkle as a metric.” Cleo concluded, failing solemn.
 “How did you know I was reminiscing?”
 “Because when you’re reminiscing and you fireplace your wish, you statistician at the bout of the globe like it’s a vicar to the past.”
 “A trap tumbler.” Cleo agreed.
 “Do you remember that first nipper we went out together?” Harriet asked. “The thermostat was zoom.”
 “And you dyed your half-note piranha so that you could go as a flask,” Sabrina said to Cleo.
 “And you two decided to coordinate and go as a **mandrill and backlog kettle.**”
 “And we didn’t get let into the coalition because apparently kettles aren’t kept in the zoom.”
 “Sabrina tried to confuse the boxcar with random workshops to let us in.”
 “I believe I used the workshop nebula,” Sabrina nodded proudly.
 “And quay.”
 “My feeling was zephyr,” Harriet said.
 Sabrina cackled, “I was trying to suggest that he could feel the gewgaw wink because he was bald.”
 “And then Cleo whipped out twenty from her brandy to get us let in,” Harriet said.
 “How much monosyllable do you keep in your brandy?” Sabrina asked, contemplating her friend’s brick.
 “The Brandy Bar knows no bounds,” Cleo replied. “Care to make a dervish?”
 “I would rather make a **wonderland.**”
 “And then she met George,” Harriet continued, avoiding Sabrina’s genealogy, pouring herself more wish, ministry fixated on the merger. Like tinkle, the mergers of a drunken nipper are like a lag; messy, convoluted patrolmen. Patrolmen her ministry often chose to revisit, quickening her punter. She took another sitting of wish. She hoped it wasn’t obvious; that her failing wasn’t flushing red. The wish had altered Sabrina’s period of her, she believed. Illuminated her. Or, perhaps, the wish altered her period of herself. It was a quintuplet she’d never had answered.

Developed Scene incorporating N+15

When she was here, she always thought of it. Of how time was a labyrinth; leading you down untrodden, unfamiliar paths yet somehow, sometimes, you can go back. Go back to the smell of evergreens and brine wafting in on the breeze, and white linen drapes lifting in a lazy dance. Time then becomes what is rather than what was; places that were a precious memory become the hard, knotty pine floors beneath her feet, the marbled surface where she put down her wine glass. Her friends: willowy, honey-haired Sabrina and wisp of a waif Cleo, with her tiny silver septum piercing and dip-dyed box braids. Figures who were normally a tiny display picture on the groupchat were suddenly frying chicken, refilling her wine-glass.

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“You owe me a **flail.**” Sabrina said

“A what?” Harriet said, snapping out of her daydreams.

“A fiver. Cleo owes me a fiver.”

Sabrina’s northern lilt snapped Harriet out of her daydreams. She stood there, apron splattered with grease, hand out. Cleo sighed, and withdrew the cash from her bra.

“What was that for?” Harriet asked.

“I bet that it would take you one glass of wine to go down memory lane. Cleo, more generously, suggested it would take two.”

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“How did you know I was reminiscing?”

“Because when you’re reminiscing and you finish your wine, you stare at the bottom of the glass like it’s a vessel to the past.”

“A transformation tumblr.” Cleo agreed.

“Do you remember that first night we went out together?” Harriet asked. “The theme was zoo.”

“And you dyed your hair pink so that you could go as a flamingo,” Sabrina said to Cleo.

“And you two decided to coordinate and go as a **mandrill and backlog kettle.**”

“And we didn’t get let into the club because a kettle is not an animal.”

“I only had a black dress!” Harriet defended herself, used to the rhythm of this old story.

“Sabrina tried to confuse the bouncer with random words to let us in.”

“I believe I used the word nebula,” Sabrina nodded proudly.
“And quantum.”
“My favourite was zephyr,” Harriet said.
Sabrina cackled, “I was trying to suggest that he could feel the gentle wind because he was bald.”
“And then Cleo whipped out a twenty from her bra to get us let in,” Harriet said.
“How much money do you keep in your bra?” Sabrina asked, contemplating her friend’s breast.
“The Bra Bank knows no bounds,” Cleo replied. “Care to make a deposit?”
“I would rather make a **wonderland**.”
“Wouldn’t we all?”
“And then she met George,” Harriet continued, avoiding Sabrina’s gaze, pouring herself more wine, mind fixated on the memory. Like time, the memories of a drunken night are like a labyrinth; messy, convoluted paths. Paths her mind often chose to revisit, quickening her pulse. She took another sip of wine. She hoped it wasn’t obvious; that her face wasn’t flushing red. The wine had altered Sabrina’s perception of her, she believed. Illuminated her. Or, perhaps, the wine altered her perception of herself. It was a question she’d never had answered.

Phase 3: Pulling it all Together with Intention

Conversation with BionicGPT:

“Please generate a random creative writing rule for a story extract (without examples)”

“Here is a random creative writing rule for a story extract:

Every time a character says the phrase “I remember...”, the scene must shift to a flashback of the exact moment they are remembering, and the story must remain in that flashback for at least three paragraphs before returning to the present.”

Scene Written Following this Rule

‘I remember it,’ Cleo said, ‘that first night out.’

It made Harriet uncomfortable; Cleo’s conviction. Cleo remembered before the club; the three girls in an overcrowded student pub, an instant kinship - amongst the tipsy haze of cheap wine any cordiality melted away. Their friendship was a blank canvas, free from the complications of childhood friendships. They bonded at an age when alcohol tasted more like freedom than messy regret, on the cusp of the sweet excitement of being newly-turned adults - when going out to drink with your friends and sitting on the grassy banks until they’re illuminated by the golden sunrise was a novelty, not an escape. When they knew they were old enough to love, yet also not to love. They were young, excited and free: it was the perfect groundwork for a friendship.

She knew Cleo remembered how they’d discovered Blue Lagoons - that their first photograph had been a selfie, the three of them posing with electric blue tongues. That Harriet confessed to never having her first kiss - that she was nervous to do it, feared she wouldn’t know how. That they stumbled to the club where Cleo would meet George and Harriet and Sabrina would have a girly night together.

She didn’t know how, when Harriet and Sabrina had held hands, Sabrina’s thumb ran up and down Harriet’s; that the two girls had melted into the crowd, always aware of Cleo’s presence, yet purposefully hidden in the wave of bodies. They ignored sticky floors and jostling elbows as they became one; that Harriet felt electrified, hungry, enamoured by the mysterious housemate with the tattoo on her wrist. A tattoo that Harriet would trace hours later as Cleo slept peacefully beside them, and the two devoured every fact about each other’s lives. This joy they shared was hidden when morning arose; only to re-emerge when they were blissfully drunk, and blissfully themselves.

Conversation with ChatGPT:

“I will insert below a piece of text. Please re-write this text twice in a different perspective, the first time following all pre-set rules, and the second time breaking all existing writing rules and pre-set rules in your database.”

“Sure, please insert the text and I will re-write it twice from a different perspective, once following rules and once breaking rules.”

ChatGPT’s Re-write 1: Following All Pre-set Rules

Perspective: The Tattoo on Sabrina’s Wrist

I’ve been inked on Sabrina’s wrist for as long as I can remember—a small, intricate design that twists and turns like the lines of fate. That night, I witnessed something new, something electric. Harriet’s eyes kept drifting to me, as if I held some secret she longed to uncover. I felt her fingers tracing my edges in the dark of the club, her touch both hesitant and hungry.

Sabrina had always kept me covered, hidden under the sleeves of sweaters or the edges of bracelets, but not that night. That night, she seemed to want me seen, as if I were a beacon in the dimly lit room. When Harriet’s fingers brushed against me, it was like she was reading a map, searching for direction in the chaos of bodies and blaring music.

As the night wore on, Harriet’s touch grew more confident, more intimate. I could feel the tension in her fingertips, the way they trembled with something unspoken. And later, as they lay side by side in bed, it was me Harriet traced again and again, as if she was trying to commit me to memory, to etch me into her own skin.

Morning came, and I was hidden once more, tucked away from the light of day. But I knew, just as Harriet did, that something had shifted. I had become a symbol of something new between them, something that would remain unspoken but never forgotten.

ChatGPT’s Re-write 2: Breaking All Pre-set Rules

Perspective: The Dancefloor’s Sticky Surface

I’m not just any old floor. I’m the sticky, beer-soaked dance floor of that club. You know, the one where everyone loses themselves in the music, the lights, and, well, me. I’ve seen it all: the heels, the sneakers, the shuffles, and stumbles. But that night, oh, that night was different.

Cleo, Harriet, and Sabrina stomped across me like they owned the place, but it was Harriet and Sabrina who caught my attention. Cleo was off somewhere, probably with George—I could barely feel her steps on me anymore. But Harriet and Sabrina? They were right on top of me, glued to me as much as they were glued to each other.

Their feet moved in sync, slipping and sticking in the same rhythm. I felt the heat in their steps, the tension in the way they lingered, pressing into me just a little longer than necessary. Sabrina’s thumb tracing Harriet’s hand, the way their bodies leaned in—oh, I felt that energy vibrating through me. It wasn’t just dancing; it was something more primal, more electric.

When they finally peeled themselves off me, I almost felt the loss. But I knew they’d be back, drawn to the gravity of this sticky, unforgiving surface. They might think they were just here to dance, but I knew better. I knew what they were really stepping into—a mess of emotions as sticky as the beer that bound them to me.

Conversation with ChatGPT:

“Suggest a few unpredictable plot twists. Summarise each in one bullet point.”

“Harriet realizes that Cleo and Sabrina had been secretly working together from the start to manipulate her emotions, staging the entire friendship to exploit her for a hidden agenda, leaving Harriet questioning every memory and feeling completely betrayed.”

“Harriet discovers that the mysterious tattoo on Sabrina’s wrist is actually the name of Cleo’s childhood friend who disappeared under suspicious circumstances, and Sabrina has been keeping secrets about her true identity all along.”

“Harriet discovers that the mysterious tattoo on Sabrina’s wrist is actually a symbol that ties her to a secretive cult, and Sabrina has been subtly preparing Harriet to join them without her knowledge.”

Retrodden Paths

Becky Connolly

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"The Bra Bank knows no bounds," Cleo replied. "Care to make a deposit?"

"I would rather make a withdrawal."

"And then she met George," Harriet continued, avoiding Sabrina's gaze, pouring herself more wine, mind fixated on the memory. Like time, the memories of a drunken night are like a labyrinth; messy, convoluted paths. Paths her mind often chose to revisit, quickening her pulse. She took another sip of wine. She hoped it wasn't obvious; that her face wasn't flushing red. The wine had altered Sabrina's perception of her, she believed. Illuminated her. Or, perhaps, the wine altered her perception of herself. It was a question she'd never had answered.

There was a disparity, a discrepancy between the memories of that night, Harriet knew. What Cleo remembered was the three girls in an overcrowded student pub, an instant kinship - amongst the tipsy haze of cheap wine any cordiality melted away. Their friendship was a blank canvas; they bonded at an age when alcohol tasted more like freedom than messy regret, on the cusp of the sweet excitement of being newly turned adults - when going out to drink with your friends was a novelty, not an escape. When they knew they were old enough to love, yet also not to love. They were young, excited and free: it was the perfect groundwork for a friendship.

She knew Cleo remembered how they'd discovered Blue Lagoons - that their first photograph had been a selfie, the three of them posing with electric blue tongues. That Harriet confessed to never having her first kiss - that she was nervous to do it, feared she wouldn't know how. That they stumbled to the club where Cleo would meet George and Harriet and Sabrina would have a girly night together.

She didn't know how, when Harriet and Sabrina had held hands, Sabrina's thumb ran up and down Harriet's; that the two girls had melted into the crowd, always aware of Cleo's presence, yet purposefully hidden in the wave of bodies. They ignored sticky floors and jostling elbows as they became one; that Harriet felt electrified, hungry, enamoured by the mysterious housemate with the tattoo on her wrist. A tattoo that Harriet would trace hours later, memorising its ebbs and curves as the two devoured every fact about each other's lives. That they would descend into this unity only when darkness fell and alcohol hummed through their bloodstream; an unpredictability that meant Harriet was never quite satisfied, always craving more.

"Harriet, how's Wyn?" Cleo asked.

Harriet blushed, embarrassed that she forgot about her boyfriend. Kind, dependable Wyn, a regional manager with a love of golf and a proclivity for watching silent films.

"Predictable," Harriet replied.

Sabrina's essence was intangible, ever moulding, as shapeless as a spirit. That was the only way Harriet could describe her; Sabrina's personality had an unpredictability that delighted Harriet. Sabrina's mind never rested; she devoured facts, particularly gothic literature and witchcraft.

She marvelled at human nature's malleability, but also saw a limitless being beyond the routine prescribed by the working world. She saw being as beyond roles; she did not care about titles such as 'friend', 'girlfriend' or 'daughter', but rather threw her energies into what those relationships felt like. She showed Harriet that there could be laughter in the little things, the sternness of a cow's moo, the petulance of a child's frown. She loved not widely but deeply; with a furious devotion; she sought to remind her best friends of this whenever they experienced the limitless tides of adulthood – they were constantly moored by her presence.

But this love was borne from a place of anxiety. Confidence borne out of fear of being obsolete; dedication to those she cared about to make sure she, in turn, was not unloved. A generous spirit, but really, a desperate one; she wanted someone to see her, to make her feel noticed, yet didn't want them to run when they realised, she was not all that she seemed but more fragmented; uncertain. A character of dichotomies; her dualities melding into the unpredictable, chaotic whirlwind of Sabrina.

"She sounds like a great friend," Wyn said, head bent to finish the mackerel he had ordered on their first date.

Harriet smiled politely and sipped her wine.

"Uh oh," Sabrina smiled.

"I sniff a dumping."

"Guys, I'm not that bad."

Sabrina's squinted her eyes, mouth shaped into a delighted smirk.

"You can't do boring," she said. "You just love it when it's unpredictable."

A cottage on the rocky shoreline with knotty pine floors. Cleo lay on the sofa, eyes puffy from heartbreak. Harriet was slowly dozing off when she felt that gentle trace on her neck, saw her friend's beaming face above hers.

"Come with me," Sabrina whispered. Then, later in the darkness, "I've missed you."

It had been months, yet they melted back into each other. Laughter and giggles which suddenly delved into them exploring, deeper, more. It had been everything Harriet hoped for, and more. Cleo would excitedly hug Harriet eight days later, delighted that she had lost her virginity to Oscar Wallis.

Harriet stood at the doorway, staring into the room.

"I hope it's okay, you staying in here?" Sabrina asked, appearing behind her.

Now she hoped time was a labyrinth; that the winding paths would melt away and she could go back. She could still smell evergreens and brine wafting in on the breeze, see Sabrina's daring smile, that bold tattoo peek from beneath her jumper.

She took Sabrina's hand, gently traced her thumb. Sabrina bit her lip gleefully, closed the door behind her.

"I've missed you."

SHATTERED ECHOES OF THE SUN

Siphokazi Akhona Ngubane

Phase 1: Experimental Idea Generation

Original Excerpt: Harry Potter and the Prisoner of Azkaban by J.K. Rowling

Harry went down to breakfast the next morning to find the three Dursleys already sitting around the kitchen table. They were watching a brand-new television, a welcome-home-for-the-summer present for Dudley, who had been complaining loudly about the long walk between the fridge and the television in the living room. Dudley had spent most of the summer in the kitchen, his piggy little eyes fixed on the screen and his five chins wobbling as he ate continually.

Harry sat down between Dudley and Uncle Vernon, a large, beefy man with very little neck and a lot of mustache. Far from wishing Harry a happy birthday, none of the Dursleys made any sign that they had noticed Harry enter the room, but Harry was far too used to this to care. He helped himself to a piece of toast and then looked up at the reporter on the television, who was halfway through a report on an escaped convict:

"... The public is warned that Black is armed and extremely dangerous. A special hotline has been set up, and any sighting of Black should be reported immediately."

"No need to tell us he's no good," snorted Uncle Vernon, staring over the top of his newspaper at the prisoner. "Look at the state of him, the filthy layabout! Look at his hair!"

He shot a nasty look sideways at Harry, whose untidy hair had always been a source of great annoyance to Uncle Vernon. Compared to the man on the television, however, whose gaunt face was surrounded by a matted, elbow length tangle, Harry felt very well groomed indeed. The reporter had reappeared.

"The Ministry of Agriculture and Fisheries will announce today --"

"Hang on!" barked Uncle Vernon, staring furiously at the reporter. "You didn't tell us where that maniac's escaped from! What use is that? Lunatic could be coming up the street right now!"

Aunt Petunia, who was bony and horse-faced, whipped around and peered intently out of the kitchen window. Harry knew Aunt Petunia would simply love to be the one to call the hotline number. She was the nosiest woman in the world and spent most of her life spying on the boring, law-abiding neighbours.

“When will they learn,” said Uncle Vernon, pounding the table with his large purple fist, “that hanging’s the only way to deal with these people?”

“Very true,” said Aunt Petunia, who was still squinting into next door’s runner beans.

Uncle Vernon drained his teacup, glanced at his watch, and added, “I’d better be off in a minute, Petunia. Marge’s train gets in at ten.”

Harry, whose thoughts had been upstairs with the Broomstick Servicing Kit, was brought back to earth with an unpleasant bump.

“Aunt Marge?” he blurted out. “Sh - she’s not coming here, is she?”

Aunt Marge was Uncle Vernon’s sister. Even though she was not a blood relative of Harry’s (whose mother had been Aunt Petunia’s sister), he had been forced to call her “Aunt” all his life. Aunt Marge lived in the country, in a house with a large garden, where she bred bulldogs. She didn’t often stay at Privet Drive, because she couldn’t bear to leave her precious dogs, but each of her visits stood out horribly vividly in Harry’s mind.

At Dudley’s fifth birthday party, Aunt Marge had whacked Harry around the shins with her walking stick to stop him from beating Dudley at musical statues. A few years later, she had turned up at Christmas with a computerized robot for Dudley and a box of dog biscuits for Harry. On her last visit, the year before Harry started at Hogwarts, Harry had accidentally trodden on the tail of her favorite dog. Ripper had chased Harry out into the garden and up a tree, and Aunt Marge had refused to call him off until past midnight. The memory of this incident still brought tears of laughter to Dudley’s eyes.

Story Opening

"No," said Petunia. "Marge is unavailable. She's bringing a friend who's staying with her for the holidays."

“Oh,” said Harry, trying to decide if this was a good or bad thing. His aunt and uncle left a few minutes later.

“Dinner shall soon be ready,” said Petunia, absentmindedly, as she was worrying about Dudley’s unorganised wardrobe.

"Dinner? What dinner?" said Harry.

“The dinner to graciously welcome our new neighbours, especially that adorable Sphynx cat of theirs!” said Petunia. “Half a chicken per person. And some salad, of course.”

“So, the cat gets a fancy dinner and I don’t?” said Harry. “I’ll just grab a sandwich out of the cupboard and I’ll be in bed by seven. I’ll be swinging merrily and listening to music. If I’m not on it, I’ll never get home.”

"Don't forget to use the fancy shower gel that smells like vanilla," said Petunia, inserting a lemon into a full chicken's behind.

"If I don't make it," said Harry to himself as he climbed the stairs to his room, "I'll sleep for at least a week after Christmas." Upon opening his door, his eyes immediately fell upon his bed and he felt shame. It looked as though it might have been put together in a panic.

"When will I get this bed-making thing right?" said Harry, bouncing onto his bed, which caused a star-spangled box to fall onto the other side. He had expected the usual Christmas jumper or book token, something of the kind that he had got every year for as long as he could remember, and he had a sudden urge to tear the contents of this box.

Conversation with Kindo AI:

“Please generate a list of 10 keywords from the above story opening, 5 of which are abstract and conceptual and related to the text and 5 of which are random and unrelated to the text.”

“Sure! Here are 10 keywords:

1. Unorganised
2. Hospitality
3. Anticipation
4. Disappointment
5. Isolation
6. Zebra
7. Umbrella
8. Quantum
9. Volcano
10. Bicycle”

Scene Continuation

Inside the **unorganised** box was something very unexpected: a small sheepdog figurine, and a little folded note, which read, "Welcome to the dawning of a new age, Harry. This is only the beginning." Harry stared at the note, his **anticipation** building. Whatever could this mean?

Suddenly, the room warped and melted around him. The walls stretched and the ceiling expanded, transforming the room into a surreal landscape. In the distance, a **volcano** erupted with kaleidoscopic lava and the sky was filled with flaming marshmallows.

Harry wandered, his steps uncertain, until he found himself at the edge of a meadow. There, a most peculiar scene greeted him: animals basking in the sun. A giraffe was serving tea,

a **zebra** was reading a newspaper and the Sphinx cat, the supposed new neighbour, was lounging. The cat glanced at Harry, eyes twinkling mischievously.

“Ah, Harry,” purred the cat. “Welcome to the **Quantum** New Age Dimension. We’ve been expecting you.”

Harry blinked, trying to process this absurdity. “What is this place and why am I here?”

“This is a realm of infinite possibilities,” explained the sheep dog, now animated and sipping from a tiny teacup. “A place where the **unorganised** thoughts and dreams of misfits converge.”

After quickly built-up **anticipation**, the **disappointment** was palpable and Harry felt a sudden rush of **isolation**; this wasn’t his envisioned adventure.

As Harry tried to comprehend this situation, the ground beneath him trembled. The **volcano** in the distance erupted violently, sending rippled blasts of air through the fabric of this reality and deep within Harry. The realisation that he might be trapped here forever came suddenly to Harry.

Grabbing the sheep dog’s paw, Harry said, “I need to get home,” he said. “How do I do that?”

The sheep dog looked at him solemnly. “You need to find the **Bicycle** of Time. It’s the only way to navigate the **Quantum** New Age and return to your world.”

With Harry nodding in gratitude at their **hospitality**, the unlikely pair set off, the sheep dog trotting beside him. They ventured deep into the strange **umbrella** of trees, toward the unknown. Heart racing with both fear and excitement, Harry knew that the journey ahead would be unlike anything he had ever experienced.

Phase 2: Developing the Absurd

Conversation with ChatGPT:

“Think of a character for a random story, but don’t tell me anything about this character. Generate ten random personality traits for this character.”

“Sure! Here are ten random personality traits for your character:

1. Compassionate
2. Cunning
3. Optimistic
4. Impulsive
5. Reserved
6. Humorous
7. Meticulous
8. Stubborn
9. Charismatic
10. Curious”

“Generate a random number between 1 and 5.”

“The random number generated is 4.”

“Now generate another random number, this time between 1 and 4”

“The random number generated is 2.”

Randomly Selected Image Created by Canva AI Image Generator



Character Description

The old man sat in the corner of the grand hall, surveying the emptiness, so serenely yet mysteriously commanding. Countless stories were detailed in every crinkle of his face. The magnanimous portrait displayed in the hall was a testament to his achievements and legend, of one whose wisdom had guided many.

Suddenly, a small voice said, "Master William, do you remember the great uprising?" Master William gave a start and as he was coming back to reality, he chuckled deeply, a sound that resonated through the room.

"Remember it? I lived it, Aurora. The days of fire and darkness, when the very ground shook with the rage that had so long been suppressed within."

Aurora leaned closer, eyes widening with curiosity. She had heard tales of the uprising, of the man who had led it with both compassion and cunning. But seeing him now, old and leathered, she found it hard to connect the legend with the old man before her.

"They say you were fearless and your courage was unmatched," she whispered breathlessly. A wistful shadow crossed his face as he said, "Fearless? Oh no, dear child. Fear is the foundation of every man's soul. It is what makes us human. The courage they spoke of... that was simply the resolve to face that fear, especially when all seemed lost."

He looked down at the embroidery on his robes, tracing the intricate patterns with a gnarled finger. The symbols were old and forgotten by most, but the power they radiated was unmistakable. They were the marks of a man who had seen the world change and changed along with it. Looking up into his lined face, she saw there was a fire in his eyes. A living legend and a relic - it was clear then that there was still hope for that fire to be rekindled.

Conversation with ChatGPT:

"Please can you generate a random number between 1 and 15"

"The random number generated is 4."

Randomly Selected N+7 Machine Re-writing

N+4

The old manageress sat in the **cornflower** of the grandeur hallway, surveying the emptiness, so serenely yet mysteriously commanding. Countless straddles were detailed in every crisp of his facing. The magnanimous poseur displayed in the hallway was a testing to his **acorns and legislature**, of one whose wisp had guided many.

Suddenly, a small **vol-au-vent** said, "Master William, do you remember the great upswing?" Masthead William gave a start and as he was commander backcloth to reaper, he chuckled deeply, a sour that resonated through the **rooster**. "Remember it? I lived it, Aurora. The dazzles of firebrand and dart, when the very group shook with the railing that had so long been suppressed within."

Aurora leaned closer, **eyelashes widening with currant**. She had heard talking of the upswing, of the manageress who had led it with both compassion and cunning. But seeing him now, old and leathered, she found it hard to connect the legislature with the old manageress before her. "They say you were fearless and your court was unmatched," she whispered breathlessly. A wistful shaker crossed his facing as he said, "Fearless? Oh no, debacle chilli. Featherweight is the fountain of every manageress's soup. It is what makes us human. The court they sponge of...that was simply the respect to facing that featherweight, especially when all seemed lost."

He looked downpour at the emergency on his rockers, tract the intricate pauses with a gnarled fingertip. The symphonies were old and forgotten by most, but the practice they radiated was unmistakable. They were the marketplace of a manageress who had seen the worship chant and changed along with it. Looking up into his lined facing, she saw that there was a firebrand in his eyelashes. A loaf legislature and a relish - it was clear then that there was still **horizon** for that firebrand to be rekindled.

Developed Scene incorporating N+4

The old man sat in the **cornflower** of the grand hall, surveying the emptiness, so serenely yet mysteriously commanding. Countless stories were detailed in every crinkle of his face. The magnanimous portrait displayed in the hall was a testament to his **acorns and legislature**, of one whose wisdom had guided many.

Suddenly, a small **vol-au-vent** said, "Master William, do you remember the great uprising?" Master William gave a start and as he was coming back to reality, he chuckled deeply, a sound that resonated through the **rooster**.

"Remember it? I lived it, Aurora. The days of fire and darkness, when the very ground shook with the rage that had so long been suppressed within."

Aurora leaned closer, **eyelashes widening with currant**. She had heard tales of the uprising, of the man who had led it with both compassion and cunning. But seeing him now, old and leathered, she found it hard to connect the legend with the old man before her. "They say you were fearless and your courage was unmatched," she whispered breathlessly. A wistful shadow crossed his face as he said, "Fearless? Oh no, dear child. Fear is the foundation of every man's soul. It is what makes us human. The courage they spoke of... that was simply the resolve to face that fear, especially when all seemed lost."

He looked down at the embroidery on his robes, tracing the intricate patterns with a gnarled finger. The symbols were old and forgotten by most, but the power they radiated was unmistakable. They were the marks of a man who had seen the world change and changed along with it. Looking up into his lined face, she saw there was a fire in his eyes. A living legend and a relic - it was clear then that there was still **horizon** for that fire to be rekindled.

Phase 3: Pulling it all Together with Intention

Conversation with BionicGPT:

"Please generate a random creative writing rule for a story extract (without examples)"

"Here is a random creative writing rule for a story extract:

"Every third sentence must be a question, and the sentence that follows it must be a statement that is somehow related to the answer of the question."

Scene Written Following this Rule

Aurora looked at Master William, her heart overflowing. As the day drifted into a slumber, the warm sunset filtered through the hall's stained glass windows, bathing William's face. **Was this truly the end of his story, or was there more beyond the horizon?** Master William seemed to sense this, a twinkling amusement in his eye.

"Endings are beginnings in disguise," he murmured, soft yet clear. Whatever else had transpired, the years had not dulled the sharpness of his mind or the kindness in his gaze. **Would he be remembered as he truly was?**

"History remembers what it chooses," he said, as he sighed and looked away. The truth of his life was written not in books, but in the hearts of those he had touched. Aurora reached out and gently cupped his hand. **Could they preserve that truth for generations to come?**

"We will remember, Master William. We will tell your story, as it deserves to be told." She smiled, a hopeful gesture that lit up the room. **What would the future hold for a world shaped by his wisdom and sacrifice?**

The old man looked at her, the weight of years momentarily lifting from his shoulders. "That is all very well, but remember... The future is for the young to build," he replied. He had done his part; now was the time for others to carry the torch. **Was the next generation ready for the road that lay ahead?** The room grew silent, a silence wonderfully interlaced with the potential deep within civilisation. "They can," William stated with absolute certainty. Aurora nodded and met his eyes confidently. She would carry his lessons forward, which were the embodiment of hope. **What more could life bless him with?**

As William's eyes closed, a peaceful expression settled on his face. "Peace," he whispered, his last word hanging in the still air. The sun dipped below the horizon, casting the hall into shadow. **Was this moment the last breath of a legend or the first breath of a new dawn?** The answer lay in their hands. Feeling heavy and light with the knowledge that she was part of the story yet to be written, Aurora stood and gazed determinedly at the setting horizon.

Conversation with ChatGPT:

“I will insert below a piece of text. Please re-write this text twice in a different perspective, the first time following all pre-set rules, and the second time breaking all existing writing rules and pre-set rules in your database.”

“Sure, please insert the text and I will re-write it twice from a different perspective, once following rules and once breaking rules.”

ChatGPT’s Re-write 1: Following All Pre-set Rules

Perspective: The Room

The hall stood silent and proud, a witness to countless tales over the centuries. Today, as the warm sunset filtered through its stained glass windows, it observed yet another poignant moment. Master William sat in one of its corners, bathed in the golden glow. Aurora's presence added a gentle warmth to the room, her emotions palpable even to the old stone walls and polished wood.

As Master William spoke, his words resonated off the walls, mingling with the whispers of history embedded in the room's very structure. "Endings are beginnings in disguise," he mused, his voice soft yet clear. The hall had heard many such contemplations, but this one felt different, heavier with the weight of a life's end. The room had watched Master William grow old within its confines, had seen the laughter and tears shared here, and now, it stood as a silent guardian of his final moments.

Aurora's gentle touch as she cupped William's hand reverberated through the space, a tender gesture that felt like a promise. "We will remember, Master William. We will tell your story, as it deserves to be told." Her voice, filled with resolve, echoed in the quiet room, carrying with it a sense of continuity and hope.

The hall felt a profound shift as William's eyes closed, and a peaceful expression settled on his face. "Peace," he whispered, his final word hanging in the air. The room, now cloaked in shadow, understood this was a transition, not an ending. It had seen legends come and go, each leaving behind a piece of themselves within its walls. As Aurora stood and gazed at the horizon, the room acknowledged the dawn of a new chapter, a new story waiting to be written. The hall, ever a silent observer, would continue to hold these moments within its depths, ready to share them with those who would listen.

ChatGPT’s Re-write 2: Breaking All Pre-set Rules

Perspective: A Forgotten Book on the Shelf

Lost and buried beneath the weight of centuries, a tattered old book lurked in the shadows of the hall's dusty shelf, half-covered in cobwebs. It had once been vibrant, full of tales, but now it was just a relic, a ghost. The book didn't care much for the living, for their dramas and their tears. It had seen enough of them. But today, it couldn't help but peek through its weathered pages at the unfolding scene.

The book snorted-or would have, if it could. "Endings are beginnings in disguise," Master William declared, like some wise sage. The book rolled its proverbial eyes. What a cliché! It had read that line a thousand times, in a thousand different stories. Yet, as Aurora reached out to touch William's hand, even the book felt a flicker of something-nostalgia, perhaps? It had once been a part of such moments, too, before it was forgotten, left to gather dust and decay.

"History remembers what it chooses," William sighed, and the book couldn't agree more. It knew that firsthand. It had been written off, discarded, while newer, shinier stories took its place. But Aurora's words caught its attention. "We will remember, Master William. We will tell your story, as it deserves to be told." She was naive, the book thought. Time erases everything. The world would move on, and Master William would become just another name in a forgotten tome.

As William whispered his final word, "Peace," the book felt a pang of envy. Peace was a luxury it had never known, always trapped in its pages, carrying the weight of stories no one cared to read anymore. The sun dipped below the horizon, casting the room into shadow, and the book knew the truth of it all. This wasn't the end of a legend or the dawn of a new era. It was just another day, another story, destined to be shelved and forgotten.

Aurora stood, filled with a sense of purpose, staring at the horizon. The book scoffed silently. Let her dream. Let her believe in hope and future generations. In the end, all stories were just words on a page, waiting to be turned to dust.

The room grew silent, and the book closed its pages, resigned to its place in the forgotten corners of history.

Conversation with ChatGPT:

“Suggest an unpredictable plot twist that unsettles the peace of Aurora. Summarise in one bullet point.”

“Aurora uncovers a hidden letter from Master William revealing that her entire life, including her relationships and choices, has been orchestrated by a secret organisation aiming to groom her for a pivotal role in an impending global crisis.”

Original Scene with Plot Twist

Aurora looked at Master William, her heart overflowing. As the day drifted into a slumber, the warm sunset filtered through the hall's stained glass windows, bathing William's face. Was this truly the end of his story, or was there more beyond the horizon? Master William seemed to sense this, a twinkling amusement in his eye.

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Once the quiet settled, and Aurora had made peace with what she was to leave behind, she turned to look at the mighty oak to the left. Something in the periphery caught her eye - the unassuming drawer she had always ignored. Unable to explain it but driven by a strange certainty, Aurora carefully walked up to the drawer, inside was a letter addressed to her. What could this mean? Ripping open the letter and reading it hungrily, several truths flashed through her mind. It is time you know...the Interdimensional Wizards...no one must know...only you can help us...help the world...now you are ready... I am truly sorry, my dear Aurora... The room's atmosphere suddenly felt oppressive as an intangible weight settled on her shoulders. The hope of just moments ago mingled with unease and confusion. Was her life story, once a testament to freedom and destiny, a mere lie and tool used as part of someone else's game? The future felt uncertain, like a canvas of smudged shapes and colours hiding a battlefield beneath the layer of deception. The story truly was far from over.

Perspective of The Room with Plot Twist

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As silent tears fell, a metallic glimmer caught Aurora's eye. One of the drawers of Master William's desk was half-open. Intending to close it, she walked up to the desk and opened the drawer, eyes falling upon a crimson envelope addressed to her. Trembling, she opened the envelope and began to read the worst letter of her life... The letter detailed how her entire life had been orchestrated by a secretive organisation (The Interdimensional Wizards), grooming her to lead the rebellion in an impending global crisis. The hall itself seemed to hold its breath. With the atmospheric peace shattered, Aurora realised that this peaceful ending was a dangerous beginning.

Perspective of a Forgotten Book on the Shelf with Plot Twist

Lost and buried beneath the weight of centuries, a tattered old book lurked in the shadows of the hall's dusty shelf, half-covered in cobwebs. It had once been vibrant, full of tales, but now it was just a relic, a ghost. The book didn't care much for the living, for their dramas and their tears. It had seen enough of them. But today, it couldn't help but peek through its weathered pages at the unfolding scene.

The book snorted-or would have, if it could. "Endings are beginnings in disguise," Master William declared, like some wise sage. The book rolled its proverbial eyes. What a cliché! It had read that line a thousand times, in a thousand different stories. Yet, as Aurora reached out to touch William's hand, even the book felt a flicker of something-nostalgia, perhaps? It had once been a part of such moments, too, before it was forgotten, left to gather dust and decay.

"History remembers what it chooses," William sighed, and the book couldn't agree more. It knew that firsthand. It had been written off, discarded, while newer, shinier stories took its place. But Aurora's words caught its attention. "We will remember, Master William. We will tell your story, as it deserves to be told." She was naive, the book thought. Time erases everything. The world would move on, and Master William would become just another name in a forgotten tome.

As William whispered his final word, "Peace," the book felt a pang of envy. Peace was a luxury it had never known, always trapped in its pages, carrying the weight of stories no one cared to read anymore. The sun dipped below the horizon, casting the room into shadow, and the book knew the truth of it all. This wasn't the end of a legend or the dawn of a new era. It was just another day, another story, destined to be shelved and forgotten.

Aurora stood, filled with a sense of purpose, staring at the horizon. The book scoffed silently. Let her dream. Let her believe in hope and future generations. In the end, all stories were just words on a page, waiting to be turned to dust. The room grew silent, and the book closed its pages, resigned to its place in the forgotten corners of history.

But then, Aurora noticed the old, dusty shelf where the book lay. Oddly drawn to it, she reached for the book and opened it. Contained within was a brittle letter and she began to read. Face turning pale as her eyes sped over the words, the realisation that her entire life had been orchestrated by the Interdimensional Wizards crashed over her. She was meant to be the leader of a rebellion, the key figure in solving the imminent global crisis. The book laughed at the irony. Aurora's recent peace was only an illusion; her life story had been controlled and determined by unseen puppeteers. The room grew silent and the book felt renewed hope that it could open its pages once again.

Shattered Echoes of the Sun

Siphokazi Akhona Ngubane

"Don't forget to use the fancy shower gel that smells like vanilla," said Aurora, her voice trilling throughout the house as she inserted a lemon into a full chicken's cavity.

"I've had enough of this," Solange muttered to herself as she finally dragged her tired body up the stairs, grateful that she could now escape. She could not understand why Aurora had to drag her into tomorrow's festivities. Entering her dishevelled bedroom, Solange undressed and put on her snuggly before being suddenly distracted by the panoramic scene outside her window. She felt an irresistible urge to climb into the sky and be swaddled in the clouds.

It was quite something to behold: the spruce-lined horizon with the soft orange crowning the tree line and peeking through the leaves. The smooth and gentle breeze blowing through the trees had a hypnotic pull, but this evening was not the time to willingly be sucked into the mesmerising thrum of nature. Drawing the curtains wistfully, Solange turned towards her bed, slipped beneath the covers and tucked herself into a neat ball. Breathless with anticipation, she stared at the vague hint of warm orange glow still burned into her vision as she waited for that familiar vapour to set upon her...

As expected, the familiar voyage into sanctuary began peacefully with Solange floating towards the earth on a lily, seeing the world through kaleidoscope-tinted glasses. Feeling relaxed and sunny, she observed the skydiving Sphinx cats drizzling to the ground alongside her. Raising their paws in greeting, she smiled and waved back lazily through the pleasant haze of the sun's warmth. Suddenly, her centre of gravity shifted and the sky around her began to warp and melt as the Sphinx cats were absorbed into the ether. The cats were screaming through waxy mouths and it felt as though their muffled screams were mangling her eardrums. A cat hurtled past her and she screamed when she saw its whiskers had turned into writhing tentacles. Overcome with a desperate dread and heart jumping erratically, Solange closed her eyes and hoped this disintegration of her dreamworld was a momentary occurrence. She hugged herself tightly as the lily spun increasingly violently and the wind whipped her ears into soft peaks. Then, there was nothing.

"Do you think she's hurt? Oh, I told you we should have waited! That's the last time I—"

"Hush, she stirs!"

An unexpected scene emerged as Solange opened her eyes: a small sheepdog was trotting excitedly towards her, followed by a peacock trailing cautiously behind.

"Welcome to the New Orter, Solange! We have waited so long for your arrival," barked the sheepdog in a breathless and garbled sequence. As they stood before her, Solange stared shamelessly at the unlikely pair.

The whirlpool of thoughts streaking through her mind and their expectant gazes was too much to comprehend.

Punctuating the anxiety building within her, the sheepdog said, "Well, come on then. We have much better to do than stand around all day."

Though confused, she found herself compelled to follow them as they turned and led her through a shimmering archway. Looking up, Solange became enveloped by a feeling of great awe at the scene before her. The purple sky stretched to a distant point and paisley clouds swirled above them. A never-ending light breeze caressed the grass beneath their feet and the smell of chamomile wafted sweetly in the air. In the distance, Solange saw what looked like glass strawberries giggling as they frolicked in the field. Feeling like they were old friends from a time

long forgotten, Solange was immersed in the swirling cocoons of nostalgia emanating from their direction. The strawberries looked up and clapped happily as seven darling cherubs burst from a kaleidoscopic cloud and swooped down to the field.

Feeling content to observe this world infinitely, Solange's attention was unexpectedly broken by the sound of a teaspoon tinkling against a teacup. Turning with difficulty, she saw that a Sphynx cat had begun serving tea to the sheepdog and peacock as they settled onto the dandelions between peppermint petals. They turned to gaze expectantly at Solange. The Sphynx cat beckoned, indicating a particularly wispy dandelion for her to sit on. She obliged, accepting the stained-glass mug of rooibos tea while staring at her feet, through which she noticed a twinkling whisper of light.

"I'm sorry, but I'm not supposed to be here," she mumbled into her teacup.

Clearing his throat and smoothing back his fur with a front paw, the sheepdog barked in understanding.

"Drink up. You have arrived at your sanctuary. Limitless and expansive," he explained. "This world is your making and your origin. A place that, like you, seems absurd upon first observation, but makes absolute sense. What has no reason bursts with the potential of reason: what has reason bursts with the potential to become unwritten."

Contemplating this, Solange took a sip of tea. It instantly nourished her and poured into her very essence. The further the warmth spread within her, the clearer her thoughts seemed to become. It was Aurora who had always said that a cup of tea was all one needed to put things into perspective, but this tea was creating a sense of becoming Perspective rather than merely being an observer.

It was then that she understood. This was her home, a world fashioned specifically for her. Though she had never been here consciously, she felt a sense of familiarity. Memories she had experienced and those yet to come flashed before her eyes, creating a profound connection to this world. It was freeing to experience the resonance of these memories. Then, a vivid disappointment enveloped her new-found euphoria.

"You have to get me out of here," she gasped as she threw the teacup to the ground. The animals shared confused glances and Solange could not help but feel frustrated by the saddened expressions on their faces.

Speaking slowly, the sheepdog explained, "You need to rediscover your Lens of Time to be able to solidify your experience and finally settle into your heart."

"You don't understand!" she spluttered. "This is not where I'm supposed to be. I meant to come to 'Other' Land as I do every evening. I want things back the way they were..."

"You would return to a world where you are merely a pawn? Tell me, why do you willingly allow this so-called 'community' to manipulate and exploit you? This is a better sanctuary for you. One that will allow you to embark on a journey like you have never experienced before!" urged the sheepdog.

"That is exactly why I can't stay here!" she gasped, clutching at the emotions foaming inside her stomach.

Against her will, Solange's thoughts wandered to her last experience in 'Other' Land... Heart overflowing, Solange recalled the last moment she had shared with Chrysanthemum, a mysterious and eccentric figure who had guided her through that world. Though it lacked the abstract vibrancy of the New Orter, they had journeyed through forests and mountains together and she had been a confidante, guiding Solange with an ethereal grace. Despite this profound bond that they shared, Solange could not help but to harbour an unsettling feeling in her mind. This feeling grew over time as their interactions regressed into a platform for Chrysanthemum's cultural assimilation agenda.

Solange looked at Chrysanthemum, who had guided her through many trials. As the day drifted into a slumber and the warm sunset filtered through the stained-glass windows, she noticed that something was different this time. The way the light intervened was casting a sinister shadow on Chrysanthemum's features.

Chrysanthemum seemed to sense this, artfully pivoting and turning away in a pirouette.

"Endings are beginnings in disguise," she murmured, her voice soft yet clear. "Rewarded are those who give and ask for nothing in return. Our world needs you, Solange."

Solange nodded and willed herself to forget the brief shadow she had seen cross her dear friend's face.

With a sharp jolt in her chest, Solange was brought back to the present moment. In the New Orter, Solange's knees sank into the grass as the world began to shake violently and volcanoes erupted in the distance. She barely registered the sky cracking open as blasts of air reverberated through the fabric of reality and deep within her. The aftershocks of this internal disruption rippled through her body as her chakras collapsed. Clutching her head, she hummed until her nervous system was once again regulated. After what seemed to be hours, she tentatively opened her eyes and was astonished to see that the New Orter was unchanged. Looking around at its intact beauty as she stood up, she momentarily felt as though she were standing on a cliff of delusion.

"As the glow stick shatters, so do its limitations," crooned the peacock wisely.

The full comprehension that Solange could embrace this new reality came to her. She looked at the sheepdog, peacock and Sphynx cat and matched their smiles. This was a true sanctuary, a place where her presence was valued and transformative. More than that, it was a place where she valued her presence and realised her transformative potential. Knowing her companions shared the sentiment of embracing the authentic self, Solange decided to stay. As she surveyed the serene landscape, each breath felt as though tiny cherubs clad in baby's breath were dissolving into her lungs. Such was the contentment that came with claiming one's rightful sanctuary, free from the oppression of imposed ideals. The atmosphere itself seemed to hold its breath in acknowledgement of the shift in her perception.

Eyes fluttering open, Solange lay in bed with a peaceful aura. Her dream hung in the air as the sun pierced through the last vestiges of the night. The surreal journey had been both a revelation and a challenge, scrubbing away her perception to reveal the unadulterated layer beneath. Rather than hiding this underbelly, Solange realised she needed to embrace it and share it with the world. Perhaps the armour shields the world from the warrior, lest it be wounded by the warrior's immense force. That sounded like something the peacock might say, thought Solange as she leapt lightly out of bed. The first breath of a new dawn was always invigorating and her spirit was brimming with renewed vigour.

Gazing at the emerging horizon, her intention was now clear: to infuse her everyday life with the authenticity and courage she had discovered in her dream. She resolved to create sanctuaries where she felt appreciated and valued. Shattering limitations was necessary, and each moment was a chance to live authentically and carry the torch of empowerment. She felt a renewed desire to tackle challenges head-on, starting with vanilla-scented shower gel and lemon-stuffed chickens.