# THE HEIRS

*The Heirs* is a work of fiction, but it deals with many real issues including references to a suicide attempt (not shown), murder, death of a parent, depression and anxiety.

For further information about these content warnings, please visit: https://qr.usborne.com/2xmcg

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# THE HEIRS

FARIDAH ÀBÍKÉ-ÍYÍMÍDÉ

USBORNE

THIS BOOK IS DEDICATED
TO THE FORMER GIFTED
AND TALENTED KIDS.
HERE'S SOMETHING TO
HELP WITH THE BURNOUT.

"REMEMBER THAT I AM THY CREATURE; I OUGHT TO BE THY ADAM, BUT I AM RATHER THE FALLEN ANGEL… I WAS BENEVOLENT AND GOOD; MISERY MADE ME A FIEND. MAKE ME HAPPY, AND I SHALL AGAIN BE VIRTUOUS."

*Frankenstein,* Mary Shelley

"WE THAT ARE YOUNG SHALL NEVER SEE SO MUCH, NOR LIVE SO LONG."

*King Lear,* William Shakespeare

# SIXTEEN YEARS AGO

THE ATOM MAGAZINE

ISSUE 98

# Genius or Insanity: The Button Method

BY JESSE PHILIPS

JULY 5

There is a saying among the French that goes: "L'habit ne fait pas le moine," meaning, "The cloth does not make the monk." Or the more trivial English translation: Don't judge a book by its cover.

However, if the book in question is a desperate old man clinging to social relevance by making up scientific theories that simply are not true, then perhaps we should judge that book a little. If not for the integrity of science, then at least for the sake of my own sanity.

As you may have already read in the news, the eccentric French-born billionaire Leontes Button has decided to hang up his game-master hat and have a go at creating scientific theories instead. Most will know Button as the founder of the internationally renowned games and merchandising company **Button Games**, known for its bestselling, top-of-the-range action toys and puzzles. However, the billionaire's latest endeavour has nothing to do with games for children and is instead a controversial experiment that is sending shock waves through the science community and beyond.

"The Saving Humanity Project" is centred on a simple idea:

Genius. More specifically, the *science* of genius and what it takes to make a *child genius* – otherwise known as a prodigy.

Mr Button's hypothesis for this grand experiment? That nurture is far greater than nature in the world of prodigies. One is not born a genius. No.

A genius can, according to Button, be plucked from a random orphanage and made in a lab, just as one might do aluminium chloral hydrate or acetic acid.

Unfortunately for Mr Button, a white lab coat does not make a scientist. A reputable degree, the ability to showcase cause and effect, and peer-reviewed research does.

There is the question of how Mr Button might go about carrying out this "experiment" of his. Outside of the practicalities of it all, there is a list of ethical concerns here. One would hope that Mr Button would know better than to test this theory of his on *actual* human beings. Someone ought to remind old Leontes that these depraved, draconian, Zimbardo-esque methods of scientific testing have not been in vogue since the 1970s; but given years of reports of the mistreatment of his staff at Button Games, I have a feeling that ethics are the least of Leontes's concerns.

Any serious scientist would not go near Mr Button or his experiment with a ten-foot pole, not when their own reputations would be on the line for what can only be described as amateur work.

Perhaps some of my readers may feel as though I am being too harsh. What is wrong with an old man playing games, after all?

Who knows, maybe old Leontes will prove us all wrong and invent time travel next.

~ ~

Despite being advised by his team not to comment on Jesse Philips' scathing polemic, days after the publication of the original article in *The Atom Magazine*, Mr Button published his response.

His now-famous three-word retort would later become a reality for the budding science journalist:

*"Eat horse shit." – Leontes Button (July 10)*

# 15 YEARS (AND A FEW WEEKS) AGO

## THE BUTTON MANOR

In the beginning, Henry Xu thought of it all as nothing more than a harmless game.

But as he watched the twisted scene unfold before him, he understood there was nothing harmless or entertaining about any of it.

It was like something out of a dystopian novel:

Mr Button, seated on his brown leather chesterfield throne as one of the maids placed each child at the edge of the room, and another maid distributed the items in a row in the centre – *a chess piece, a violinist's bow, a gold medal, a paintbrush and a pencil* – before they returned to their places, awaiting further instruction.

The staff had been preparing for the day's events for several months. They'd ensured that the room was at an ideal and exact temperature for brain stimulation, that the items had been vetted by experts as optimal choices for the purpose they would soon serve, that the staff on duty would be up to their tasks and aware of the stakes at hand, signing NDAs and receiving healthy bonuses for their cooperation as well as their silence.

Each person would be a player and each player would become a pawn. As Mr Button's personal secretary, Henry Xu had made sure of it.

After several moments of nothing, Mr Button surveyed the room, his gaze landing on the motionless infants all seated before him. He sighed loudly, uncrossing his legs and pushing himself out of the leather armchair.

"Children, I must remind you, today is a very special day – one you will be defined by for the rest of your lives. There is a lot riding on this going perfectly, so it is of utmost importance that you get this right. Capiche?" Mr Button said, staring sternly down at the plump toddlers as their wide eyes blinked up at the tall, greying man who was more or less still a stranger to them.

It was impossible for the children to truly understand a word the strange old man had said, and yet Mr Button nodded, as though the children had given him a satisfactory response.

"Very well," Mr Button continued with a wide smile, before returning to his chair.

Henry cleared his throat and fixed his tie nervously. He couldn't wait for this day to be over. Unfortunately, in his naivete, he did not realize that this day was just the beginning. There would be no end, no happily ever after. Things would just keep getting worse for the occupants of the Button Manor.

In retrospect, it might be hard to see how Henry could have missed how wrong this all was when the signs were always there. Indeed, an onlooker might've gestured to the blood-red flags undulating in the stifling air of the Manor. And yet, as though colour-blind, Henry never saw the issues coming – at first, anyway.

Months after this date, Henry would come to regret not stepping in sooner. Not questioning whether this was at all moral. Subjecting children to this, making the children choose who they would be for the rest of their lives without understanding what it would mean for any of them.

To be unwilling science experiments. Chess pieces.

To live out the Orwellian fantasy of a billionaire.

It wasn't so much the practice Henry found unethical, but more so Leontes Button himself. He was almost certain that Mr Button had gotten the idea of placing items in front of children for them to choose their futures in this way from Henry's ancestors. It wouldn't be the first or last time a man like Mr Button would steal and bastardize something sacred.

Zhuazhou (also known as Doljabi in Korea). A one-thousand-year-old Chinese custom, similar only in theory: the practice of allowing children to crawl towards their own destiny on their first birthday.

Henry barely remembered his own choosing ceremony, but his mother always spoke of it fondly.

He imagined her holding him tight, kissing him on the forehead like she always used to, before letting him go. He imagined that she'd set him down, as all of his relatives and those who loved him most stood around and dreamed up a future more bright and more brilliant than anything he could ever imagine for himself.

A future much better than the present, where he was the secretary to one of the world's most powerful men.

Unlike whatever it was that Mr Button was doing today, the ceremony in its original form was about hope.

And there was certainly no hope here.

"Come on, children! Hurry along," Mr Button yelled at the unstirring toddlers, all of them still seated in the far-reaching corners of the large office space. He clapped fiercely at them and startled everyone in the process – Henry included.

The first toddler to move was of course Bilal. He was never one to sit still for long.

The staff held their breaths as the child crawled towards the items, stopping in front of them, head moving from left to right as he appeared to examine each one.

His little brown fingers wriggled as he grabbed the gold medal.

"That's my boy!" Mr Button cheered as Billy placed the round object in his mouth. One of the maids lifted him up and carried him away, handing him over to his wet nurse.

*One defenceless child down, four more to go*, Henry thought.

Henry had only been working for Mr Button for a few short months, though according to the other staff, he'd been the secretary to last longest in recent history. The previous three had all quit in under a month.

At first, Henry didn't understand it. The pay was generous – triple what his previous job had offered – and he even got his own room in the Manor. The hours were flexible, and the job itself wasn't as taxing as one might assume. All he had to do was manage a portion of Mr Button's affairs and, on occasion, tend to the children.

But as the days stretched on, Henry found himself understanding why it was the other secretaries had quit.

It was the darkness that did it. The inescapable emptiness one felt when they stayed too long in the Button Manor.

The Manor had that cold, quiet charm of a graveyard. The security it offered was much like the icy embrace of a ravenous ghost. Unpredictable and cruel. It was as though once you stepped inside, the smoke and mirrors cleared, and it was evident that you would never shake the feeling of unease again.

Henry would come to theorize that the house was indeed cursed, and that the longer you stayed, the easier it became for the darkness to nest and eat away at you until you were nothing but bone dust. Haunted and haunting, starved and ravishing everything inside of it. Henry could feel the house rotting him from the inside out.

And yet he stayed.

Over the years, he would watch Mr Button assume the role of a god, bearing witness to the sin at its point of origin, first starting here in Eden, and ending catastrophically with the billionaire's

five unwitting heirs. Mr Button's touch shrouded everything and everyone in darkness in his wake.

Henry tried to shrug off the darkness now, continuing to observe the perverse scene unfolding in front of him.

The next child to move was Fola. Her competitive nature was clear in the way she moved with quickness and determination towards the objects on the carpet.

It did not take her as long as her brother to choose what would become her fate.

She let out a small girlish laugh as she grabbed hold of the chess piece on the ground – the pawn, ironically – before she was carried away, like her brother. Her prize for conforming was the privilege of food from her own wet nurse. The other children – Romeo, Perdita and Octavius – soon followed in the footsteps of their siblings.

Mr Button's eyes lit up as he watched his five heirs giddily move about, clutching their carefully orchestrated futures in their undeveloped grasps.

Watching them, it should have been clear what would become of them all.

If Henry had known what would become of them, he might have intervened. Might have risked his job and potentially his life to put a stop to this.

But how could he have known what the events of that day would trigger?

How could any of them have known?

"This is a cause for celebration!" Mr Button announced to the dimly lit room, only to be met with silence. The only sound present was that of raindrops hitting the roof outside.

"Henry, please fetch us a bottle of the finest wine we have," Mr Button said as the evening sky purpled, bringing more darkness into the room with it.

Henry paused, looking from Mr Button to the maids, who all had their heads bowed, to the five children clinging to their prizes.

"For just yourself, sir?" he asked, unsure of the lengths to which his employer would go. After all he had seen, it wouldn't at all be surprising if Leontes Button thought it suitable to give each of his children glasses of pinot noir.

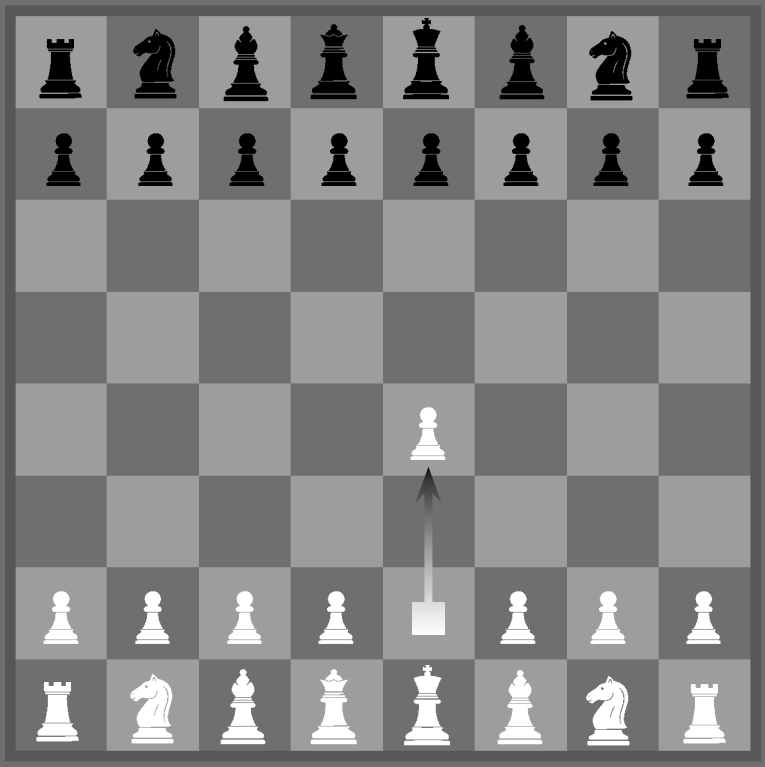
Mr Button laughed. "Of course not!" he exclaimed. Henry's heart stopped. "Glasses for you all as well, and juice for the children. They have done well today."

Henry let out a sigh of relief.

*Thank the heavens*, he almost whispered.

Before he left to fetch the drinks, Henry turned to look once again at the children. His gaze lingered on the one who held his own object with a frown as though, unlike his siblings, he was aware of the gravity of his choice.

# ACT I:



# THE KING´S PAWN

# PRESENT DAY

Death came for Leontes Button at 11.44 p.m. in the form of a large horn.

His dying wails were drowned out by the music from the orchestra on the top deck of the yacht. A symphony of thrumming strings and whistling woodwinds, of pattering percussions and the sustained buzzing of brass, swallowed and silenced what would be his final words.

Fireworks rocketed into the night sky, in sync with Mr Button's weakening heart, crackling and then exploding into the atmosphere, before losing momentum and fading into a still, unbeating nothingness.

It was too loud to hear the screams that came from below the deck.

Too dark to see the face and the bloodied palms of the figure who staggered away from Mr Button's sullen corpse.

And far too late to reverse time and stop this all from happening in the first place. Far, far too late.

The last thing Mr Button would see before his untimely expiration was the burning hatred in the figure's eyes.

At 11.57 p.m., as guests started to depart and the large ship rattled from side to side, no one else knew that Mr Button had been dead for several minutes.

In fact, it wouldn't be until 7.21 a.m., many hours after the revels of the night had ended, that the staff would come across Mr Button's body and he would be pronounced dead at the scene.

The details that brought us to this point are not at all unusual. But what followed in the wake of this bloody tragedy is notably a lot more interesting than the unfortunate events that came before…

# HOURS BEFORE

## 10.37 A.M. – GRAND CENTRAL STATION, NEW YORK CITY

At the centre of the world's largest train station, a boy with a broken heart sat playing the piano.

He played through the hustle and bustle of the early morning rush hour, going largely unnoticed, while the tenants of this undying city rushed hastily past him towards their departure gates. Off to live lives far away from here – or so he imagined.

The boy had come here every day before school for the past month, to this very station, at the very same time. Dressed in the same uncharacteristically shabby clothing and scuffed sneakers, with his uncombed nest of salt-white hair, all of which helped conceal his true identity.

No one would ever dare suspect that a *Button Heir* of all people would be here of all places, looking more than a little worse for wear.

And no one would ever dare think that the heir in question was in fact Octavius Button: third-oldest child of billionaire Leontes Button and famed teenage musician.

Octavius preferred it when his audiences were unassuming, when they didn't come with the baggage of expectation, when they couldn't care less about who he was or where he came from. Not when he was just a random insignificant boy, playing a random

insignificant melody that no one would recognize or care enough about to stop and listen to.

That's what he loved most about the city. No New Yorker in their right mind cared about him or his broken heart. He was completely and utterly invisible, and he liked it that way.

Octavius's pale, delicate fingers danced along the keys, replaying the same notes, the same song, on a loop with no definitive end. He looked possessed, like a machine malfunctioning. And in some ways, he was exactly that, if you were to believe what some scientists say about the human brain being one big, complicated mess of a machine. In which case, Octavius was a computer weakened by a virus. Faulty, glitching and dying, his hardware completely wrecked by the evils of love and the side effects of heartbreak. Pieces of aorta, congealed pericardium fluid and the little that remained of his right ventricle, all left behind in love's wake and scattered across the city, a bloodied trail following him wherever he went.

Even now, as he played, an invisible puddle of blood dripped from Octavius's ruptured organ, pooling around his feet, and staining the white material of his beat-up Chucks a bright crimson red.

The boy, much too preoccupied with carving out a melody from the wooden piano keys, did not sense the shift in the air when it came. He did not hear the heeled boots clicking against the station's marble floor, nor did he feel the eyes burrowing holes into the back of his head.

It wasn't until a manicured dark brown hand jutted forwards out of nowhere that he finally took notice of his intruder.

He watched as an index finger from the already-outstretched hand pushed down on one of the keys, F sharp, disrupting his flow with a single note.

He looked up through the haze of the station's overbright lights, as the familiar dyed honey-blond curls and unimpressed grimace of his eldest sister came into view.

"Fola?" he said, as both a greeting and a question.

"Octavius," she replied, in a way that was both an answer and a statement.

If it weren't for the fact that his sister was known to be in a perpetual state of displeasure, between her pinched expression and folded arms, he would have assumed that she was pissed off at him or something.

"What are you doing here?" he asked, when what he really meant was, *How did you find me?*

"I could ask you the same question. Aren't you meant to be in school?" his sister asked.

"Today's my day off," he lied. Truthfully, Octavius was barely ever in school these days.

Fola only blinked at him, dissecting his lie with her usual analytical gaze. Before she could ask him another invasive question, he beat her to the chase.

"You didn't answer my question… What are you doing here?"

He hadn't seen his sister in weeks, maybe even months. He wasn't great at tracking useless things like the passage of time. The last he'd seen of Fola was when she'd ambushed him at Appleton Prep (his Manhattan boarding school) however many moons ago, much like she was doing now. She'd travelled all that way just to ask him to consider returning home for the summer holidays. He'd asked her why, and she'd simply replied: "Because I miss you." Which had been very, *very* unlike his sister.

It was unlike any of his siblings, really; they weren't the affectionate sort of family. He couldn't even remember the last time he'd spoken to Bilal, Perdita, or Romeo.

And despite Fola being one of his favourite people in the short list of people Octavius actually tolerated, his last meeting with his sister had not been an entirely pleasant one, so he imagined this wouldn't be either.

"They sent me to fetch you, since no one else had any clue where you'd be," she replied, eyeing the grand piano he was seated at with mild contempt.

*They*, he thought, briefly wondering if his boarding school had suddenly begun to care about his ongoing absences and had, for some reason, sent his older sister to fetch him. He'd always had very poor attendance, and no one had bothered him about it in his three years of being there (which he suspected was in part due to who his father was). So no, that couldn't be it. This had to be someone else…

Octavius's eyebrows knitted together. "Who is *they*?"

"You know, the usual suspects," Fola said, waving her hand dismissively.

*The usual suspects* was normally code for their father. But then again, this could be another ploy of Fola's to lure him back to the family manor for absolutely no reason.

"Well, as you can see, I am very busy," Octavius said, making a point to gesture to the piano. "So sadly, I won't be able to come with you at this moment in time."

Fola raised an eyebrow, giving him a judgemental once-over as she took in his disheveled appearance. "Oh, I can see you're very busy indeed. Busy pretending to be poor again, that is. What did I say last time about cosplaying the working class, Tavi?" Fola asked sternly, before she finally broke her resolve, allowing a small smile to trespass her usually guarded expression. It was the smile that she only ever reserved for both Octavius and complex math equations.

He rolled his eyes. "I'm not cosplaying anyone. I'm just wallowing pathetically in self-pity. Didn't realize that was a crime."

She gave him another scrutinous glare, and then a few moments later *ahh*ed as if finally sussing him out.

"Let me guess, yet another of your forays into romance has ended bitterly?"

Octavius sighed. "You could put it that way."

"Who was it this time? A Japanese heiress? The son of a Russian oligarch? The next Miss Argentina?" Fola asked teasingly, taking a seat next to him on the short piano stool. Fola always found her brother's failed romantic excursions ever so amusing.

"Spanish prince," he muttered.

This wasn't the first time Octavius had been brutally dumped before, nor the second time, nor the third. But this one hurt for reasons he wasn't quite sure of, especially since one of his previous suitors had gone through the great effort of dumping him via the boarding school's *ancient* fax machine. This time Octavius had at least been dumped in person, over chai lattes in Central Park. You'd think he'd be over it by now, given that it had been weeks since the dumping.

Maybe his melancholy was because it was finally dawning on Octavius that the problem in all of his relationships was, in fact, him.

"You know, despite all this being a tad too theatrical for me…I find myself almost feeling sorry for you," Fola said as she ruffled his platinum-white hair.

She liked to call Octavius a serial dater, as though it were his choice to get repeatedly dumped and humiliated, like his life was a sad reboot of *Groundhog Day*. He didn't *choose* to be dumped, it just so happened that his romantic relationships always ended the exact same way: first, with signs of mild disinterest, then with Octavius desperately trying to cling to the tail end of a ship that had long since sailed, followed by various torturous, almost barbaric, methods of severing ties. Fola wouldn't understand it at all. She'd never been dumped before; she was usually the one who did the dumping.

He glared at his sister. "Anyway, I told you that I'm busy, so what are you still doing here?" he asked again, trying and failing to mask his growing agitation. "Clearly it isn't just to mock me or because you 'missed me.' So what is it? And how did you even know I would be here?"

"To answer all of your *burning* questions…you're right, I'm not here to call you back because I've missed you – which, for the record, I always do, *dearly*, my dear brother. I'm here because we are all being summoned back to the Manor to fulfil our yearly contractual obligations. And lastly, I knew you were here because I know how you think. Figuring out your movements was just one long maddening math equation, really."

He didn't like that she found him so predictable; sometimes he forgot how much of a mastermind his sister truly was. She'd always catch him in a lie, even before he'd opened his mouth to speak it. She was constantly several steps ahead of everyone else. He'd learned long ago to accept it.

Octavius looked at her, confused. "Yearly contractual obli—"

"What day is it today, Tavi?" she asked, cutting him off.

He shrugged. He had no clue when he'd last considered what day it might be, not when all the days felt the same, merging into one large ball of achromatic nothingness.

"It's Friday, November twenty-third," Fola said, answering her own question.

He stared at her blankly.

She blinked at him and then simply added, "Prodigy Ball Day."

And there it was, the puzzle piece he was missing. The nightmare finally clicked into its dreadful place.

"Fucking hell," he said, immediately rubbing the encroaching horror from his eyes.

The last he had checked, the event was still two blissful months away. This breakup seemed to have taken a bigger toll than he had realized.

"Yeah, fucking hell indeed. Everyone's already gathered at the house for the ten-year anniversary press conference. I lied and told them you were out running errands. Of course, given that everyone

knows you never *actually* run errands, it was a pretty far-fetched lie. Still, better than the truth of you being here, hungover, missing your classes to cry over someone you dated for five minutes."

Octavius ignored his sister's callous words about his love life.

"I thought that if I pretended it wasn't happening, it simply wouldn't happen," he replied numbly.

"In what universe would Father ever cancel the Prodigy Ball? Let alone the *ten-year anniversary one*, with a *press conference*?" Fola asked with a raised eyebrow.

"I don't know, a universe where I'm lucky, I suppose."

"Now, Tavi. What have I said about luck?"

"That it's unreliable?"

"No, it's worse than that," Fola said, standing up from the piano stool. "It's unmathematical, and therefore pointless to believe in."

Octavius blinked up at his sister. "I always forget how much of a delight you are, Fols," he said.

Fola rolled her eyes, before checking her watch. "We should get going. There's a car waiting for us… Unless you wanted to finish that piece you were playing."

Octavius glanced down briefly at the old piano before shaking his head. "That would defeat the point of it," he said.

"The point of what?" Fola asked.

"The piece. It's called 'Pandesto: The Triumph of Time.' I wrote it to have no end; it's just meant to be played until the player is too sick to continue."

Fola looked at him in the way she always looked at things that weren't mathematical: with a mixture of bewilderment, disgust and boredom.

"The art is in the irony – the triumph of time… But we only get worse with time?" he explained, but that didn't seem to help at all.

"So…you're not going to finish the piece, then?" she asked.

His gaze edged hesitantly towards the keys once again, but he nodded. "I think I'm done here."

"Great!" Fola said, and then without any warning, she grabbed him by the arm and began pulling him towards one of the station's many exits.

"You know I am very capable of walking myself, right?" Octavius grumbled as his sister practically dragged him across the busy walkway.

She heaved a sigh and let him go, muttering something under her breath about how slow he was as she marched on.

He was about to respond to her with a very witty retort about how scientifically *he* was naturally faster than her, given their height difference of over nine inches, but was stopped in his tracks by the sight of something, or rather *someone,* painfully familiar.

His older brother's face. Plastered all over the front pages stacked up on a newsstand.

**The Olympian too bruised to bear another gold**, one headline read. And another: **Bilal Button: Genius fencer finally foiled**. And another: **Bilal's Blunder** and another and another. Each headline as brutal as the last.

"I take it you heard about Bilal?" Fola asked suddenly, having stopped to observe the newsstand with him.

Of course he had. Who in the country hadn't? The news had only just broken, and despite being largely in his own world, Octavius hadn't been able to miss it. The newspapers, the rolling headlines, the loud whispers. It was all anyone seemed to be talking about: Renowned genius fencer and the world's youngest Olympic fencing gold medalist was facing what was potentially a career-ending injury. Apparently, Bilal had injured himself in a freak accident several weeks ago but the details were only emerging now.

*Only just leaking now,* Octavius realized.

Once upon a time, Octavius would have been the first person to know about the goings-on of his brother's life, instead of finding out about it with the rest of the world.

"Yeah, I heard about the accident," Octavius replied numbly.

A strange look flashed across Fola's face at the word *accident*, and then it was gone in an instant.

"He'll obviously be at the press conference this afternoon, if you want to say anything to him. I imagine it has been a difficult time for him; it would be good to check in," Fola said as they began to retreat towards the exit once again.

Octavius had thought about checking in on his brother last night, sending him a text to see if he was doing okay, but he knew the text would go unanswered.

He wasn't sure there was anyone in the world who hated him more than Bilal did.

It was weird to think that the brothers had once been inseparable.

"Maybe," Octavius replied, feeling the chilly November air wrap around him as they stepped outside, sending shock waves of bitter cold through his system.

He spotted the sleek exterior of an unmistakable Button town car parked outside the station, identifiable by its unique Button-shaped symbol on the licence plate. The driver stepped out of the car and opened one of the back doors. With a gentle shove from his very temperamental sister, Octavius clambered into the car.

"Thanks for manhandling me," he said pointedly as she got in after him.

"No need to thank me, just doing my job," Fola replied, looking very pleased with herself.

"I thought your job involved winning chess matches against old men and solving impossible algebraic equations," Octavius muttered, as the car started to move.

"Yes, and *also* picking up my dramatic younger brother from the train terminal while he sulks and plays the piano. How exactly did that piano get in there, anyway? I don't recall Grand Central having one…"

Octavius gave an innocent shrug. "Who knows. I think they installed it a few weeks ago," he answered, omitting the fact that *he* might have put in a special request to have the piano in his dorm room moved to the station. It wasn't like he'd gotten in trouble for it yet. That was the wonderful thing about New York. No one asked questions. Not even when a piano seemed to fall from the sky.

"Curiouser and curiouser," Fola muttered, in the way she did when she was in problem-solving mode.

Octavius knew that he'd eventually be found out, that his misdeeds would not go unnoticed forever. But for now, at least, they'd slipped under the radar.

As the car rolled down the busy stretch of Forty-Second Street, Octavius braced himself for the impact of whatever disaster was to come next.

# 12.13 P.M. – THE BUTTON MANOR

WESTCHESTER COUNTY, NEW YORK

The ride to the Button Manor didn't take nearly as long as Octavius wished it had.

He hadn't been back "home" since he'd left for boarding school almost three years ago. And he hadn't intended on ever returning either.

The sprawling Button Estate was hidden away, off the side of an inconspicuous road in the heart of Scarsdale (the small hellscape of a town he'd had the misfortune of growing up in). The road that led to the Button Estate was obscured by a huddle of oak trees, the first of several security measures that were meant to conceal the entrance from the public's view and deter any stalkers. Behind the trees were a massive set of iron gates that could only be opened by a very specific configuration of numbers based on a game their father had invented years ago. Octavius watched as the driver begrudgingly played the game, keying the desired numbers into the control panel before the gate yawned wide open. This was one of the many pointless features their father had incorporated into the Manor's functions; pointless games were Mr Button's favourite thing in the whole wide world.

This game setup was meant to keep the property inaccessible to outsiders, but this didn't stop intruders. Once in a blue moon the family's more persistent stalkers seemed to bypass the system and find a way in. Octavius recalled a time when he still lived in