

THE WIZARD OF L-OZ AND THE YELLOW BRICK LABYRINTH

D.O.W.

Prologue — Mercy Meadow

The first mercy they offered Wren's mother came on a tray.

Not gauze. Not stitches. A tray.

Silver, velvet-lined, carried in both hands like something sacred you might put a cake on.

On it lay:

- A crimson Heart Patch, gauze stitched into a neat red emblem, edges bound in gold thread.
- A delicate Brain Lace circlet, silver filigree veined with tiny runes: clarity, compliance, calm.
- A vial of Courage Draught, honey-amber, throwing back the lanternlight.
- Two glass vials of Slipper Tonic, dark red as lacquer.
- A small bottle of Oil of Counsel, its wax seal stamped with a Coach's sigil.

“Nothing invasive,” the nurse said. Her voice was a soft, padded thing. “We don’t wound here. We help.”

She wore the Emerald Infirmary’s glass-green uniform, all rounded seams and mirrored buttons. When she smiled, the walls warmed to match her expression.

Behind her, under the domed ceiling, the Mercy Meadow unrolled: grass laid over hidden tile, rows of white daisies nodding in time with a string quartet in the corner. Lanterns hung like low moons. Everything glowed faintly—the petals, the musicians’ bows, even the air.

Over the arch, in perfect emerald script, the hospital’s motto shone:

THE KINDEST THING IS WHAT APPEARS KIND.

Beneath it, smaller text slid along the curve of the dome:

Kindness applied: Mercy Meadow (Evaluation)

Justice restored: Capacity Stewardship (Queue Formed)

The words followed you when you moved. Wren tried not to let them.

Her mother sat at the edge of a low cot where grass met stone, cardigan buttoned to her throat despite the warmth, ankles pale above hospital socks. The cot had no rails. Just embroidered daisies as if flowers could keep anyone from falling.

“It’s beautiful,” her mother murmured.

“Beauty is part of healing.” The nurse tilted the tray, letting the Heart Patch catch the lanterns. “We avoid harsh visuals—no bruises, no bandages. Only symbols. The system responds better to symbols.”

Wren’s hands stayed in her pockets so no one would see them clench.

Her gaze drifted up, past the nurse, to the far wall, where a mural climbed the dome.

Not just a mural—a window. A cut in the world.

Through it, painted and real at once, towered Her.

The central statue of L-Oz rose from the hill at the world’s core, visible from the Meadow as if someone had peeled the dome back like an eyelid.

A woman’s outline, but wrong:

- Head: a lion’s head, blindfolded in red silk, mane carved in molten gold.
- Body: a girl in a prairie dress, skirt torn at the hem, apron tied neat at the waist, ruby slippers planted on the stone of the hill.
- One arm flung upward, holding a sword like a torch, blade blazing.
- The other arm outstretched, bearing scales.

On one pan: a glowing Heart, smooth and stylized, the same crimson as the Heart Patch.

On the other: a shining Brain, delicately ridged, silver-white, lit from within.

As Wren watched, the Heart sank a little lower. The Brain lifted, lighter.

Letters unfurled beneath the statue’s painted feet:

Justice restored: Clarity in Application (Heart > Brain)

The glow from the image bled into the Meadow. For a moment the grass looked redder, the daisies pink at the tips.

“Until compassion outweighs analysis,” the nurse said, following Wren’s stare. “That is the balance we strive for.”

“That’s not what that says,” Wren muttered.

“Pardon?”

“Nothing,” she lied.

Earlier, on her way in, she’d seen the statue itself through the glass—in the real distance beyond the Meadow. Huge and still, sword raised, scales trembling over the ring of the golden Labyrinth at her feet, Emerald City wrapped like a crown outside that. The same lion head. The same red blindfold. The same Heart winning.

The Wizard, they said, lived in the lion’s head.

From there, he could see everything.

Here in the Meadow, they’d made a mural of it, scaled down just enough to feel comforting.

Wren didn’t feel comforted.

A thin metal ring slipped around her mother’s wrist with a soft magnetic kiss.

Wren hadn’t seen where it came from. One moment the bracelet wasn’t there. The next, it was.

“What’s that?” she asked.

The nurse brightened. “Just a visualizer,” she said. “It tracks her Petal Tally. We use flowers instead of numbers. It feels kinder.”

Tiny daisies were etched around the band. One petal glowed faintly, then dimmed—as if waiting.

“The ring doesn’t start until you consent to treatment,” the nurse added. “Nothing happens without permission. Choice is central to our care.”

New text shimmered along the dome:

Lesson offered: Choice Appears—Comfort Ensured.

Her mother’s hand hovered over the Heart Patch, fingers thin and careful. “It’s pretty,” she said.

“That’s why it works,” the nurse replied, smiling. “Our data shows the kindest thing is what appears kind.” She nodded at the motto. It brightened obligingly.

Wren thought of all the things that had looked kind and hurt anyway.

She did not say them.

Instead, she watched as the nurse lifted the Heart Patch from the tray like a relic and pressed it gently to her mother's chest, over the hospital gown, directly above her heart.

The patch warmed; a soft red light pulsed beneath the gauze.

Kindness applied: Restorative Mercy (Heart Patch)

Next came the Brain Lace. The nurse set the circlet on her mother's head, fingers careful not to snag hair. Tiny runes flared around the band, traveling from temple to temple—measuring, adjusting, writing something in invisible ink.

Justice restored: Clarity in Application (Brain Lace)

Her mother's eyes sharpened, just a notch. Enough for Wren to see herself more clearly in them: small, tight, jaw set, standing in a field of fake grass under a lesson disguised as a ceiling.

“And the third?” the nurse asked. “Most Meadow regimens benefit from Courage.”

“Courage is for people going somewhere,” Wren said, before she could tidy the thought.

A tiny chime plinked in the air.

On the dome, text flashed and faded:

Kindness applied: Composure Coaching (Low)

The nurse's smile didn't slip. “Courage is also for those staying,” she said. “It helps us recognize distress as dignity. It makes their rest easier... to witness.”

Her mother's fingers squeezed Wren's, dry and warm. “My girl,” she said softly, “some of us have to lie down so someone can stand up. Let me be brave in this. You be brave in the other thing.”

The other thing. They both knew what she meant.

The Courage Draught glowed on the tray, amber-rich.

Wren swallowed. "Fine," she said lightly. "If bravery comes in a fancy glass, it would be rude to refuse."

The nurse poured the Draught into a cordial glass. Her mother took it in both hands, like a toast she owed the room, and drank.

The Meadow cooed:

Lesson offered: Poise Under Load (Composure +10)

Note: Care-for-Control engaged

"Care-for-control?" Wren echoed.

"A harmless term," the nurse said, smoothing it down with her tone. "The Meadow takes on some of the burden of choice for your comfort. Fewer difficult decisions. Less fatigue. You'll see—it feels very kind."

On her mother's wrist, the daisy ring pulsed. One petal filled with light and stayed.

"See?" the nurse said. "Progress."

Wren saw a countdown.

Through the glass at the Meadow's edge, beyond the lantern haze, Wren could see the world arranged like a diagram:

At the center of everything, on the hill, the colossal Lady Justice statue, lion head blindfolded, ruby slippers gleaming, sword ablaze.

Around her feet, the sprawling Yellow Brick Labyrinth, paths glowing gold as they twisted toward her.

Beyond that, the perfect rake of Emerald City, catching the light.

Further out, on three massive plinths like the points of a triangle, the three giant figures they showed in schoolbooks:

- A towering Dorothy in metal, hauntingly kind face, dress cast in cream enamel, a giant hourglass cradled in her arms. Time.
- A gleaming Tin Man, chest a monumental set of scales, watching the city like an accountant of fate. Gilt.
- A huge Lion, velvet-mane carved from stone, blindfold tied tight, sword down at his side, paws on the world. Pain.

From here, they were just part of the view. Decoration around the colossus.

Inside each, everyone knew, were engines that talked to the collars everyone wore.

In the arena, the towers focused inward, measuring, docking, shocking.

In the city, they were “mostly idle,” unless someone forgot to act grateful.

And above it all, in the lion head of the central statue, the Wizard of L-Oz watched through hidden lenses, deciding which pan the scales should favor today: Heart or Brain. Optics or outcome.

Today, the Heart sank low in the statue’s hand. The Brain hovered, lighter, losing.

The Meadow copied the motion on its wall, obedient:

Justice restored: Clarity in Application (Heart > Brain)

“Until compassion outweighs analysis,” the nurse murmured again. “That’s what our Wizard stands for.”

Wren let herself look once more at the mural. The blindfolded lion, the ruby shoes, the sword, the scales. Heart winning.

If compassion outweighed analysis, she thought, why did everything here feel like a script?

Her mother’s hand searched for her. Wren caught it.

“I’ll fix it,” Wren whispered, low enough the Meadow wouldn’t hear. “I’ll go to the Academy. I’ll study the Labyrinth. I’ll get to him. I’ll get your petals back.”

Her mother’s thumb brushed the back of her hand. “Learn first,” she said, eyelids heavier under the Brain Lace. “Then fix.”

The Petal ring on her wrist flickered.

Petal Tally: 1

The quartet’s song shifted. The daisies rustled as if they knew their cue.

New lines spread above the arch:

Kindness applied: Mercy Meadow (Beginning)

Note: Daisy Sleep — Optional (for now)

For now.

Wren bent down and kissed her mother's temple, careful not to brush the Lace or the Patch. The Courage already made her look... softer. Almost peaceful. Like someone else's idea of her.

As Wren turned away, a single daisy by the cot brightened, its petals flushing faint pink, then white again. The system loved a good image.

She walked out under the motto:

THE KINDEST THING IS WHAT APPEARS KIND.

The corridor beyond the dome was lined with framed portraits of Enchanted Helpers—once-human petitioners now painted luminous, collars discreet under jeweled throats. Their plaques read like happy endings:

DIGNIFIED TRANSITION
CAPACITY STEWARD
COMMUNITY AID

Chapter One — Orientation: The Lovely Machine

The Academy of Optics smelled like polish and old paper and the inside of a music box.

Wren stepped through the brasswork gates with the rest of the first-years and felt the collar at her throat wake. Just a little—an almost-imperceptible tightening, as if the air inside it had suddenly remembered a job.

Ahead, the courtyard opened like a theater stage.

Stone tiers climbed up and out in concentric rings, every step lined with trimmed hedges and tiny, well-behaved topiaries. At the center stood a smaller version of the statue on the hill: the blindfolded lion head, the Dorothy body in carved stone skirts and ruby slippers, sword raised, scales outstretched with Heart and Brain gleaming on their pans.

At the base of the pedestal, picked out in green-gold inlay, the Academy's motto curled around like a crown:

WHAT IS SEEN IS WHAT IS FAIR

Someone had polished the letters clean enough to copy themselves into Wren's eyes.

Students were already clustering there, families hovering at the edges. Some of the collars on the adults were old, scuffed, lacquer cracking. The students' collars, like Wren's, gleamed: thin bands of gossamer metal that caught the light and pretended to be jewelry until they decided to be something else.

“First-years!” called a voice like glass on glass. “Over here, please. We will begin with perspective.”

The woman in the center of the courtyard was all porcelain—appropriately enough. Her hair was a perfect lacquered coil, her expression serene. Her collar was there, technically, but it looked more like a decorative choker, set with an emerald drop that matched her eyes.

Headmistress Porcelain.

Wren had seen her on the acceptance brochure: one hand holding a quill, the other resting lightly on a student's shoulder. Here, the quill was gone, the hand gesturing toward the world.

“Find a spot,” Porcelain said. “We want everyone to see.”

A flutter of agreeable laughter passed through the students. Wren slipped toward the front, not pushing, just aiming. The stone underfoot was so clean it bordered on rude.

From this terrace, the whole design unfolded.

Down the slope, past the Academy gardens and the Mercy Meadow dome, the hill fell away to the Labyrinth. A golden tangle encircled the base of the towering Lady Justice—the full-sized statue that ruled the center of L-Oz.

Even hazed by distance, she looked enormous. The lion head blindfolded in red. The Dorothy body in windswept skirts and red slippers bright as fresh blood. The sword a line of blazing white. The scales—tiny, from here—still visibly tilted.

Even from this far, Wren could tell: the Heart glowed lower than the Brain. Heart > Brain. Again.

Beyond the ring of the Labyrinth, the Emerald City spread in all directions: terraces and spires and mirrored glass, glittering complacently in the morning sun. And at three corners of the arena like punctuation marks, the giant Dorothy, Tin Man, and Lion towers watched everything.

Today their eyes looked dull, their massive frames still. The collars in the crowd hummed anyway.

Porcelain waited until the murmur settled into something she could call silence. Then she smiled, and the courtyard seemed to adjust its posture to match.

“Welcome,” she said, “to the place where we polish fairness into something the City can see.”

She let that sit for a beat, then continued.

“You have all earned your place at the Academy of Optics—either on the Artisan track or the Rulewright track.” A ribbon unfurled behind her, listing the words in neat calligraphy. “Our work is simple and profound: we ensure that justice is legible. That harm is narrated correctly. That mercy is recognizable as mercy. Because—say it with me.”

The older students, ringed around on the terraces, chimed in on reflex:

“What is seen is what is fair.”

The first-years stumbled over it in a half-whispered echo.

Wren’s collar warmed in approval at the same time the words prickled the back of her neck.

Porcelain nodded, pleased. “We live under the eye of the Wizard of L-Oz,” she said, gesturing toward the distant lion head. “He sees from the summit of Justice. But he is only one man, and a man cannot see everything. The Machine helps him. And we,” she added, hand lightly to her chest, “tend the Machine.”

Amber text scrolled along the inner courtyard walls:

Kindness applied: Civic Orientation
Lesson offered: Poise in Public Spaces

Wren watched it track around the stone like a halo.

“Artisans,” Porcelain went on, “craft the visible: the arenas, the skins, the gentle guidance of light and color that makes even difficult truths bearable. Rulewrights craft the invisible: the conditions, the clauses, the tiny calibrations that keep outcomes within the bounds of fairness.”

She turned slightly. The smaller replica of Lady Justice behind her caught the light, ruby slippers winking like an inside joke.

“You will all learn both languages,” Porcelain said. “Form and rule. Heart and brain.”

Wren glanced back toward the real statue on the hill.

From here, the little red glow of the Heart pan looked smug.

“And,” Porcelain added, “you will all learn the difference between what is actually kind and what appears kind. One answers to the soul. The other,” she tipped her chin toward the Meadow dome down the slope, where the hospital motto pulsed faintly, “answers to the City.”

A ripple of appreciative murmurs. Someone scribbled notes on a slate. Someone else dabbed their eyes, already moved.

Wren was not unmoved. She just had a different reaction.

The difference between kind and appears kind, she thought, is that one of them always comes with a receipt.

Her collar pulsed once—just enough static to kiss her throat.

Kindness applied: Tone Check (Low)

She smoothed her face before the second pulse arrived. The lion statue's distant blindfold glinted.

Porcelain did not look at her directly, but her gaze passed close enough that Wren had the distinct feeling she'd been seen.

"Now," the Headmistress said warmly. "A brief tour, and then Sorting."

She clapped her hands once. The air shivered.

Around the courtyard, three figures stepped out of alcoves that Wren had taken for carved reliefs until they moved.

They were the Triad—smaller than the hilltop colossus, smaller than the outer towers, but still taller than any teacher. Their surfaces were matte, not polished; their outlines precise.

Gale Host: a girl-shaped construct in a frozen swish of skirt, porcelain face, hair in a bow, a silver Mercy Bowl in her hands.

Tin Arbiter: a metal man with a chest-window that ticked like a metronome and Scales built into his breastplate.

Lion Marshal: a lion upright on hind legs, mane carved in velveted bronze, Blindfold of Valor lifted just above his eyes, a velvet whistle hanging on a chain around his neck.

They descended the steps with slow, joint-perfect grace and came to rest behind Porcelain, forming a backdrop more unnerving than any banner.

"These," Porcelain said, "are the local interfaces of Justice. You will see them again and again in the arenas. Today, they're here to help you understand your place."

The students around Wren straightened unconsciously.

Gale Host's head turned with that too-clean, two-click movement. Her painted eyes found the first-years. She smiled, a fraction too wide.

"In your time here," Porcelain continued, "you will observe the Labyrinth in operation. You will study the way players move through it, the way help is offered and accepted, the way errors are gently corrected."

"Gently?" someone muttered behind Wren.

Lion Marshal's ear flicked. The collar on the boy who'd spoken gave an audible tap, like a drop of rain.

Kindness applied: Composure Coaching (Minimal)

The boy coughed, then smiled, cheeks flushing. “Sorry,” he said, too quickly.

Porcelain did not turn. She didn’t have to.

“The Labyrinth,” she said, “is a long and challenging process, but it is fundamentally safe. Non-injurious. Players may experience discomfort”—a tasteful euphemism worked smoothly into the sentence—“but pain is never the goal. Correction is.”

Tin Arbiter’s metronome ticked a little faster.

Wren thought of the portraits in the corridor outside Mercy Meadow: all those former petitioners turned Enchanted, their eyes luminous and empty, plaques calling them Community Aid.

Correction to what, she wondered. And what happens to the part that doesn’t correct?

Porcelain raised her hands; the small Lady Justice statue behind her woke. The Heart and Brain on its scales flared brighter. A projection spilled out in lines of light, painting a shimmering, miniature version of the Labyrinth in the air between them and the courtyard’s edge.

“Perspective,” she reminded them. “Orientation.”

In the projection, players—tiny gold motes—ran along the paths, leapt invisible hazards, faced glowing obstacles. At certain points, little flares of red and blue—Heart and Brain—flashed above them as decisions were logged. Whenever a motif of red outweighed blue, the path ahead smoothed; when blue outweighed red, walls rose, routes lengthened.

“What you see here,” Porcelain said, “is how the Machine weighs choices. We ensure, as best we can, that the appearance of fairness matches the reality of it.”

She gave them all a lovely, sincere look. “You are here because you have a talent for that work. For seeing where stitches show. For polishing seams. For hiding the places where life has been cruel, so that the audience is not made to suffer twice.”

Wren felt the word *hiding* crawl down her spine.

On the projection, one of the golden motes stumbled. A faint shimmer marked a collar pulse. The mote’s little trail flickered, then smoothed into a respectable line again.

“What happens if we... don’t hide the seams?” Wren heard herself ask.

Her voice sounded strange in the quiet.

Every head seemed to turn at once.

Porcelain's eyes slid to her, cool and interested. Gale Host's smiling face tilted; Tin's chest-window ticked; the Lion's tail gave a soft, slow swish.

"Name?" Porcelain asked.

"Wren," she said. "Wren Meadow."

Something—amusement?—flickered at the corner of the Headmistress's mouth. "How apropos," she said lightly. "You're concerned about seams, Miss Meadow?"

Concerned is one word, Wren thought. "You said we'd see where stitches show," she answered instead. "If a stitch looks wrong, and we don't hide it, does that... count against the Machine? Or us?"

The projection hovered between them, heart-lights pulsing, brain-lights flickering.

Porcelain folded her hands. "What is seen," she said, "is what is fair." She inclined her head toward the motto, then toward Lady Justice on the hill. "If you reveal a seam, you must do so in a way that preserves fairness in the eyes of the City. That is a delicate art. That is why you are here."

Gale Host cooed, voice like porcelain teacups tapping. "One plain sentence," she said. "Seams are for mending, not for flaunting."

Lesson offered: Professional Boundary (Inquiry Contained)

Wren's collar warmed. Not a shock—just a reminder. She filed away the phrasing. One plain sentence. They liked to ration those.

"Now," Porcelain said briskly, as if she'd just dusted an inconvenient thought off the table. "Sorting. Please follow the light corresponding to your letter—Artisans to the left galleries, Rulewrights to the right. You will have time to ask more questions once we've determined how you'll best serve justice."

Lines of light blossomed on the stone, curling into symbols at their feet.

An A unfurled under Wren's boots, stylized to look like a drafting compass and a brush cross-stroked. Artisan.

Of course.

She glanced once more at the distant hill.

The giant Lady Justice stood unmoving at the Labyrinth's heart, sword bright, scales tipped toward the Heart. Around her, the three outer towers—the great Dorothy with her hourglass, the Tin Man with his chest-scales, the Lion with his sword and blindfold—cast long shadows over the maze.

Between here and there, a thousand little compartments of “non-injurious” difficulty waited, all of them carefully calibrated to favor what looked kind, what looked fair.

In the Mercy Meadow behind her, her mother's Petal ring had one glowing segment.

Wren stepped onto the Artisan path, the A brightening beneath her.

She kept her expression composed, her collar happy, her eyes wide like everyone else's.

Inside, very privately, she added a line under the one she'd already written in her head.

WHAT IS SEEN IS WHAT IS FAIR, she thought.

Then I will learn what they refuse to see.

They filed into the Academy like beads sliding onto different threads.

The Artisan path led Wren and a stream of others along a colonnade that hugged the inside curve of the courtyard. Stained-glass panels lined the outer wall, each one a different stylized scene from the Labyrinth: players balancing on beams while scales glowed over their heads; players singing in front of looming choirs; players kneeling in fields of glass flowers. In every panel, the players smiled.

Over each doorway, slogans:

PAIN, POLISHED, BECOMES COURAGE.

EVERY COST IS AN INVESTMENT IN FAIRNESS.

WHAT IS SEEN IS WHAT IS FAIR.

Sometimes the letters shifted, but the last one never did.

The Rulewrights peeled off down a mirrored hall to the right, Tin Arbiter's avatar striding ahead of them, his chest-window ticking out a calm, relentless beat. Wren caught a flash of Tamsin Thorn's profile as she turned away—sharp cheekbones, bright eyes, hair braided

with tiny silver threads. They'd sat the entrance exams in the same row. Tamsin had the kind of posture that made proctors stop worrying about her.

Wren almost called after her. Didn't.

A soft thread of light unspooled under the Artisans' feet, humming them onward.

Their group emerged into a wide, circular hall with a glass floor.

Wren's breath caught.

Beneath their feet, through the clear panels, lay the Labyrinth—one specific section of it, magnified. She recognized it from orientation diagrams: Yellow Brick Switchways, with its dancing signposts and repaving road. But here, from above, it looked like an intricate toy: paths reconfiguring in slow waves, signs turning, platforms rising.

Tiny specks moved along the paths. Players. Live.

The collars of the students around Wren pulsed in unison—a synchronized quickening. It felt like the building drawing a breath.

A figure in green robes waited at the center of the hall, the color of field grass under a storm. His collar was wider than the students', etched with tiny notches like ticks on a measuring cup.

"Artisans," he said, voice echoing pleasantly off the dome. "Welcome to the Gallery of Skins."

He raised his hands; lines of light traced his gesture, outlining the glass at their feet, the walls, the ceiling. Wren noticed that as they moved, the light avoided the seams between panels, making them look like one continuous sheet.

"I am Master Vellum," he said. "I oversee surface and spectacle for the first three rings of the Labyrinth. That means I teach you how to make things look right."

The way he said it, right sounded like holy.

"At this Academy," he continued, "we do not change outcomes. That is the Labyrinth's work, the Wizard's purview, the Rulewrights' playground. We"—his hands sketched a circle, taking in all of them—"change perception."

The word hung in the air like a bell note.

Beneath the glass, a player misstepped. One of the repaving bricks flicked up and out from under them. They stumbled. Wren saw a flash of real panic in the angle of their shoulders.

Instantly, the scene adjusted: the brick's edge smoothed in the projection, the misstep softened into something almost graceful. The player recovered. On their HUD (projected faintly overhead), a pale script appeared:

Kindness applied: Balance Cue (Visual)

"See?" Master Vellum said lightly. "Their clumsiness becomes a learning moment. A bit of flourish, a bit of framing, and suddenly we aren't laughing at them. We're cheering for their growth. Optics are mercy."

Wren chewed that over.

Optics are mercy.

Down below, the player shook out a hand as if it hurt. The glass didn't show the tremor.

"First lesson," Vellum said. "Name what you see."

A dozen students spoke at once: "Bricks," "path," "gold," "speed."

"In phrases," he corrected gently. "Complete ideas. Artisans narrate."

There was a pause. Then someone tried: "The path is... responsive to missteps."

"Good," Vellum said. "Responsive. Better than 'dangerous' or 'slippery.' The path wants to help them correct."

Another student: "The player... is being coached by the course."

"Excellent," Vellum said. "Coached. Not punished." He nodded toward the glass. "You?"

Wren realized his eyes were on her.

She looked down. The brick that had flipped was slotting itself back in, edges smoothing, gold shining. The player moved on, steps neat now, smile tight.

"The floor," she said slowly, "is... unforgiving, but the view forgives them."

The words came out before she vetted them.

A few students shifted where they stood. Vellum's eyebrows arched, just a hair.

“Unforgiving,” he repeated, tasting it. “Interesting.” He stepped closer to the panel in question, looking through it as if through a lens.

For a moment, Wren thought she’d stepped too far. The collar at her throat warmed—not a full shock, just a prickle.

Lesson offered: Lexicon Tuning (Mild)

Then Vellum smiled. “You are halfway there, Miss...?”

“Meadow,” Wren said. “Wren Meadow.”

“Halfway there, Miss Meadow,” he said. “The floor has to be unforgiving. Otherwise the correction is meaningless. But if that is what we show, the City sees only cruelty. If we mostrar the assistance—” he gestured, and the projection rewound a second, focused on the railings along the path, the subtle way the bricks glowed brighter under good foot placement “—the same event reads as help. Do you understand?”

“Show the help, not the hurt,” someone near Wren whispered.

Vellum’s smile brightened. “Exactly. What is seen is what is fair. And your work, as Artisans, is to decide what is seen.”

What about what is true? Wren didn’t say.

Instead, she looked for seams.

The path below shifted again, tiles rotating. Her eyes tracked the motion until she saw it: a tiny hesitation in one corner of the course where the repaving took a fraction of a heartbeat longer, leaving a sliver of safe space if you stepped just so. A flaw. An edge.

She filed it away. Section: Switchways. Tile: third from outer rail. Beat: one-and-a-half.

Vellum moved on, the light following him; the glass underfoot rippled like water as the view changed.

Flying Monkeys next, the discovery arena. From above, the monkeys were almost charming—brass wings, bright eyes, little satchels of papers.

Beneath them, a player flailed trying to protect their documents. The monkeys swarmed. Pages scattered.

The projection blurred, smoothing the panic into a comic flurry. The player's HUD showed a penalty, but their face—edited for the viewing gallery—wore an almost heroic determination.

“Now,” Vellum said, “describe this.”

A chorus: “Thorough review,” “vigorous record-building,” “active engagement.”

“Good,” he praised. “No one likes to be misrepresented. We give them action. We give them diligence.”

Wren’s eyes followed the arc of a page as it whipped out of the player’s hands and across the arena. One of the monkeys snagged it. As it turned, a plate on its wing caught the light.

For an instant, Wren saw letters stamped there. Not a witch sigil. Not some chaos glyph.

EM-SER-17.

Emerald Service.

Her heartbeat stepped sideways.

The projection, of course, had already smoothed that glint into a harmless sparkle.

“We also,” Vellum added, “are mindful of external narratives.” He tapped two fingers against the glass. A security ribbon overlaid the scene, tagging the monkeys as Potential Westreach Interference (Monkeystorm). A neat border around the arena labeled it SAFE, in calming green.

“The public must never feel unsafe,” he continued. “When true harm occurs—rare, but we are honest people—we recontextualize it. We show it as anomalous, contained, or—if needed—attributed to external threats. That is Rulewright work, but we support it with visual cues.”

“What if the external threat is... really internal?” Wren asked, unable to help herself.

A few heads turned. Someone to her left sucked in a breath between their teeth.

Vellum’s smile didn’t so much fade as go still.

“An Artisan,” he said, “does not speculate on threats. We convey reassurances. We depict containment. We illustrate kindness.”

Her collar tightened against her throat—no shock this time. Just a reminder that it could.

Kindness applied: Curriculum Boundary Noted

“Leave questions of blame to the proper channels,” he added, more gently. “That is not a correction to you, Miss Meadow. Merely a guidance. We do not want bright minds wasted on paranoia.”

Wren pressed her tongue to the back of her teeth. Guidance, she thought. Noted.

Below, the player in Flying Monkeys finally gathered enough pages to satisfy the arena. The monkeys scattered. The ribbon around the court flashed Threat Mitigated and faded to a tranquil blue.

Vellum clapped his hands once. The projection blinked off.

“Enough for today,” he said. “You will have many hours in these galleries, I promise. We will study every section in turn and learn how to drape each difficulty with the right tone, the right hue, the right story. For now—Sorting results.”

A smaller, simpler display rose from the center of the hall, listing names and assignments.

“Most of you,” Vellum said, “will rotate through general Artisan studies. Some will specialize quickly: Game Skin, Audience Optics, Penalty Design, Consolation Theatrics. If your name glows, you’ve been flagged for early track consideration.”

Wren skimmed the list until she found herself.

MEADOW, WREN — ARTISAN, PENALTY & CONSOLATION DESIGN (PROVISIONAL)

Her name glowed softly.

Penalty. Consolation.

“Fortunate,” Vellum said, noticing where she was looking. “Penalty design is one of our most delicate arts. Every punishment must feel like a kindness. Every sanction, a lesson. Every loss, a gift.”

His eyes crinkled at the corners. “You’ll like it, I think. You have an eye for seams. If you can learn to cover them instead of pulling at them, you’ll be very valuable.”

Wren smiled, because the collar would complain if she didn’t.

“I’ll do my best,” she said.

Inside, she wrote a new line in the quiet ledger of her mind:

Learn every penalty. Learn how to make it look kind. Then learn where the look ends.

Beneath her feet, unseen by anyone else, the glass panel over Yellow Brick Switchways flickered for half a heartbeat. A maintenance sprite scuttled through the seam she'd noticed, applying a lick of golden paint.

The Machine did not like bare edges.

Wren watched it hide the flaw and thought, Good. Now I know where you're thin.

Orientation, she decided, had been useful.

They'd just shown her exactly what they were afraid of.

They broke for a brief, tasteful lunch—broth that tasted expensive, bread that did not quite fill—but the day didn't really tilt until the Penalty Studio.

“Selected provisionals,” a chime said in the corridor, “report to Studio Nine. Others to general optics.”

Wren followed the glowing 9s along the curved hall, collar humming faintly in approval every time she stayed with the group.

Studio Nine was smaller than the gallery, but only in size. In attitude, it felt larger.

The room was circular, walls paneled in pale wood. The ceiling was a domed mirror, reflecting everyone back at themselves from slightly above, as if judging posture. In the center, on a raised platform, sat a ring of devices laid out like jewelry: collars, anklets, bracelets, delicate combs and pins, thin veils.

A woman waited beside them in a chair that had clearly been designed to evoke softness without ever risking comfort. Her hair was silver, not from age but choice; each strand looked threaded with frost. Her collar had extra bands, like stacked rings.

“Welcome,” she said, smiling. “I’m Mistress Chime. I design how consequences feel.”

Of course she does, Wren thought.

A soft ribbon of text brushed the air near the ceiling:

Kindness applied: Introductory Consolation

Mistress Chime gestured to the array on the platform. “These,” she said, “are the tools by which the Labyrinth speaks its disappointments. Our work is to make that speech gentle. Legible. Beautiful.”

She picked up a collar—not the gossamer kind they all wore, but a slightly thicker band with a line of tiny opals running around it.

“Courtesy Collar,” she said. “You’re all familiar.” A few students touched their throats unconsciously. “Standard output is a mild corrective pulse when composure dips. But pulse alone feels... harsh. So we wrap it in language and sensory cues.”

She snapped her fingers. The collar came to life, humming in her hand. A faint floral scent rose, like something sprayed in expensive department stores.

“When the Collar fires,” she continued, “we accompany the sensation with labeling.” She flicked two fingers; a translucent strip of text appeared above the collar.

Kindness applied: Composure Coaching (Level 2)

“At Level 1,” she said, “the pulse is barely more than a tap. By Level 3, it approaches genuine pain. Anything above that is reserved for egregious breaches and requires Rulewright authorization.” She let the collar rest flat again.

“Now. Artisans. Your task is to make Level 3 feel, in the audience’s mind, like a painful kindness.”

She looked around, eyes bright. “Ideas?”

Hands went up. Wren stayed still, listening.

“Call it... Resilience Enhancement?” someone suggested.

“Too clinical,” Chime said. “We don’t want to frighten sponsors. Next?”

“Stress inoculation?” another.

Chime tilted her head. “Closer. It frames hurt as preparation. We like that. But inoculation still sounds like needles. We avoid anything that implies puncture.”

“Courage Cue?” offered a third. “Like bravery training?”

Chime smiled. “Better. Now we are somewhere. Can we attach it to community, perhaps? Make the recipient feel... included in a larger moral project?”

“The Community Courage Cue,” a girl near Wren said promptly.

Words appeared in the air as Chime spoke them.

Lesson offered: Community Courage Cue (Escalated Composure Coaching)

“Yes,” Chime said. “Very good. Much kinder. The same sensation—” she tapped the collar; a faint crackle licked the room “—now reads as bravery, not punishment. Optics are mercy.”

There it was again.

Wren felt her jaw tighten. This time, she made her mouth curve before her collar reminded her. It stayed quiet, pleased.

Chime moved on to anklets—thin bands with tiny bells attached.

“Grace Weights,” she explained. “Applied when movement is deemed discourteous. We could just make players heavier, of course. But heaviness alone can look cruel. Bells, however...”

She shook one. The smallest, prettiest sound chimed out.

“Bells imply performance,” she said. “They turn trudging into dance. If someone stumbles under their weight, the audience doesn’t see suffering. They see a failure of grace. As future designers, you must think like this always. What can we add to a burden to make it look like an adornment?”

She split them into pairs and handed each pair a device: collars, anklets, hair combs bristling with unseen shocks.

“You,” she said, stopping in front of Wren and a boy whose name she hadn’t caught, “get Delay Finch.”

The object on the tray looked like a brooch in the shape of a tiny bird, wings spread, clockwork gears in its breast. It was painted a soothing blue.

“Delay Finch,” Chime said, “attaches to a player’s record when a Review Freeze is issued. The player is told time has been stopped ‘for fairness,’ so the court may catch up. In reality, Delay Finch leaves their internal clock running untouched while the Labyrinth’s clock slows and rearranges around them. They feel stalled; the system moves on.”

She smiled faintly. “We need a sleeve for that reality.”

The boy beside Wren frowned at the Finch. “So it... steals their time.”

“That is a confronting way to put it,” Chime said. “More accurate to say it redistributes urgency.”

Wren turned the Finch over. On the underside, in careful engraving, were the words FOR YOUR OWN GOOD.

Of course, she thought.

“Design a label set for me,” Chime said. “One for the moment of application, one for when they question it, and one for the audience watching.”

The boy spoke first. “Application could be... ‘Fairness Hold Initiated’?”

Chime considered. “Mmm. Holds can sound punitive. We like ‘pause’ better than ‘hold.’ Pauses are musical. Holds are prisons.”

“Fairness Pause,’ then,” he amended quickly.

“Better,” she said. “Miss Meadow?”

Wren looked at the etched words again. For your own good.

“Application label: Kindness applied: Reflective Pause,” she said slowly. “When they question it: Lesson offered: Perspective Grace. For the audience...” She hesitated, then went on. “Justice restored: Docket Hygiene (No One Rushed).”

Chime’s eyes sparkled. “Oh, very good,” she said. “Hygiene. So clean. So necessary. Who would argue with cleanliness?”

The Finch’s eyes glowed as if pleased with its new clothes.

In the projection that sprung up between them, a player blinked as a blue bird icon appeared at their shoulder. Time around them blurred; labels floated gently above.

Kindness applied: Reflective Pause (Delay Finch)

The player’s expression twisted for a second—frustration, panic—but then their collar pulsed. Their mouth smoothed. To the viewers, it read like composure.

When the player tried, later, to protest the lost time, a second label appeared:

Lesson offered: Perspective Grace (Review in Process)

Above the whole scene, where sponsors and spectators would see it, a third:

Justice restored: Docket Hygiene (No One Rushed)

“Perfectly done,” Chime said, and the word perfectly made Wren’s stomach attempt a slow somersault.

She’d just helped make it easier to steal someone’s time and call it cleanliness.

“Remember,” Chime went on, satisfied. “Every punishment wears three faces: what it feels like, what it says to the punished, and what it says to the crowd. You, as Artisans, must design all three to agree.”

She clapped once. The devices dimmed.

“That is all for today. You may go. We’ll refine these tomorrow and introduce Care Bonds.” Her smile brightened. “You will like Care Bonds. They are almost too pretty.”

The group filtered out, collars thrumming with a faint glow of Productive Engagement.

Wren lingered for a moment, looking back at the ring of devices.

The Courtesy Collar, humming faintly in its cradle. The Grace Weights, bells catching light. The Delay Finch, wings frozen mid-flight, underside engraved with a lie.

Someone had polished each one so carefully.

“Miss Meadow?”

She started. Mistress Chime stood closer now, head tilted.

“Yes,” Wren said. “Sorry. Coming.”

“You did well,” Chime said. “Your empathy will be an asset here, as long as you don’t let it compromise composure.”

“My... empathy.”

Chime nodded. “Penalties designed without empathy become clumsy. Obvious. Even cruel. We want the punished to feel... held. Supported. Only then will they correct themselves.”

Held, Wren thought, like a throat in a hand.

“Thank you,” she said aloud.

As she stepped through the threshold, her collar cooled, the studio’s subtle pressure easing off.

A chime somewhere in the hall signaling the hour shifted; the ambient light slid toward afternoon.

Across the courtyard, the Observation Balcony doors were opening.

Students leaned over its rail every afternoon they were allowed.

From there, the view cut straight down to the Labyrinth—a living, shifting map with the central statue’s shadow stretching over it like a sundial. Today, the blindfolded lion head’s shadow fell near the section labeled Porcelain Freeze, where players would soon be working to obey tone cues under stop-and-go scrutiny.

Wren found a gap at the railing.

The collars of everyone around her hummed at the same frequency—a hive of polite interest. Above them, on the terrace, Gale Host’s local avatar stood with her Mercy Bowl, Tin with his ticking chest, Lion with his whistle. Watching.

A silver line traced itself down from the enormous Dorothy Time Tower on one edge of the arena, connecting to a tiny HUD above a player in yellow. Another line from the Tin Gilt Tower. A third from the Lion Pain Tower.

Three leashes. One contestant.

“Orientation match,” someone beside Wren said eagerly. “They always pick a messy one for the first day.”

Wren folded her arms on the rail and watched.

The player below—just a speck from this height, but magnified on the HUD displays—looked about ten years older than her. Their collar was thicker, scuffed. A faint Meadow ring flashed on their wrist. Petal Tally: 4.

Wren’s stomach clenched.

“Mama?” she whispered, before she could stop herself.

Not her mother. Someone else's. But still.

The boards labeled the player: PETITIONER: CALDER LANE.

The cause: REQUEST: EXTEND MERCY MEADOW COVERAGE / CONTEST THRESHOLD FOR DAISY SLEEP.

Wren gripped the rail so hard her fingers hurt.

Calder's HUD flickered and stabilized. Gilt: Low. Fatigue: High. Composure Index: middling but holding.

"Begin," said a voice from somewhere—Lion Marshal's, amplified and gentle. "Remember: you are safe here. The Labyrinth is non-injurious."

The students around Wren murmured the last two words along with him.

Non-injurious.

Below, Porcelain Freeze lit up: rows of porcelain busts in an echoing hall, each with eyes that could swivel too fast. Calder took their first step onto the velvet strip.

"Watch their tone," a boy near Wren whispered. "First-timers always crack in the Freeze."

The first bust turned. Freeze. Smile.

Calder's mouth twitched toward a wince, then corrected. The collar around their throat pulsed—Wren saw the faint ripple run through their shoulders.

Kindness applied: Composure Coaching (Level 1)

The bust turned away. Move.

Velvet. Porcelain. Velvet. Porcelain. Each time the busts swivelled, Calder had to lock in place, smiling.

When one bead of sweat at the hairline glittered, Gale Host's avatar on the balcony cocked her head. Down below, something in the air sensed the deviation.

Kindness applied: Community Courage Cue (Escalated)

The next pulse made Calder's jaw clamp. They held. They smiled. Their Composure Index ticked upward, even as Fatigue crept higher.

A student to Wren's left sighed. "Look how brave they're being."

Brave.

Wren watched Calder's hands. The way the fingers trembled, then flattened when the busts looked.

Halfway through the hall, a Care Offer Icon flickered above Calder's head—a tiny image of Gale's Mercy Bowl, inviting. Coaching available. Sponsor willing.

Chapter Two — Sorting Day: Artisan, Not Advocate

Dorm keys were handed out like favors, not necessities—thin disks of glass that learned your palm and hummed when you were aligned with yourself.

Wren's door opened to a narrow room with a window that framed the hill: the colossus at center, sword a pale brand in the late afternoon. The Labyrinth glowed like a hive around her feet. Beyond, the three towers brooded, their faces turned inward.

On the desk: a folded card.

WELCOME, ARTISAN.

Track: Penalty & Consolation (Provisional)

Studio: Nine

Motto: What is seen is what is fair.

Someone—no, something—had written a second line in exactly the right hand to look human.

Kindness applied: Student Wellbeing (Orientation Rest)

Her collar warmed, already agreeing with the concept of rest.

A gentle knock. Tamsin Thorn leaned in, eyes bright. “Neighbors,” she said, showing her own glass disk. “Rulewright track. I can smell your studio on you; Mistress Chime keeps the perfume high.”

Wren glanced at the card. “Penalty and Consolation.”

“Fun.” Tamsin stepped to the window and squinted toward the hill. “Do you feel it? The Machine? Or is that just me being dramatic.”

Wren joined her. The statue’s scales shone faintly; even from here she could see the Heart sitting heavy.

“I feel it,” she said.

Tamsin grinned. “Good. We’re going to be brilliant. Come on—there’s an Observation block at dusk. They lift the shields for the Optics Coliseum. It’s... awful. And very instructive.”

They went.

The Optics Coliseum was the arena that pretended it wasn't one.

From the balcony it looked like an open amphitheater of marble and silk, with a dais at the center and galleries stacked like a wedding cake. No traps. No moving floor. Just weight.

At dusk, the Lion Tower's blindfold caught the last light; the sword in his huge fist gleamed, then settled as the city lamps came up. The colossus at the center seemed to inhale; the ruby slippers flashed; the scales quivered.

The screens unfurled.

CASE SET: CALDER LANE — Public Grace Under Load

ASK: Extend Mercy Meadow Coverage / Contest Threshold for Daisy Sleep

Gilt: Critical → Sponsor Pool Open

Composure Index: 62 → public

A hush fell over the balcony. The students were silent, eager and kind. The collars liked that.

Calder stood at the dais, smaller now without the porcelain busts to hide behind. They faced the tiers. A speech should be easy, Wren thought, compared to the Freeze. But the dais had its own gravity. You had to stand inside other people's eyes and not cower.

“Open with gratitude,” murmured a second-year behind Wren, like a prayer. “They always open with gratitude.”

Calder opened with gratitude. “Thank you for seeing me.”

Kindness applied: Public Commendation (Civic Courtesy)

Weights dropped—visible only on the HUD: Grace Load +10. The dais was always heavier for the grateful.

“Don’t list symptoms; list contribution,” another student breathed. “Give them something beautiful to identify with.”

Calder listed contribution. Hours volunteered in the Infirmary’s laundry. Storytime in the library when the city’s tutors were thin.

“Tell the truth,” Wren whispered, forgetting to edit herself.

Tamsin’s elbow brushed her. “This is the truth,” she murmured. “It’s just the relevant angle.”

Calder's voice stayed even as the Grace Load ticked up. In the second tier, sponsors whispered to the screens, deciding whether Calder's steadiness looked like "dignity" or "defiance."

The Tin Tower tipped. Gilt Burn: Review Prep. The Dorothy Tower sighed; a few minutes slid off Calder's docket "for fairness." The labels bloomed, soft as petals:

Justice restored: Clarity in Application (Heart > Brain)
Kindness applied: Time Stewardship (Review Pause)

A moderator avatar (a choir of Gales wearing one smile) asked if Calder understood the risks of continuing care. "Daisy Sleep is gentle," she said. "It appears kind."

Calder's throat moved. "It appears kind," they agreed. "But my mother isn't... done. She still counts in threes when she is nervous. She still laughs at the nurse who hums. She is not done."

For a breath, some of the second-years at the rail stopped narrating.

The Lion Tower's blindfold twitched. The collars around the city registered the tremor and soothed themselves: Composure Coaching (Low). The audience's faces softened.

"Good optics," someone whispered.

A care offer pulsed above Calder: Coach: Diction Dressage (Comp Fee Waived). If they accepted the phrasing help, their Composure Index would spike and the donors would praise themselves for facilitating "voice."

Calder shook their head—tiny, decisive.

"Declined assistance noted," Tin Arbiter purred again.

Lesson offered: Independent Burden Management

A Flying Monkey zipped through the rafters, shedding one page of record into Calder's lap: INTERIM METRIC: PETAL TALLY 4 → 5 (Projected).

"Because they took Courage," Tamsin said, almost proud of the machine's logic. "The ratios always wash that way. If you look brave, you're asked to be braver."

Wren's mouth filled with metal.

"Close with gratitude," the second-year prompted, almost happily. "Always close with gratitude."

Calder did.

The screens announced DELIBERATION (HEART > BRAIN), and while the audience murmured how brave, how steady, the Tin Tower turned the wheel another notch, and Gilt burned for “Community Adjudication Services.”

When the decision scrolled, it did so in ribbons:

Justice restored: Clarity in Application (Heart > Brain)

Order: Mercy Meadow Extended (2 days)

Note: Daisy Sleep Recommendation escalated (Kindness Advisory — Non-Binding)

The balcony applauded. Soft. Delighted with itself.

Calder bowed. The collar at their throat pulsed twice; Wren saw their balance shift now that the dais’ hidden weights were lifting.

“Kind,” Tamsin said, not unkindly.

Wren’s hands clapped in time with the collars around her, each little pulse another tidy bead on the same string. In her head, she wrote a new line:

Coliseum — Sponsor Pool → burns Gilt as “participation.” Heart > Brain = mercy purchased; reason pocketed. Find edge.

As they filed away, the Lion Tower’s sword tilted—just a fraction—as if to salute the west. The propaganda ribbons flared WITCH ADVISORY (LOW) for the evening: Remain Pleasant; Do Not Engage Disinformation.

The giant statue at center breathed a red glow through the city.

Curfew draped itself over the Academy like a veil.

Kindness applied: Quiet Hour (Student Health)

Doors hummed shut. Lamps softened. The mirrored ceiling in Studio Nine blinked and dimmed.

Wren lay flat on her bed and stared at the seam where the wall met the ceiling.

Learn first, her mother had said. Then fix.

Learning could be obedient. Fixing could not.

She slid her palm to the glass key; it warmed. The door unlatched just far enough to admit a girl with very soft footsteps.

Tamsin.

“I assumed,” Tamsin whispered, slipping inside, “that you’d go look anyway. Might as well do it without getting shocked for hall wandering.”

Wren blinked. “You assumed—”

“You took notes like you were drawing blood,” Tamsin said simply. “I want you alive.”

Wren let a laugh escape—quiet, grateful. “Thank you.”

They moved together: down the service stair behind the poster of the Academy Slogan, across the colonnade where the hedge topiaries watched like polite animals, past a plaque that read STUDENT SAFETY: DO NOT ENTER AFTER QUIET HOUR (the kind of kindness that liked to talk about itself).

At the Gallery of Skins, Tamsin produced a Rulewright’s token—borrowed, stolen, it didn’t matter—and touched it to the lock. The door considered their collars, weighed their intent, and decided to pretend it didn’t see them.

Inside, the glass floor reflected their faces back at them. The Labyrinth below slept between pulses, resetting for night games, but the systems hummed. Maintenance sprites scurried—tidying, repainting, smoothing.

“Show me,” Tamsin said softly.

Wren crouched over Yellow Brick Switchways and pointed. “There,” she said. “Repave lag. Beat one and a half. Step just-so and you catch a strip the Machine forgot—” She stopped. The seam was smaller than before. A sprite was already patching.

“We can mark it,” Tamsin said. “But not with anything obvious. The Machine edits.”

Wren drew a breath, let the studio’s perfume out of her lungs. “Not a mark,” she said. “A shine.”

She took out the handkerchief they’d given them that morning—silk, printed with the Academy seal—and breathed on the glass. A thin fog bloomed. With one finger, she traced a spiral where the lag began—not a map, a flourish. A polishing pattern. She buffed it in

until it was only a microscopic difference in the glass's sheen, visible if you caught it with the corner of your eye.

From below, the maintenance sprite paused where the light bent. Its logic decided the anomaly was decorative. It moved on.

"That's wicked," Tamsin whispered, delighted and afraid.

"Wicked," Wren agreed. "Pretty."

"Someone could see that from the balcony," Tamsin said, head tilted. "If they were desperate enough to notice. And if they trusted their own eyes."

"They would have to trust themselves," Wren said. "And step off the beat."

Tamsin's smile flickered. "You're going to make enemies."

Wren looked down at the golden paths, the sleeping machine, the hill with the blind lion's head watching even now.

"I'm going to make choices," she said.

On the far edge of the glass, a different arena pulsed: Paper Gardens. Bees dozed on printed flowers. Wren breathed again on the panel, left the faintest stitch-shaped shine near the hive-door—an invitation to step when the Notice Bees turned their wings.

Tamsin touched her shoulder—gratitude, warning. "Enough for one night."

The building agreed, lights whispering their warning tone; the collars basked in Quiet Hour Compliance.

They slipped out, the door closing with the softest sigh.

In the corridor, a ribbon ran along the crown molding:

Kindness applied: Curfew Kept (Student Safety)

Lesson offered: Trust the Process

Wren walked under the words without reading them.

In her room, she watched the hill for a while longer.

The scales in the colossus's hand tipped—Heart > Brain—and the city blushed red as if agreeing with itself.

She wrote one more line in her ledger:

Edge made — Switchways (shine spiral), Paper Gardens (stitch-gloss). Find Calder. Hand them a way through without touching their hands.

Her collar stayed cool.

For the first time that day, she slept.

Chapter Three — The Art of Hiding Hurt

Master Vellum received them in a room that looked like a chapel for liars.

Bolts of Optic Veil hung from rafters—gauze woven with a faint mother-of-pearl sheen. Jars of Harmony Lacquer lined a counter, each labeled with a musical term: Andante, Dolce, Adagio. A tray of Chorus Powder glittered like the inside of a throat lozenge.

“Pain makes noise,” Vellum said, palms open. “We teach it to sing.”

Assistants rolled out a practice dais with a weighted floor and a polite incline. A volunteer—second-year, practiced smile—stepped onto it. Vellum flicked a switch; the hidden weights doubled.

The volunteer’s knees trembled. Wren saw the truth in the ankles.

Vellum draped the Optic Veil so it caught the light just so. He dabbed Harmony Lacquer along the edge of the dais.

“Watch,” he said.

The volunteer’s breath hitched—and harmonized, a soft choral hum replacing rough strain. The veil refracted the tremor into a shimmer: from pain into devout effort.

Labels surfaced on the wall like approving choirboys:

Kindness applied: Dignity Finish (Veil)
Lesson offered: Poise Under Load (Harmony)

“Now the audience,” Vellum said pleasantly, “does not witness suffering. They witness character.”

At the back of the room, the smaller avatars of Gale, Tin, and Lion observed. Tin’s chest-window counted something Wren could not see. The more beautiful the tremor looked, the louder his metronome ticked.

“Note the Rulewright synergy,” Vellum added. “Exhibitions of pleasing effort increase Capacity Index. Higher capacity changes what assistance looks appropriate.”

“How?” Wren asked, though she already felt the answer looking straight at her.

“Assistance becomes... celebration,” Vellum said. “Ribbons instead of rations. Commendations instead of waivers.”

Justice restored: Clarity in Application (Heart > Brain)

The room hummed with approval. Wren wrote in her ledger:

Prettier pain = higher capacity. Waivers vanish into congratulations.

They took turns with the tools. Wren's veil work was flawless; her lacquer smoothed groans into lullabies. Mistress Chime would have been proud.

She wanted to rip the gauze down and wrap bruises with it.

When the session ended, Vellum led them through a service door to the day-shielded Labyrinth—Safe Mode, where students could walk the courts without being counted as players. Enchanted Helpers tended stations like docents.

At Mirror Court, an Enchanted in pale glass—the Porcelain Hart—arranged reflective panes that thinned limp from the view. As the class drifted on, Wren lagged.

Porcelain Hart's eyes clicked to Wren. For a breath, something human swam up.

"They taught us to be kind," she whispered, like someone telling a secret to stay alive. "They never taught us to stop."

Her pupils glazed again; she floated back to her place.

Wren stood very still as the Machine smoothed even that sentence into an anecdote.

She followed the others, jaw tight, memorizing every hinge.

Before they left, she and Tamsin "polished" a seam: a microscopic shine spiral where Standing Stones tested posture against humming rods. A second stitch-gloss under an intake window in Paper Gardens—right at the Notice Bees' wing-turn. Decorative. Invisible. True.

The maintenance sprites glanced, labeled it ornamental, and moved on.

"Wicked," Tamsin breathed. Not disapproving.

"Pretty," Wren said.

At dusk, the giant sword atop the hill angled west; WITCH ADVISORY (LOW) scrolled the city ribbons. Remain Pleasant; Do Not Engage Disinformation.

The Heart sank on the statue's scales. The city blushed red.

Chapter Four — Switchways by Day, Switchbacks by Night

Calder Lane's name reappeared on the boards with the last of the sun.

SET: PAPER GARDENS — Forms & Notice

ASK: Correct misaddressed filing; establish timely service.

“Hold your breath,” Tamsin murmured at the balcony rail. “The Bees always sting on the second turn.”

Below, Paper Gardens unfurled like a bureaucrat's dream: hedges trimmed into paragraphs; flowers embossed with titles; Notice Bees drifting from blossom to blossom, reading out loud in small, polite voices.

Calder stepped onto the path and was met by a Form Rose: PETITION FOR EXTENSION. The petals whispered acceptable salutations. A humming rod above the hedge tested tone.

“Smile when the Rose corrects you,” a second-year whispered. “They take offense if you don't.”

Calder smiled. The Rose purred. A line on the HUD marked Civility Credit +1. The Tin Tower skimmed a tiny fee for “styling.”

Wren's teeth clicked. Style has a rake, she noted.

At the first hive, the Notice Bees turned their brass faces and read: MISADDRESSED.

Calder swallowed; Composure Coaching (Low) kissed their throat.

“Now,” Tamsin breathed, “they'll either argue or say ‘thank you.’ If they argue, Lion bumps the collar. If they say ‘thank you,’ Dorothy steals time to ‘teach the proper envelope.’”

Calder did neither. They moved—two steps, light, when the Bees pivoted.

Wren held her breath.

Her stitch-gloss sat right under that pivot, bending light—turning a sliver of shadow into a sliver of space.

Calder slid a corrected envelope through the narrow hatch just as the wing-turn exposed it.

The hatch drank the document down with a satisfied chime.

For a heartbeat, the Bees hesitated—caught between misaddressed and miraculously timed. Their tiny logic hiccuped, then recalculated the world to include Good Timing.

On the HUD:

Lesson offered: Self-Correction (Observed)

Kindness applied: Commendation (Non-Convertible)

A low cheer rolled around the balcony. Even some faculty clapped, pleasantly surprised. Wren felt her collar warm in agreement; she clapped too, because that's how you keep secrets.

Calder moved on.

At the Second Hive, the Bees hummed toward sting. Wren saw the angle—almost right for her stitch—but not quite. Calder reached instinctively toward a Coach Offer icon. Their hand shook. They stopped.

“Declined assistance noted,” Tin cooed again, pleased with his own repetition.

Justice restored: Clarity in Application (Heart > Brain)

A tiny Delay Finch perched on Calder’s record with a sweet blue blink.

Kindness applied: Reflective Pause (Delay Finch)

The arena slowed for Calder. Everyone else kept moving.

“They’re stealing their night,” Wren whispered, before she could put perfume on the words.

Tamsin’s fingers tightened on the rail. “It’s called fairness,” she said, and Wren heard the borrowed teacher in it.

Calder shook off the Pause. The Bees turned again. Wren’s little stitch-gloss bent the light. Calder found the seam on instinct, slid the second correction home.

The hive chimed a second time—unmistakable Acceptance.

This time the balcony really applauded. The Gale avatar smiled with her porcelain teeth.

Kindness applied: Public Praise (Non-Convertible)

“Non-convertible,” Wren murmured. “Always ribbons. Never keys.”

When the route opened, Flying Monkeys spilled through the trellis, shedding Service Proofs like confetti. One clipped Calder's shoulder. The plate on its wing flashed in the spill-lamp.

EM-SER-17.

Wren felt her pulse jump. She squeezed the rail until her palms ached.

"Witch pests, contained," the ribbon on the hedge announced, soothingly.

The Lion Tower blew its velvet whistle. Collars across the arena and the City pulsed Calming. The truth blurred.

Calder reached the Garden Gate and stood very still, waiting for the board.

RESULT: Filing recognized as corrected; Timely Service established.

COST: Gilt Burn (Docket Hygiene, Audience Adjudication).

REWARD: Commendation (Non-Convertible).

Two meters of ribbon spilled at Calder's feet—beautiful, useless.

Up on the hill, the Heart dipped lower against the Brain. The sword glowed kindly at nobody.

Wren exhaled. Her fingers uncurled one by one.

"Your shine worked," Tamsin whispered. "You saw that. It's possible."

"It's survivable," Wren said. "That isn't the same."

The Tin Tower's scales turned once more; a ledger somewhere decided that Calder's neatness meant capacity. A future waiver, somewhere, evaporated into admirable grit.

Wren wrote while the crowd praised itself:

Edge validated — Paper Gardens, wing-turn seam. Machine compensated with Finch + fees + ribbon. Next: Switchways mark, Standing Stones shine. Give Calder a map without a map.

Across the arena, Porcelain Hart stood at the edge of a mirror, watching the players file into night rest. For a breath, her face slipped human again.

"Westreach speaks plain," she whispered to no one the Machine would count. "Here, they drown you in compliments."

The Harmony Lacquer caught even that and made it lovely.

Wren pressed her lips together until the urge to answer passed.

Curfew returned like sugar in milk.

Back in the halls, a new announcement slid along the cornice in tasteful green:

Kindness applied: Care Bonds Pilot (Opt-in)

Note: Shared Liability = Shared Strength

Mistress Chime would be delighted.

In her room, Wren stood in the dark and looked at the hill. The Heart glowed fat and benevolent; the Brain hovered like a discarded thought.

Her mother's Petal Tally would tick at dawn when the Meadow counted the night's courage as proof she could lie still longer.

"What is seen," Wren whispered, "is what is fair."

Then she breathed on her window and drew, with one fingertip, a spiral so fine it might have been a stray polish.

If any player ever looked up at the right moment, from the right place, they would see the glass bend, and know—without knowing why—to step off the beat.

Chapter Five — The Conservatory of the Enchanted

They called it a conservatory so you'd think of light on leaves, not people in display cases.

Sun fell through a green glass roof onto platforms arranged like islands. On each, an Enchanted Helper performed a task with the grace of a museum guide: arranging mirrors, pouring cordial, measuring tone with a smile as precise as a ruler.

“Remember,” Mistress Chime said, voice as soft as a ribbon pulled from a drawer, “the Enchanted are not victims. They are graduates of burden.”

Kindness applied: Community Reassurance (Terminology)

Wren kept her face composed. The collar purred.

An aisle of plaques: PORCELAIN HART (burden redistribution, dignity finishes), CHALICE SWAN (panic-to-poise conversion), CONFETTI SPRITE (celebration therapy). Each “therapy” had a footnote: non-convertible.

At the far platform, a Chalice Swan—sleek, luminous—tilted a silver chalice toward a player in Safe Mode (a mannequin, today). The potion looked like sky melted into spoonfuls.

“Observe the Poise Pour,” Chime said. “We resolve panic into gratitude. Sponsors prefer gratitude.”

The potion slid down the mannequin’s throat. HUD text bloomed overhead on cue:

Lesson offered: Poise Under Load (+10 CI)

Kindness applied: Courage Sip (Calibrated)

“And the cost?” Tamsin murmured.

Chime’s smile didn’t falter. “Everything costs, dear. What matters is how it looks.”

A soft clink. The Chalice Swan set down her cup. Her gaze lifted. Landed on Wren.

For one breath, the glaze slipped. A human woman looked out—startled to find herself underwater.

“Don’t drink it,” she said, so quiet Wren first thought she imagined it. “Not unless you set the price first.”

The glaze slid back in with a sigh. She blinked, serene again, wings making a small, elegant tuck against her back. The label above her platform brightened:

Kindness applied: Audience Comfort (Helper Reassurance)

“Enchanted help is safe,” Chime continued smoothly. “And our newest Care Bonds make it safer.”

She led them to a table where six bracelets rested in a circle. Each was etched with vines and tiny daisies; each had a thread of red running through the metal like a vein.

“Care Bonds allow groups to carry one another,” Chime said. “When one falls behind, the others feel a little weight. When one receives a Community Courage Cue, the others receive a little echo. This prevents isolation. It distributes correction. It is kinder.”

Kindness applied: Care Bonds Pilot (Opt-in)

Note: Shared Liability = Shared Strength

“What if one player is already at the edge?” Wren asked. “Won’t the echo push them over?”

Chime tilted her head. “They shouldn’t opt in if they’re poor candidates for community,” she said gently. “That’s why there’s consent.”

Consent, Wren thought, under a fistful of hunger and fear.

Chime pushed the bracelets toward them. “Sketch the label set,” she said. “A: the pitch. B: the pulse. C: the audience wrap.”

They worked. Wren’s pen moved by itself.

A. Kindness applied: Burden Braiding (Care Bond)

B. Lesson offered: Courage Echo (Distributed)

C. Justice restored: Equity of Effort (No One Alone)

Chime’s eyes warmed. “Lovely,” she said. “Now add a clasp flourish to make the Bond feel like jewelry.”

Wren picked up a bracelet. On the inside, where it would rest against skin, a line was already engraved:

FOR YOUR OWN GOOD.

She masked her flinch by smiling wider. The collar let her keep the thought.

They looped the Care Bonds onto a volunteer mannequin cluster. On the board, simulated players stumbled in three different arenas; six bracelets pulsed in six different rooms. The labels fluttered like silk. No one screamed. The weights distributed. The audience wrap purred.

“Optics,” Chime said, proud, “are mercy.”

Wren tucked her lurching stomach behind her ribs and filed the bracelet’s clasp shape in memory. The mechanism had a gap—small as a breath—where a paper-thin wedge could keep it from locking or, better, create a false lock that logged as consent but didn’t transmit pulses.

On the next platform, Porcelain Hart arranged mirrors around a chair. Her antlers were carved like chandelier arms, crystal at their tips. Players would sit, she’d “help” carry visible weight with those antlers... and leave a hidden bridle where the help had been.

As the class drifted, Wren paused. Porcelain Hart’s eyes flicked to her again. Something in them sparked.

“They gave me a mirror,” the Hart murmured, voice human as a bruise. “I gave them a seam. They called it kindness. Then they took my name.”

The collar at Wren’s throat prickled a warning—Inquiry Boundary. She nodded once, slow. The Hart’s pupils glazed; the label above the platform floated:

Kindness applied: Helper Composure (Audience Ease)

“Move along,” Chime sang. “We mustn’t agitate the displays.”

Displays, Wren repeated in her head, and left two edges behind: a hairline shine spiral on the Care Bond clasp in the tray (wedge here), and a stitch-gloss in the mirror trim of Porcelain Hart’s chair (look here; lift here).

If any player or Enchanted with a lucid second ever saw the bend of light and trusted themselves, something might give without an alarm.

The conservatory doors sighed shut behind them. The Witch Advisory (LOW) scrolled the city ribbons for the twilight games: Remain Pleasant; Do Not Engage Disinformation. The Lion Tower’s blindfold tilted west. The colossus’s scales lowered the Heart like sunset.

The collars hummed: Curfew Approaches. Be Grateful.

Chapter Six — Odds, Ribbons, and Confetti

The Betting Windows didn't call themselves that. They called themselves Participation Gardens, and they were lovely.

Long counters of green marble; strings of lights; attendants in glass-green coats; a whispering crowd moving like polite water. Overhead, ticker scripts wound around the room: ANGLES, ODDS, SPONSOR POOLS, COMMUNITY PRAISE.

Master Vellum led the Artisans along the wall to the Sponsor Skin console. Tin Arbiter's smaller avatar stood beside it, chest ticking like a ruler tapping a desk.

"Public participation is a civic duty," Vellum said. "We must render it enjoyable, reassuring, and decorative."

He showed how Commendations scroll when a sponsor "bets for outcomes" and how Caution Ribbons unfurl when a sponsor "flags unsafe narratives." The words bet and flag never appeared. Participation did.

"With each click," Vellum said, "their Gilt becomes moral. They think less about winning and more about helping. The ticker skin makes that happen."

Kindness applied: Civic Pride Filter

Justice restored: Clarity in Application (Heart > Brain)

Tin Arbiter adjusted the metronome in his chest; the odds brightened. Calder Lane's name flickered at the far end of the board with a thin halo: Middling dignity, critical Gilt, fragile timeframe. Participation prompts formed like dew.

Wren's fingers found the edge of the console. Inside the casing—a seam. Always a seam. She could feel the tick of the odds under her fingertips. The odds ticker ran past a tiny confetti port; Confetti Sprites dusted the room whenever a sponsor "helped," and the crowd glowed.

"Today," Vellum said, "we'll practice Teller Tone. How your words colors their wagers. How your smile turns a Caution into a Commendation."

He handed out scripts:

- "You're part of the outcome."
- "A ribbon for your kindness?"
- "Every share is a shelter."

Wren read the lines and tasted sugar and chalk. She watched the Confetti Sprites burst from the tins, glitter pretty as pardon.

When the Sprites landed on the ticker's exposed gears, Wren saw it: for a fraction of a beat, the confetti gummed the cogs, softening their tick.

A beat and a half.

Her brain wrote it like a song: gum-beat-one-and-half → stall.

The Sprite tins sat open, friendly as party favors.

“Miss Meadow,” Vellum prompted, “your Teller Tone?”

She stepped to the window, asked an old man with a kind, tired face if he'd like to sponsor “Public Grace for Calder Lane—two days of Meadow” or “Immediate Resolution—Daisy Comfort now.” The script made Daisy glow like a lullaby.

The old man exhaled. “My Ruth would have liked the grace,” he said. “But she also wanted it... over.” He pressed a coin and selected Daisy.

The ticker hiccuped. Heart > Brain brightened.

At the corner of the console, Wren “accidentally” tapped a Confetti Sprite tin just as a cluster of sponsors clapped themselves for their Civic Mercy. Confetti spilled. It fell into the gears like glittered honey.

The odds stalled for a beat and a half.

Stall, she thought. Breathe.

On the arena HUD, Calder Lane's Grace Load slid one tick down during the stall.

No one noticed. Or rather, the Machine re-labeled noticing as Festive Atmosphere.

Kindness applied: Participation Celebration (Ticker Pause)

Tamsin's shoulder knocked Wren's. “You're doing something,” she whispered without moving her mouth.

“We are decorating,” Wren said, smiling at a sponsor so the collar wouldn't tap her throat.

They ran drills. Wren learned where the console's confetti chute connected to the odds motor and where a bigger burst would flag maintenance. She learned how often the Lion Tower swept its velvet gaze into this room (every twenty-five seconds; don't stall on the beat). She learned how to make a tiny, pretty, eight-second breathing space where the Machine forgot to demand gratitude.

It wasn't victory. It was oxygen.

Between drills, the Triad avatars glided through: Gale with her Mercy Bowl, Lion with his whistle, Tin tapping and tapping.

Gale caught Wren's eye. "Remember," she said, "we don't cure fear. We dress it." She lifted the bowl, smiling. "Kindness appears."

Lesson offered: Appearance Management (Advanced)

Tin's chest scraped an extra tick. "Watch your enhancements," he said. "Glitches earn audits."

"Yes, Arbiter," Vellum murmured, hand smoothing the console, eyes on Wren for a fraction too long.

She widened her smile a little more.

By the time the Participation Gardens dimmed, Calder's name had been buffed into Community Favorite (Sleeper). The label meant nothing and cost him a day of Sponsor dockets. His Gilt dropped. His ribbon pile grew.

The balcony crowd was done narrating. The city rings brightened WITCH ADVISORY (LOW) and called it a night.

Wren and Tamsin walked back toward the dorms through light that made even dust look angelic.

"You're going to get caught," Tamsin said softly. It wasn't a warning so much as a weather report.

"Probably," Wren said.

"Your edge today—" Tamsin lowered her voice further. "That stall. That wasn't just petty sabotage. You moved oxygen."

Wren nodded.

“Do you have... an endgame?” Tamsin asked. “Or are we just... polishing seams until the statue blinks?”

Wren looked up the hill where the blindfolded lion never blinked.

“Endgame is simple,” she said. “Calder reaches Wizard alive. My mother gets her petals back. Then we set the Brain down harder than the Heart can pretend to lift.”

Tamsin walked three steps in silence. “My mother is fine,” she said. “But that doesn’t mean I don’t want yours to be.”

Wren swallowed a knot of gratitude until it didn’t show. “Thank you.”

They were five doors from Wren’s room when a new ribbon unfurled in the corridor, letters tall and calm:

Justice restored: Curriculum Compliance Review (Random)

Kindness applied: Mentorship Check-In (Miss Meadow)

Tamsin’s mouth went thin. “Random.”

The door at the end of the hall opened by itself. Headmistress Porcelain stepped into the corridor already wearing a smile the city could borrow if it needed to.

“Miss Meadow,” she said. “A word?”

The collar at Wren’s throat cooled—the kind of cool that felt like a hand on the back of your neck, steering.

“Of course,” Wren said lightly, and followed the Headmistress into the office trimmed in green and mirrors.

On the desk, under the glass, lay a brass wing plate stamped EM-SER-17.

Porcelain’s fingers rested on it like a paperweight.

“Let’s talk,” she said. “About edges. And safety.”

Chapter Seven — Mentorship: For Your Own Good

Headmistress Porcelain's office was all green mirrors and tidy weather.

A single brass plate lay under the glass of her desk, used as a paperweight though there were no papers. Wren knew it before she read it: a wing plate from a Flying Monkey, the stamping crisp.

EM-SER-17. Emerald Service.

Porcelain's fingers rested on it like a blessing. "Do you know what this is, Miss Meadow?"

"A wing plate," Wren said. "Service make. Emerald."

Porcelain's smile barely moved. "We call them markers. They... find their way onstage when the City is anxious. Symbols help anxiety settle. A witch rumor here, a plate there—the audience likes to know monsters have serial numbers."

Wren said nothing.

Porcelain removed her hand. The plate flashed once in the lamplight, then went dull, like metal deciding to be innocent.

"You are very promising," Porcelain said, changing nothings into compliments. "Penalty & Consolation is a delicate orchestration. You hear how labels land. You anticipate where the Machine might bruise. That makes you valuable."

The collar at Wren's throat purred in agreement; she kept her face obediently pleased.

"And," Porcelain continued, "you are also... curious."

A silver thread of text slid along the office cornice:

Kindness applied: Mentorship Begins (For Your Own Good)

"Curiosity is a virtue," Porcelain said. "Until it is a hazard."

She touched a panel on the desk. A projection unfolded between them, painting the Participation Gardens in miniature: confetti tins, ticker gears, sponsors' hands moving like polite fish. There Wren was at the teller's window, bright and composed, asking with perfect Teller Tone whether they preferred Mercy Meadow now or "right now." And there—just after applause—her hand nudging a Sprite tin.

The odds motor gummed. A beat and a half stalled like a held breath.

“An unauthorized flourish,” Porcelain said, her voice like satin ribbon around a blade. “Very pretty. Very unsafe.”

“Unsafe how?” Wren asked, keeping her tone rounded and empty.

“When the Machine pauses at the wrong angle,” Porcelain said, “it thinks twice. Thinking twice is... contagious.” Her eyes warmed to show this was concern, not anger. “You might be right, Miss Meadow. But we do not reward contagions.”

On the panel, another image: the Glass Gallery at midnight, two silhouettes over the Switchways and Paper Gardens tiles. Breath fog, wiped into spirals and stitch-gloss. Decorative, unless you knew where to step.

Porcelain tilted her head. “Edges,” she said gently. “Pretty edges that persuade the course to be... lenient. Do you understand how that looks from the hill?”

Wren glanced out the window at the blindfolded lion. “Like kindness,” she said.

Porcelain’s smile widened—delighted. “Exactly. Which means it is ours to apply. Not yours.”

The collar at Wren’s throat cooled—Tone Check (Low)—as if to say: soften. She did.

“I’m... sorry,” she said, because the word made collars everywhere hum contentedly. “I didn’t intend hazard. I only intended—”

“—to help,” Porcelain finished, forgivingly. “I know. But help given without a license is called... liability.”

She drew a small case from a drawer and opened it. Inside lay a delicate device shaped like a finch, lacquered blue, its eyes opals: Mentor’s Finch.

“It watches,” Porcelain said. “Not a punishment. A shadow. When you approach the line, it whispers. When you cross it, it sings loud enough for me to hear.”

Wren looked at the fine gears under the Finch’s throat, the engraving on its belly:

FOR YOUR OWN GOOD.

“May I ask a question?” she said.

“Questions are the soul of learning.”

“Is EM-SER-17 a real monster or a stage direction?”

For a fraction of a second, Porcelain’s gaze landed exactly on Wren’s.

“Stage directions,” she said softly, “keep mobs from becoming tragedies. We are not Westreach. We do not feed our people to fire. We distract them toward kindness. I would like you to help us do that.”

“I am helping,” Wren said.

Porcelain nodded, satisfied with the tone if not the content. “Good. Then we will make a trade.”

She closed the case on the Finch and slid it toward Wren.

“You wear this and work strictly inside Safety Curriculum for two weeks. In return, I will personally ensure Mercy Meadow reviews your mother’s Petal Tally with fresh eyes.”

Wren kept all the words off her face.

“Thank you,” she said, and made the thank you sound like relief.

Porcelain’s smile held. “We all want the same thing, Miss Meadow. A City that feels safe enough to be good. What is seen is what is fair.” She tapped the brass plate once as if to quiet it. “And what is fair is what the City can live with.”

She stood, smoothing the line of her skirt. Their collars hummed together in a little duet of Mentorship Concluded.

At the threshold, Wren paused. “Headmistress,” she said, “one more question?”

Porcelain’s look was indulgence wrapped in threat. “Yes?”

“If the Machine hates edges,” Wren said lightly, “why does it keep... leaving them?”

Porcelain’s eyes flicked to the wing plate without leaving Wren’s face.

“Even the best machines,” she said, “need somewhere to breathe.”

Wren smiled as if she’d just been allowed a secret. “Thank you.”

Out in the corridor, she pressed the Finch to her palm. It settled like a polite burden. Shadow engaged, the air wrote. Kindness applied: Mentored Period (Cordial).

Tamsin waited leaning against the far wall. “Alive?” she asked, trying not to look like she was trying to look unworried.

“Mentored,” Wren said.

“Oh.”

“She offered to ‘review’ my mother’s petals,” Wren added, neutral.

Tamsin’s eyes softened. “Then we make it worth their time to be kind.”

Wren tucked the Finch into her collar seam. Its opal eyes blinked; the office behind them sealed itself back into a painting.

In the glass of a trophy case, Wren’s reflection looked like a good student. The Finch nestled at her throat looked like jewelry.

She enjoyed the lie for two seconds. Then they went to class.

Chapter Eight — Coaches and the Pro Se Rule

The Coach Kiosk lived on the Labyrinth's outer ring, dressed like a tea room. The Pro Se Rule was posted on its silk awning in calligraphy that made the letters look gentle:

UNLICENSED AID INVITES LIABILITY.
ALLOW PROFESSIONALS TO BE BRAVE FOR YOU.

Inside: velvet chairs, quiet water, a menu of services handwritten as if a grandmother had drafted it.

VOICE DRESSAGE — 8 GILT / MIN
RHETORIC LIFT — 12 GILT / MIN
RECORD BRAIDING — 20 GILT / MIN
EMERGENCY DAISY COUNSEL — ON APPROVAL

The Tin Tower had an invisible finger on the register; every choice burned Gilt labeled as “Confidence Investment.” The Dorothy Tower trimmed time from the player’s docket for “Consultation Harmony.”

“Non-predatory,” said the placard in small print. “Regulated.”

A Coach in a cream suit with a lapel pin of the scales smiled the specific smile of a billable hour. “How can we help you feel brave today?” he asked a player whose eyes were already glossed with composure.

Calder Lane waited at the back of the queue, jaw tight, Meadow ring dull. Gilt: Critically Low.

Wren and Tamsin, in Safe Mode, passed like polite ghosts.

“Two minutes would cost him a week,” Tamsin murmured. “And they’ll say he’s strong for declining.”

On the wall, the Pro Se Rule glowed again, a lullaby for liability. At its base, a small pamphlet holder offered something rare: IN FORMA PETALIS (IFP) — FEE PROTECTION APPLICATION.

Wren stopped. The Finch at her throat clicked, curious or suspicious—she couldn’t tell which.

In Forma Petalis—the Petal Shield—was the City’s version of fee waiver: a translucent badge that, if granted, sat on a player’s HUD and made Gilt burns pass through without latching. It carried two costs:

1. Stigma: sponsors read it as “low capacity,” and their Commendations turned into “Encouragements,” which bought nothing.
2. Surveillance: the badge attracted Delay Finch audits like sugar attracts ants. Time drained elsewhere.

“Almost never granted,” Tamsin whispered. “Rulewright memo last year put it at four percent.”

Wren thumbed the pamphlet anyway. Fine print moved like a school of fish. She recognized the tells: loops that returned to the top if your commas were not single-file; tone tests between clauses.

“If he applies,” she said, “they’ll punish him with pauses and praise.”

“Yes,” Tamsin said.

“If he doesn’t, he buys courage by the teaspoon.”

“Yes,” Tamsin said again.

Calder reached the counter, read the menu, and stepped away like a person deciding not to eat. The Coach smiled reflexively and presented a Care Bond brochure “for later.”

As he left, he brushed the pamphlet rack. A single IFP sheet drifted free and feathered to the floor. He didn’t see it.

Wren bent and picked it up. The Finch at her throat made a tiny warning click.

She inhaled, exhaled. The label suite glowed obediently in the air:

Kindness applied: Liability Education (Pro Se Rule)

Lesson offered: Bravery Channels (Coach Use)

She tucked the IFP paper back into the rack upside down, so its red watermark would catch the light like a ribbon instead of a warning. Shine spiral in miniature, paper instead of glass.

The Finch did not sing.

“Next time he passes,” Tamsin said, “maybe he’ll see it.”

“Maybe,” Wren said.

They continued the ring, looking like tourists with notebooks.

At Standing Stones, posture-rods hummed and judged. Wren’s shine spiral was still there at the fourth stone, a way to shift weight without the rods reading defiance. A woman found it by accident—stepped sideways before force of habit yanked her back. The HUD rewarded her with Poise Credit and erased the sideways step like it had never been.

“Optics,” Tamsin said under her breath, “are mercy.”

Wren didn’t argue. She only wrote another line in her ledger:

IFP exists. Make the red look like celebration. Teach the eye to read its own salvation as a prize.

At dusk, Optics Coliseum bloomed again.

Calder returned to the dais, less steady, more honest. The boards called him Community Favorite (Sleeper) again, a label that tasted like hope and meant Please clap louder.

“Open with gratitude,” a second-year whispered automatically.

Calder did not. He opened with facts.

“Your Pause took a night,” he said, voice calm and raw. “Your Courage Cue made my mother’s Petal ring glow. You called it progress. I call it a receipt.”

The room went very quiet.

Wren’s collar vibrated once—the warning that a crowd gives itself before the Lion’s whistle blows. She could feel the Heart weigh against the Brain on the hill; see the red light on the edges of the balconies.

The Gale avatar smiled even wider. “How brave to speak plainly,” she cooed.

Kindness applied: Public Commendation (Plain Speech)

Grace Load +15. Tin skimmed Gilt for “Audience Processing.”

“Close with gratitude,” a different student hissed at the rail, panicked. “Close with gratitude before they tilt the sword.”

Calder closed with: “Stop calling my mother’s death a kindness.”

The collars in the City fired Composure Coaching so softly most people mistook it for gooseflesh in a draft.

On the hill, the sword tilted west a fraction and held. WITCH ADVISORY (MED) flared and softened to LOW again.

Chapter Nine — Safety Review (Witchlight)

Morning arrived already explained.

Every corridor wore the same new ribbon:

Kindness applied: Community Reassurance — Helper Incident Contained
Justice restored: Witchlight Advisory (LOW): External Agitation

The Conservatory glass had been replaced overnight. Harmony Lacquer perfumed the halls. The story spoke first: an unfortunate Helper Malfunction; a reminder to remain pleasant; a note that Westreach disinformation sometimes “upset vulnerable systems.”

At breakfast, a screen looped three moments: Porcelain Hart’s smile before the doors opened, a tasteful cutaway during the smashing of the bowl, and a still of Gale Hosts embracing the fallen Helper “to shield her from further distress.” The Cascade never appeared. The words did the work.

Kindness applied: Privacy Veil (Spectator Health)

Tamsin pushed a bowl of broth at Wren, which the collar labeled Orientation Restorative so she’d swallow it. Neither spoke until the spoon hit empty.

Headmistress Porcelain gathered the students in the courtyard beneath the polished motto.

She looked... almost tender.

“Yesterday,” she said, “we were reminded that the Enchanted carry a great deal of our burden. Occasionally, a Helper experiences Integration Distress. We answer with language hygiene, structure, and care. You will hear whispers assigning blame to the Machine. Don’t absorb that harm. There are external agitators who profit from fear.”

She lifted a palm; the smaller local Triad arrayed behind her like a reliquary.

“Repeat with me,” she coaxed gently, “so your collars can help you keep your composure.”

The older students breathed it like prayer. The first-years half-mouthing.

“What is seen is what is fair.”

The lion on the hill threw a red blink across the city: WITCHLIGHT Advisory (LOW). The blindfold shone like a halo built out of obedience.

When the assembly dissolved, tags followed Wren down the hall like polite wisps:

Kindness applied: Healing Narrative (Student Safety)

Lesson offered: Distrust Disinformation

Wren smiled at the air so it would let her pass.

The Mentor's Finch at her throat clicked twice—soft, appraising—then went still.

Chapter Ten — The Map Without a Map

They met in the Gallery of Skins at noon under Safe Mode, when maintenance sprites were busiest and audits least interested in students.

“Edges?” Tamsin asked.

“Edges,” Wren said.

They moved in the way of people carrying something breakable: too casual by exactly half. The Finch watched from her collar, opals set to “decorative.”

At Standing Stones, Wren palmed the rod lightly and watched how the hum changed at waist, shoulder, throat. She caught the pitch that punished truth—the one that widened when a voice traded grace for plain speaking—and filed it in her mouth the way musicians keep keys behind their teeth.

At the Care Bond tray in the conservatory ante-room, she pretended to admire the etching while she slipped her fingernail under the clasp and tested the gap she’d seen the night before. It accepted a paper-thin wedge cut from an old IFP pamphlet (red watermark side out), setting a false lock that would log consent but starve the Bond’s pulse.

“Let me,” Tamsin murmured, taking one and copying the movement with the narrow precision of a watchmaker. “If they flag your prints everywhere, they’ll glue your shadow to the floor.”

Wren nodded. “Two trays. Mixed in. Not all. The Machine tastes control in patterns.”

They left stitch-gloss tucked under mirror trim near Porcelain Freeze—lift here / look here / rest your jaw here when you smile until your teeth feel like they’re not yours.

In Yellow Brick Switchways, their breath polished a second spiral—one beat beyond the first—so that a player who trusted the wrong seam might still land in almost safety, not punishment.

The Finch clicked once—curious, maybe. Wren stroked it as if it were jewelry.

Kindness applied: Mentored Period (Cordial)

At Participation Gardens, they stood like good Artisans in training and practiced Teller Tone while Wren “spilled” a Confetti Sprite in a timing that would stall the odds motor eight seconds without flagging maintenance. Tamsin, at the next console, matched the spill out

of phase, twin hiccups in two different rooms making twelve seconds for someone somewhere to catch their breath.

It wasn't rebellion. It was oxygen.

They couldn't hand Calder a map.

They could hand him air, light-bends, false locks, and a red watermark that would pretend to be ribbon long enough for him to pocket it.

"Tonight?" Tamsin asked.

"Coliseum," Wren said. "If he speaks plain again, he'll get the Cue and the Load. We can ask the ticker to blink."

"And the IFP?" Tamsin glanced at the pamphlet rack inside the Coach Kiosk, where the red watermark peeped like a tiny alarm masked as a bow.

"Let him see it," Wren said softly. "Don't name it for him. If he can't read his own salvation in red, the Labyrinth will call it stigma and eat it."

They turned to go.

"Miss Meadow," said a voice like brushed steel.

The Tin Arbiter's local avatar stood in the doorway like a clock that never got tired. He tapped his chest glass once; the metronome inside ticked at a slightly higher speed than comfort.

"Your Mentor appreciates your initiative," he said pleasantly enough. "She asked me to remind you that flourishes outside Safety Curriculum can look... witchlike to anxious citizens."

The Finch nuzzled Wren's collar with a polite, invisible beak.

"My flourishes," Wren said, rounding the vowels, "are entirely decorative."

"Good," Tin said, and let them pass.

Only when they stepped into the corridor did Wren let the breath out of her bones.

"You're two edges from 'unsafe,'" Tamsin whispered. "He can smell you thinking."

"I only need one more," Wren said.

Chapter Eleven — Two Petals, One Receipt

Mercy Meadow looked the same. Beauty doesn't flinch.

The quartet hummed the same soft aria. The daisies nodded. The motto held the ceiling like a spell.

THE KINDEST THING IS WHAT APPEARS KIND.

Wren found her mother's cot among the identical. Heart Patch glowing. Brain Lace humming. Petal Tally: 2—it had ticked up during the last two days of grace. Progress, the Meadow called it. A receipt, Calder had said from the dais.

"Hi, love," her mother whispered. "They taught me to breathe in time with the music. Isn't that clever."

"It's clever," Wren said, and pressed the back of her own teeth against the taste of metal.

A nurse drifted over with a tray. Courage Draught. Slipper Tonic. Oil of Counsel for the Coach Kiosk, if they wanted a consult "about carrying feelings safely."

"Your Mentor's request has been logged," the nurse said with a smile that belonged to pictures. "We will re-evaluate your mother's Petal Pace."

Text scrolled along the dome:

Kindness applied: Review Cue (Mentorship Courtesy)

Wren's collar purred, recognizing Porcelain's favor.

Under the music, behind the polite, Wren heard the words her mother always said when a door was closing meanwhile and nobody wanted to say it out loud:

Be quicker than the part of you that obeys.

She leaned in and kissed her mother's temple. "Two more days," she said. "Then I'm in front of him."

Her mother smiled like someone being polite about a thunderhead. "Bring a ladder," she said. "He sits high."

On the way out, Wren took a detour by the Coach Kiosk. The IFP pamphlet's red watermark glinted at the edge of the rack. She turned it just a hair so the light bent better.

The Finch at her throat clicked once—Cordial. The hallway ribbons approved her choice to seek professional advice even though she didn't walk inside.

By the time she crossed the colonnade back to the Academy, the Green Hour bells were chiming toward night.

Calder's name climbed the board; his Gilt fluttered in the red; his Composure Index held like a tether. The sponsors' ticker patted itself, generous and proud.

Wren and Tamsin took their places at the balcony rail.

“Decorations ready?” Tamsin murmured.

“Decorations ready,” Wren said.

Chapter Twelve — Calm Riot

Calder stood at the Optics Coliseum dais without opening gratitude or closing thanks.

He stood like a person with a clock in their chest that wasn't the City's.

"Mercy Meadow," he said, "taught me that courage is measured by stillness. I disagree. Courage is measured by who pays when the machine corrects."

The Lion Tower's blindfold tweaked. The collars whispered Courage back to the room like a sedative. The Dorothy Tower tipped the hourglass: Review Pause, and called it kindness. The Tin Tower skimmed Gilt for Community Adjudication and called it civic pride.

Wren nodded once at Tamsin.

Two consoles, two Confetti Sprite tins, two eight-second decorations out of phase.

The ticker stuttered once in Participation Gardens A and once in Participation Gardens C. Scarcely a breath. Only enough for Calder's Grace Load to ease a hair and for the Gale avatar to fill the space with praise so sponsors wouldn't feel the floor move.

Kindness applied: Participation Celebration (Ticker Pause)

Calder breathed into it like a person practiced in finding steps between nails.

"Your kindness cost my mother two petals," he said. "I am here to ask you to stop charging."

The Pro Se Rule glowed across the kiosk awning on cue: ALLOW PROFESSIONALS TO BE BRAVE FOR YOU.

A Coach Offer bloomed over the dais: Rhetoric Lift (Comp Fee Waived), gilded, benevolent. Calder shook his head.

Tin's metronome ticked faster. "Declined assistance noted."

Wren pinched the rail. The Finch at her throat clicked—Cordial. In her head, she marked the beat: the moment a refusal became "independence" and bled Gilt by another name.

From the sponsor tier, a Caution Ribbon unrolled—Witchlight Advisory—and instantly turned pink: Community Elegance. The plate impressed EM-SER-17 drifted like a little angel of blame.

"External agitation," Gale crooned. "We will not be baited."

Lesson offered: Public Poise Under Narrative Stress

Calder did not look up at the floating blame or down at the Care Bond brochure sliding like a soft instruction toward his palm. He looked—up.

Wren realized, a heartbeat too late, that he had found the shine spiral she'd left in her window.

From here, at the rail, the glass of her dorm caught a tiny slant of light bent wrong. A seam too fine for anyone trained to ignore seams.

Calder looked into that bent light and squared his shoulders.

“Stop calling Daisy Sleep mercy,” he said, voice steady. “It’s a receipt you print on our bodies so you can hang it on your walls. If you want to be kind, give us a shield. Let us keep our Gilt when we have none. In Forma Petalis.”

Half the balcony inhaled—audacious, to say the red words out loud.

The other half cheered their own shock at his bravery.

The Wizard—somewhere in the lion head—tilted the sword a hair. The scales at the statue’s hand shone Heart > Brain brighter.

Tin Arbiter’s metronome hammered. Gale’s smile grew. The Lion’s whistle hovered.

Wren had the next decoration ready, breath primed, fingertips resting “accidentally” beside the Sprite tin.

But the Mentor’s Finch at her throat sang—a delicate, piercing tone only collars recognized—right as her finger moved.

Porcelain heard thunder.

The consoles changed color. The Sprite ports sealed. The odds motor ate sugar like teeth, chewed, and kept ticking.

Wren kept smiling. Tamsin did too.

Chapter Thirteen — Safety Inquiry (For Your Own Good)

Porcelain's office had been replaced by a stage.

Not literally—same green mirrors, same brass wing plate under glass—but the air now ran on cues. A ribbon on the cornice pre-wrote the outcome in velvet:

Kindness applied: Curriculum Compliance Review (Mentor-Supervised)
Justice restored: Community Safety Demonstration

Porcelain gestured Wren toward a polite circle in the carpet. The Mentor's Finch on Wren's collar brightened, as if pleased to be seen.

"Miss Meadow," Porcelain said, voice lacquer-smooth, "for your own good, we'll walk through three concerns. You may choose a Coach to stand beside you."

A Coach in cream already waited with a lapel pin of the scales and the specific smile of billable minutes.

"No, thank you," Wren said pleasantly.

Tin Arbiter's local avatar materialized like a clock that knew the line between seconds and sin. "Declined assistance noted," he purred.

Lesson offered: Independent Burden Management
Gilt Burn: Audit Processing (Civic)

Wren smiled wider to soften the word declined into brave for the room.

"Concern One," Porcelain said, tapping the glass. The office projected the Participation Gardens in miniature. Wren nudging a Confetti Sprite tin. The ticker stall like a held breath.

"Unauthorized flourish," Porcelain narrated, kind as a lullaby. "You gum the gears. Sponsors lose trust when the Machine hesitates. Safety suffers."

She slid a device from a drawer: the Tone Bit, gossamer bridle for a human mouth. "Merely a prop," she promised, and set it in Wren's palm. The Bit hummed, calibrated to shock only when a voice left the range labeled pleasant.

"Concern Two," Porcelain said. "Edge polishing." Switchways. Paper Gardens. Breath spirals and stitch-glosses that were decorative unless you knew where to put your feet. "Pretty," Porcelain allowed. "But edges entice falls. Safety again."

A tray appeared. Grace Weights with tiny bells. “Slip them on?” she asked, as if offering jewelry.

The bells chimed when Wren buckled them. The weight dragged at her calves with the gentle insistence of a hand that thinks it’s helping.

“Concern Three,” Porcelain said. The Conservatory froze on Porcelain Hart stepping through the blown doors. The ribbon above the still image read Helper Incident Contained.

“You were in the colonnade,” Porcelain said softly. “You heard her say the wrong things. These things... metastasize as witchlight in anxious minds.”

A Care Bond bracelet waited in Porcelain’s other hand, its inner engraving FOR YOUR OWN GOOD catching the light like a blessing. “A pilot,” she said, smiling. “Let me share a little of your load. It will teach you how we carry one another.”

Wren turned the cuff as if admiring it. A paper-thin red wedge—cut from an IFP pamphlet—hid under her thumbnail.

“Of course,” she said, and let Porcelain fasten the clasp. The wedge slid into the gap she’d tested in the Conservatory. The false lock clicked, logging consent while starving the pulse.

Porcelain’s gaze flicked to the collar-cam feed. It showed a satisfying bloom of Courage Echo across two dots: Wren and Porcelain, beautifully bound. The Bond felt like air.

“Good,” Porcelain breathed. “Now—Demonstration.”

The carpet circle brightened to a ring. Screens rose. Wren stood suddenly inside a polite slice of the Labyrinth: a miniature Mirror Court and a Switchways tongue that re-paved in clean, safe waves.

Kindness applied: Safe Mode — Educational

Note: Non-Injurious

“Walk the beat,” Tin suggested. “Narrate your choices. Smile.”

Wren stepped onto the Switchways tongue. The floor repaved beneath her in time with an unheard metronome. The Grace Weights sang sugar-sweet with every lift of her feet. She smiled. The Tone Bit approved.

“Very good,” Porcelain praised. “Now show the edge you left.”

Wren breathed once and didn’t—she walked perfect beats on purpose. The floor repaved obediently. No seam flickered.

Porcelain's smile did not dim, but something behind it took a note.

Tin tapped his chest. "Now stress," he said, and ticked the beat a hair faster. A Delay Finch perched on the edge of the ring to "help" timing.

Wren glided. In her peripheral vision, the spiral she'd left in the real Switchways sang to her like a secret. Here it did not exist. Here the Machine had already healed.

"Excellent," Porcelain said. "You are proving my point."

"Which is?" Wren asked—pleasantly, the Bit ensuring it.

"That you are safe," Porcelain said. "In a classroom. Which is why, for your own good, your flourishes must stay here."

The ring dimmed. The office returned. The Finch on Wren's collar chirped a satisfied chord only Porcelain could hear. Mentorship Effective, the feed wrote.

"And therefore," Porcelain said, the sentence trotting like a well-bred horse to its gentle stable, "our remedy is not punishment but placement. You need to learn the Labyrinth's kindness from the inside so your empathy stops threatening safety from the outside. The City cannot afford rumors of students making the Machine... think twice."

The ribbon wrote the verdict while Porcelain delivered it like a balm:

Justice restored: Educational Placement (Pro Se Track, Provisional)

Kindness applied: Lesson Pathway — For Your Own Good

Wren felt the words pass through her before they landed on her. They had built a school that wrapped punishments in syllables like "placement" and "lesson."

"For how long?" she asked, and made it sound curious instead of hoarse.

"Until the Wizard determines you've learned what kindness looks like under load," Porcelain said, almost tender. "You'll begin at Gate One on the Night Cycle."

"My Promenade slot—"

"Converted," Porcelain said gently. "To a Player Intake Blessing. You'll see him sooner this way."

Tin bowed a fraction. "For your own good," he echoed, and meant for ours.

The Tone Bit hummed approval at Wren's silence. The Grace Weights chimed Poise when she did not stumble.

The Care Bond sat soft at her wrist, locked and meaningless, logging a virtue that could not hurt her.

Porcelain opened the door like someone ushering a child into a library.

"Go tell your mother," she said, kind as medicine. "Two more days would have been cruel hope. This is kinder."

Wren closed her hand around the Finch and smiled so the collar wouldn't hurt her for the wrong expression.

"Thank you," she said, devout as a blade under velvet. "For my own good."

Chapter Fourteen — Last Daylight

The Meadow met her with the same hymn and a new ribbon.

Kindness applied: Family Preparation — Lesson Placement

Note: Optimism encouraged (Non-Binding)

Her mother's Petal Tally: 2 → 3. Not because of healing. Because of grace under prolonged composure. The Meadow called it progress. Wren called it a receipt printed on skin.

"They told me," her mother whispered, fingers warm around Wren's. "You'll go in tonight. And then—out. And then up the hill. It's quicker."

"They called it kinder," Wren said, forcing lightness into her voice until the Tone Bit petted her throat. "They promise non-injury."

"They promised me daisies," her mother said, and smiled because the music asked her to. "I do like daisies. I don't want to sleep in them."

Wren pressed her forehead to her mother's. Their collars hummed gentleness between skull and skull.

"If they try to tip you into the field," Wren breathed, "call the beat wrong. Sing on the wrong note. Make the Harmony Lacquer show its seams. Promise me."

"I promise," her mother said. "I'll step off the beat."

A nurse approached with Courage Draught and Slipper Tonic, labels gentle as lullabies. "You're so brave," she told Wren's mother. "Every petal is a prayer."

Kindness applied: Courage Sip (Calibrated)

Justice restored: Clarity in Application (Heart > Brain)

Wren smiled at the nurse and signed the Lesson Placement form, because if she didn't a Delay Finch would eat an hour out of spite.

As she turned to go, her mother tugged her hand. "You were born with a seam in your eye," she said. "Don't let them polish it out."

Wren nodded once and left before the Tone Bit punished the noise a sob would make.

In the corridor, she found Tamsin waiting with a small parcel wrapped in Academy-green paper.

“Contraband,” Tamsin murmured. “A Skinner’s kit—microcloth, pocket lacquer, mirror chalk. Decorative tools. Harmless. Unless you know where to use them.”

Wren swallowed. “If they audit you—”

“They won’t,” Tamsin said, and smiled with her mouth while her eyes looked like a person who had already chosen a side. “I’m boring. That’s my superpower.”

Wren laughed once—real—and the Finch at her collar clicked Cordial so Porcelain wouldn’t scold her for joy.

“Meet me at the rail,” Tamsin said. “I’ll stall the odds when I can. Out of phase.”

“Eight seconds,” Wren said.

“Twelve if I’m feeling wicked.”

They didn’t hug. The Care Bond at Wren’s wrist might have decided to feel something about it.

Chapter Fifteen — Gate One

Night slid over the Labyrinth like a page being turned.

The Lion Tower's blindfold shone. The Dorothy Tower's hourglass flipped. The Tin Tower logged. The Wizard breathed the city from the lion head and pretended to consider individual prayers.

Players emerged from the Intake Arcade in lines, collars humming. Some wore Coach ribbons; some wore Care Bonds linked to strangers whose pulses would echo like guilt. Some had Petal Shields—thin and red and stigmatized—floating over their HUDs like bruises.

Wren stood among them in a Player collar that looked like hers but wasn't. Its opals were duller and more honest. Its Composure Coaching had teeth.

A ribbon wrote her new name on the air:

PLAYER: MEADOW, WREN

STATUS: Educational Placement (Pro Se — Provisional)

GILT: Seeded — Low

FATIGUE: Low

COMPOSURE INDEX: Promising

Porcelain's local avatar placed a hand on her shoulder as if handing her a diploma.

“Remember your lessons,” she said. “What is seen is what is fair.”

“Thank you,” Wren said, and the collar rewarded everyone for her manners.

The Gate One arch—Threshold of Courtesies—glowed like an opening night. Dorothy (Time) smiled from her tower, benevolent. The Lion (Pain) twitched his velvet whistle. Tin (Gilt) ticked.

A row of tiny bells waited on the lintel. When Wren stepped under, they measured her smile, posture, phrasing, eye-glitter, patience, gratitude. Any deficit would become a kindness: a cue, a weight, a pause.

A Coach Offer flickered above her head—Diction Dressage (Comp Fee Waived, First Minute)—like a halo with an invoice.

Wren declined. The HUD logged Independent Burden Management and billed her Gilt for the boast.

From the balcony, Tamsin stood very still at a console that pretended to be a garden. Across the room, a Confetti Sprite tin waited like a party trick.

The bell-boughs stirred. Begin.

Wren took her first step into the Threshold.

Bells graded her smile. She smiled with exactly the wrong tooth showing—a micro-insult the Machine would have missed if not for a thousand Artisans teaching it to see.

Kindness applied: Composure Coaching (Level 1)

The Bit pricked. The collar hummed. Wren kept walking.

A Civility Grieve anklet presented itself like an award. She took it, strapped it on, and let the bells sing her Poise under new weight.

Her Gilt ticked down for Audience Adjudication. Tin's chest-window brightened.

She reached the first courtesy altar—Say Thank You—and said, “Thank you,” in a tone so perfectly pleasant the Tone Bit trembled with delight while the meaning went elsewhere like a letter in a false envelope.

The altar purred. The bells approved. The odds ticker in the Gardens hiccuped—
—eight seconds.

Somewhere, a Confetti Sprite spilled its sugar into gears.

Wren breathed a thread deeper. A stranger at her side—an older woman with a limp masked in lace—caught the breath like a memory and matched it. The Machine logged it as Community Courage, billed a fee, and called it sweet.

Chapter Sixteen — Paper Gardens (Live Fire)

Night made the Paper Gardens gleam like a polite trap.

Hedges trimmed into paragraphs breathed out the titles they preferred in a hush of leaves. Blossoms opened to reveal embossed forms—Petition for Extension, Notice of Service, Affidavit of Effort—and the Notice Bees drifted between them, brass faces turning, tiny mouths reading clauses in tones that made error sound like etiquette.

Wren stepped onto the path. Bells in the arch recorded her posture; the Civility Grieve at her ankle chimed when she set down too firmly, then purred when she softened the step.

“Smile,” the hedge suggested, sweet as poison.

She smiled. The Tone Bit at her throat warmed approval; Tin’s window ticked a small Gilt fee for Appearance Hygiene and called it Community Processing.

At the first hive, the Bees pivoted toward her envelope. She moved when they moved—one breath after the wing-turn—finding the stitch-gloss she’d hidden weeks ago. Light bent; a slit that wasn’t there became a slit that was. Her corrected service slid into the hatch.

The hive chimed satisfaction.

Lesson offered: Self-Correction (Observed)

Kindness applied: Commendation (Non-Convertible)

A Delay Finch flitted out of the hedge and landed on her docket with a crystalline blink.

Kindness applied: Reflective Pause (Delay Finch)

The world around her went to syrup. Her path dimmed. Other players kept moving—papers blooming, Bees murmuring, sponsors sighing at their own good taste. Gilt burned anyway: Review Pause (Fairness). The Dorothy Tower tipped an invisible hourglass and called the drain Time Stewardship.

Wren breathed through the pause. When it released, she went on.

At the second hive, an older woman with a ribbon-stiff smile fumbled a salutation. The Bees’ faces angled toward sting. Wren didn’t move toward her—that would be liability—but she let her breath catch on the turn of the Bees’ wings and then let it go, just audibly enough for a desperate ear to borrow.

The woman's head tilted. She matched the breath, slid the envelope on the wing-turn seam.

Accepted. A tiny victory.

The Garden instantly reframed it.

Safety Advisory: Unlicensed Coordination Risk

Kindness applied: Grace Weights (L2) — Teach Careful Helping

Two heavier anklets presented themselves to Wren as if she'd won a prize. She strapped them on with a thanks bright enough to keep the Tone Bit from nipping. Her calves burned; the bells applauded.

The woman was rewarded with Public Praise (Non-Convertible) and a Daisy Advisory printed in petals at her feet.

“Kind,” someone in the gallery sighed, delighted with themselves.

Wren moved under the Bees’ hum as if it were a metronome trying to hide a cough, eyes catching every seam the Machine hadn’t polished yet. At the Garden gate, a ribbon spooled:

Order: Timely Service Established

Cost: Gilt Burn — Docket Hygiene, Audience Processing

Note: Community Courage Exemplary (Non-Convertible)

She gathered the ribbons with both hands because the City loved to see you hold your compliments. The Delay Finch on her docket glowed satisfied and swallowed five more minutes for her own good.

Chapter Seventeen — Clockwork Orchard (The Beat and the Bite)

The Clockwork Orchard was beautiful enough to forgive.

Trees latticed like cathedral ribs held fruit that pulsed with quiet light—deadlines ripening in color bands: ripe on beat, premature off beat, punitive late. Beneath them, the path ticked like a music box you couldn’t see.

Tin Arbiter’s small avatar waited at the gate with a schoolroom smile. “Pick with poise,” he said. “The Lion admires bravery under load.”

Kindness applied: Courage Coaching (Low)

Wren stepped into the Orchard. The Grace Weights chimed with every lift; her collar hummed Composure. Fruit swayed at shoulder level, labeled in lace-script—Answer Due, Record Proof, Notice Window—each with a band of safe beat around its skin.

Pick too early and the stalk shivered her hand—Premature Ripeness (Dismissal). Pick too late and the fruit hardened mid-air into a Sanction Pomegranate—heavy, ornamental, useless.

She set her breath to the floor’s hidden tick, listening for the tiny machine lag she’d felt in the Switchways. It wasn’t the same here; the Orchard had been retuned. She missed the first Answer Due by a hair. The fruit flashed gold—late—and fell into her palms as a pomegranate of pure weight.

Kindness applied: Burden Education (Carry and Learn)

The Lion Tower’s blindfold shifted west. A Community Courage Cue (Escalated) kissed her collar—shock not called shock—and flowered as praise.

She smiled into it. Her calves sang. The bells at her ankles measured her poise and sold it back to the sponsors as a story called steadfast.

At the balcony rail, Tamsin’s fingers hovered above two Confetti Sprite tins in separate Participation Gardens, not looking at Wren, not looking at anything. On the beat that wasn’t now, she tipped the first; sugar glittered into gears; the odds motor hiccuped eight seconds. Three trees away, she tipped the second—another eight—out of phase.

Wren felt the air change. The Orchard’s tick faltered; fruit hesitated at the lip of ripeness.

She reached up and took the Record Proof apple on that breath-space—exact. The stem released with a clean little tear that felt like truth unhooking from theater.

Order: Record Marked Timely

Cost: Gilt Burn — Audience Adjudication (Pride)

The Lion blew his velvet whistle. Collars City-wide pulsed Courage Coaching so everyone could believe they had helped.

Wren absorbed the cue. She banked the pattern: blink eight, blink eight out of phase. She carried her mistake—Sanction Pomegranate heavy at her hip, bells pretty as applause she hadn't asked for—and stepped out of the Orchard with fruit and rhythm both.

Chapter Eighteen — Match Play (Pleading Duel)

The Match Court pretended to be instructive.

Two daises faced one another across a parquet floor engraved with merit stars. A moderator avatar (Gale, teeth perfect) glided between them, Mercy Bowl in hand. Above, the boards explained that pairing petitioners “sharpens arguments for the Wizard’s ear.”

Kindness applied: Peer Excellence Exercise

Safety Advisory: Unlicensed Aid Invites Liability

Wren’s opponent looked like a postcard: neat shoulders, eyes that had learned to be agreeable. A Coach stood at their elbow, lapel pin gleaming. A Care Bond ringed their wrist, tethered to two others off-stage; the pulse light blinked like a heartbeat printed on silk.

Wren had her false-locked Bond, a pocket Skinner’s kit, and Tamsin’s air if the Garden would let it through.

“Begin with thanks,” Gale encouraged.

Wren’s opponent thanked the room in a tone dead-centered in pleasant. Their Coach flicked two fingers; a Rhetoric Lift buffed the sentence until it shone like a lie you want to believe.

Wren inclined her head in the same register and said nothing at all. The Tone Bit hummed approval at her restraint and billed Gilt under Composure Maintenance.

“Question One,” Gale smiled. “Whose delay harms most?”

Wren’s opponent lifted their chin. “The City,” they said. “Delay drains Civic Spirit. We must move briskly.”

A sponsor in the second tier exhaled with joy and pressed Commend. The odds kissed the Coach’s ledger by a hair; Tin tapped time into Processing Fees.

Wren eased her palm across the dais’s edge. Under the lacquer, the maintenance lip she’d found in Mirror Court had a twin here—lift, speak from the seam.

“Delay kills the poor first,” she said, pleasant as sugar. “The City can nap.”

Half the balcony made a noise their collars transformed into admiration. The other half made the same noise and called it offense. Either way, the Lion’s whistle lifted a hair.

Wren angled her body so the Coach's client could see the Care Bond clasp at her wrist—the tiny gap where a paper-thin wedge could make a false lock. She didn't show it; she let light catch it as if by accident. An invitation, not a hand.

The system saw it anyway.

Safety Advisory: Unlicensed Coordination Risk (Medium)

Kindness applied: Grace Weights (L1) — Teach Careful Boundaries

A new anklet slid toward her with a bow. She took it. Bells sang. The floor measured her poise like a tithe.

“Question Two,” Gale sang. “Is mercy soft or sharp?”

“Soft,” the Coach's client said promptly. “It appears kind.”

The room swooned. The Dorothy Tower shaved two minutes from Wren's docket for Time Stewardship and called it leveling the field.

“Sharp,” Wren said, smiling with all her teeth and none of her compliance. “It cuts receipts into our skin.”

The Mercy Bowl quivered. The collars petted their owners for being brave enough to listen.

Gale glided, still smiling. “A final exercise. Demonstrate your opponent's weakness for the City, so we may all learn.”

The Coach put a hand on their client's shoulder. “Watch the wobble on her left,” he murmured for the room, meaning Wren; “she disguises strain as style.”

Wren did not turn that blade back into the other player. She opened her hands.

“My opponent's weakness,” she said in a tone the Tone Bit adored, “is that the Coach costs so much Gilt he can't hear his own voice anymore.”

A hush pressed the room flat. The boards immediately reframed it.

Kindness applied: Commendation — Plain Speech (Non-Convertible)

Safety Advisory: Potential Undermining of Licensed Aid

The Care Bond on the other player's wrist budded an auto-link toward Wren—“for shared learning.” Her false clasp took the handshake and logged virtue without transmitting pulse. The system, denied the satisfaction of a clean sting, conjured a lesson instead:

Lesson offered: Brave Separation (Peer Independence)

Ribbons poured over Wren—praise that bought nothing. Ribbons poured over her opponent—praise that moved them three tiles ahead “for safety.” The Coach bowed, billing Gilt into a ledger named Confidence.

Up at the rail, Tamsin’s palm hovered over a Sprite tin she did not tip, because the Mentor’s Finch in Studio mirrors was already singing.

Wren stepped off the dais heavier, richer in commendations, poorer by the exact number of minutes praise likes to charge.

Gale beamed. “See?” she said to the City. “How we sharpen one another.”

The Lion’s blindfold glowed. The Tin ticked. The Dorothy turned her hourglass and called the theft of time kindness.

Wren bowed and kept walking, bells on her ankles chiming attainment while her ledger wrote the word receipt in the margin so hard the paper almost tore.

Chapter Nineteen — Mootness Marsh (Courage Sip)

Fog wore perfume and good intentions.

The Mootness Marsh spread in pale panes, each reed tagged with a deadline like a silk place card. Lily pads were docket stamps; minnows carried Notice of Changing Circumstance in their mouths and let them fall where they pleased. A metronome-tide lapped polite.

Gale's small avatar skimmed the surface, bare feet not getting wet. "Here," she cooed, "we learn wise surrender. Some urgencies melt when compassion warms them."

Kindness applied: Priority Reassessment (Warmth)
Safety Advisory: Agitation → Fog (Self-Care)

Time slid off statements and sank. Wren watched a Hearing Request cloud at the edges, soften, and unfurl into "Perhaps unnecessary" without anyone touching it.

From the mist, a Chalice Swan glided, neck curved, wings a hush of lacquered light. The silver cup she carried looked like the sky folded into a bowl.

"Courage?" she asked Wren gently, tipping the chalice so the surface shivered with invitation. "Just enough to stop your hands from shaking."

Wren's hands were steady. The Grace Weights did the shaking for her.

"Thank you," Wren said, which is what the Marsh wanted to hear.

Kindness applied: Courage Sip (Calibrated)

The collar purred. Sponsors sighed. Dorothy's hourglass tilted a soft grain toward Time Stewardship.

Wren set her thumb against the chalice stem, not the cup, and angled the mirror-surface until it caught the Tin reflection—just there, where his metronome hid in fog. The sip touched her lip; the reflection touched the metronome; the count hiccuped.

On the board: her Composure Index rose (prettily). In the ledger: the cost misrouted—away from her docket and into Course Maintenance (Optics Calibration).

She swallowed a mouthful of sky and felt it cool, not numb. The Marsh applauded itself for helping.

A tiny lens beaded on the rim—dew that wouldn’t fall. The Swan’s glass eyes flickered human for a breath.

“Set the price first,” she whispered, so softly the fog could call it ambience. “Or send it into the water, if you can.”

Wren tilted the chalice back to the Swan’s beak. A single drip slid off the lip and vanished into the Marsh with a sound like a receipt dissolving.

On her HUD, a prize blinked to life:

Award: Rule-Gloss (One Use) — Clarity Token

Note: May reveal hidden timer beneath fog (Non-Transferable)

The crowd cooed. Gale smiled, dimples bright. Dorothy shaved four minutes from Wren’s docket and labeled it Gracious Priorities.

Kindness applied: Time Stewardship (Non-Contestable)

Wren pocketed the dew-lens at her collar, close to the Mentor’s Finch. The Finch clicked Cordial, logging compliance. The fog returned to work.

She tested the token on a reed that hummed “Resolved by circumstances.” Through the lens, the reed’s pith glowed: a hard little timer ticking under the fog. The Marsh had renamed the deadline compassion and kept the clock.

She let the lens fog and tucked it away.

Two players ahead, a young man sighed and sat down on a pad labeled If It’s Meant To Be. The pad slid him six tiles backward while Gale praised acceptance and the sponsors applauded themselves for encouraging peace.

Wren thanked the Swan for the kindness she had not paid for and stepped out of the Marsh with a pocket of air, a lens, and a ledger that would later call her serenity expensive.

Chapter Twenty — Standing Stones → Mirror Court (Polishing the Shadow)

The Standing Stones hummed like crystal voices testing you for the right key.

Rods rose from the floor in elegant pairs; the narrower your wobble, the better the tone. The wrong tone drew Tone Bit taps and Poise Drills billed as Confidence Gifts. Above, the blindfolded lion's face caught lamplight; the sword looked benign by design.

Wren stepped into the lane. The first hum asked for composure, the second for gratitude, the third for ownership of feelings in a tenor that made your throat want to behave. Her Grace Weights chimed polite counterpoint. The Tone Bit watched for edges, ready to buzz if truth left the pleasant corridor.

Three rods in, the older woman from Paper Gardens limped into the adjacent lane, lace taut over effort. The rig calibrated to erase her limp if she pretended it wasn't there.

Wren kept her face forward and adjusted her own breath just off the rod's key—a whisper of dissonance. Not enough to trip a tap, enough to make a human ear doubt the machine.

The woman's shoulders unlocked a finger-width. She let the rod hum pass through muscle instead of against it. Her limp stayed a little true. The rods rewarded her with Poise Credit and erased the adjustment from the record like it had never happened.

Kindness applied: Public Commendation (Non-Convertible)

Wren took the praise the rods pushed at her and spent it on balance the rods couldn't see: heel, toe, heel, toe, one hair off the demanded cadence so she didn't hand them her whole gait to keep.

At the exit, the lane coughed up a Mirror Court—panels arranged to flatter, lacquer to sweeten, attendants to suggest “just a touch of polish.”

The mirror caught her and did what it was built to do: autocorrect the tell-tales—shoulder quiver, bite marks on the inside of a cheek, the hitch when a memory brushed against a feeling. The reflection smoothed like language written by someone who cares more about how it sounds than what it says.

“Optional,” Gale trilled.

Kindness applied: Appearance Hygiene (Optional)

Optional like oxygen in a crowded room.

Wren set her palm against the frame where the maintenance lip lived, under the silver, and lifted a breath. The autocorrect slid past her like a hand missing a wrist. She kept her limp—small, invisible—and her face—pleasant, hungry.

The Tone Bit tapped her once for Refusal to Groom, a sting wrapped in Self-Respect Award. Tin skimmed Gilt for Record Grooming Bypass (Processing) and named it Civic Clarity.

Justice restored: Clarity in Application (Heart > Brain)

“Lovely,” Gale smiled, because the City likes choices it can invoice.

Behind the mirror, the Porcelain Hart’s platform cast a quiet reflection; she wasn’t there, but her absence had the shape of someone who should be.

As Wren stepped off the dais, Tin Arbiter’s local avatar waited in the aisle like a polite clock.

“Your Mentor is proud,” he said. He tapped his chest glass twice; the metronome inside ticked a fraction fast. “And concerned.”

A ribbon unrolled over Wren’s path as if it had been waiting all night for this exact sentence:

Justice restored: Safety Audit (Provisional → Active)

Kindness applied: Monitoring Intensified — For Your Own Good

The Mentor’s Finch at her throat sang a single clear tone. Not a punishment—a bell that meant somebody on the hill had noticed the way she stepped where autocorrect asked to be believed.

Wren bowed as if grateful.

“Thank you for watching over me,” she said, and made every word taste like compliance so the Tone Bit would purr.

The lion’s blindfold caught the light again—kindness made into law with a ribbon. The sword angled west. The scales glowed Heart > Brain brighter for the audience that needed to be told exactly what fairness looked like.

Wren walked on, bells at her ankles singing poise, pockets holding air and a lens, throat stung once and fine. Ahead, the Optics Coliseum woke like a theater hungry for someone else’s composure.

She flexed her fingers and felt the Skinner’s kit Tamsin had slipped her: microcloth, mirror chalk, pocket lacquer. Decorative. Harmless. Unless you know where to use them.

“Ready?” someone breathed from the rail above, too far away to be anyone and exactly the distance to be Tamsin.

Wren didn’t look up. She nodded at a seam in the floor.

Above the arena, the Witchlight Advisory flickered LOW to MED and back, and a small brass plate stamped EM-SER-17 made a quiet circuit like a saint on a string.

“Begin,” the City murmured.

Wren smiled, pleasant as a blade under velvet, and stepped toward the roar that called itself kindness.

Chapter Twenty-One — Optics Coliseum (Public Grace Trial)

The Optics Coliseum woke like a theater that believed itself a cathedral.

Balcony tiers shimmered with sponsors in glass-green, hands poised over Command and Caution petals. The floor was a ring of polished stone inlaid with phrases the City loved: Poise, Civility, Gratitude. Overhead, the Triad watched from their towers—Dorothy cradling her hourglass, Lion with velvet whistle, Tin tapping the beat no one was supposed to hear.

Gale's avatar drifted to the center, Mercy Bowl glowing like a moon. "Tonight," she sang, "we celebrate composure under truth."

Kindness applied: Public Commendation Pathway

Safety Advisory: Unlicensed Aid Invites Liability

Wren stepped onto the stone. The Grace Weights chimed with her first breath; the Tone Bit warmed, pleased to be needed. On the rail high above, Tamsin stood at a console she never looked at directly, a fingertip hovering beside a Confetti Sprite tin.

"Begin with thanks," Gale suggested.

"I'm grateful to be seen," Wren said, voice pleasant as polished wood. "Not because seeing is fairness, but because fairness can start there."

Half the balcony sighed; the other half adjusted their collars to feel brave about disagreeing. Tin skimmed Gilt into Audience Processing (Civic) and called it participation.

Gale tipped the bowl. "Your Record Proof says you met the Orchard. How did it taste?"

"Like an answer wrapped in a bill," Wren said. "Sweet on the surface, heavy in the hand."

Before the room could decide whether to applaud the metaphor or punish it, Tamsin tipped her first Sprite—a pretty spill that dusted gears like sacrament.

The odds motor hiccuped eight seconds.

To most, it felt like a collective inhale. To Wren, it was air.

She threaded facts into the pocket: "When I picked Record Proof on the blink, your clock said 'timely,' and your ledger said 'processing.' You called both kindness."

Lesson offered: Plain Speech — Pleasant Tone (Advanced)

Kindness applied: Community Courage Commendation (Non-Convertible)

The crowd applauded themselves for loving honesty. The Lion's whistle lifted a degree; collars bloomed Courage Coaching so everyone could call their gooseflesh virtue.

Gale smiled. "And the Marsh?"

"I accepted a Courage Sip," Wren said. "I set the price first."

Dorothy tilted her hourglass; grain slid. Time Stewardship ledgered two minutes from Wren's docket—for her own good.

Order: Mercy Meadow Review Suggested (Non-Binding)

Note: Daisy Advisory — Strong

Wren felt the collar's bite come labeled poise. She spoke pleasantly anyway: "Stop naming our exhaustion as grace."

The sound that followed was not entirely voluntary. The Mentor's Finch at Wren's throat sang, clear and delicate—Porcelain lifting a finger in a mirror two buildings away. On the sponsor tier, a steward sealed the Sprite chutes. Tamsin's second spill never happened; sugar glinted on the rims like a smile that didn't reach the eyes.

Tin tapped his chest glass twice. "Audit Intensified," he announced in the cheerful cadence of an elevator.

Justice restored: Safety Audit (Active → Escalated)

Kindness applied: Supportive Monitoring — For Your Own Good

Gale lifted the Mercy Bowl higher, filling the stall Tamsin had tried to buy. "And what would you like us to call it?" she asked, tone tender, teeth perfect.

"A Petal Shield," Wren said, pleasant as rain. "A red badge that means we don't get charged for asking for help."

An audible hush. Saying the red words aloud turned stigma into object. Sponsors froze between Command and Caution, unsure which would feel more like virtue later.

Dorothy's hourglass shaded heavily. The Witchlight Advisory flickered LOW → MED → LOW. A brass plate stamped EM-SER-17 spun like a saint on a string.

The decision ribbon rolled in satin script:

Order: Grace Load +10 (Public Bravery)

Extension: Mercy Meadow +0.5 Day

Advisory: Daisy Sleep — Strong (Non-Binding)
Cost: Gilt Burn — Civic Adjudication, Poise Hygiene

The Coliseum cheered itself righteous. Wren bowed, taking the weight they praised her for carrying. When she straightened, the Tin avatar waited at the edge of the ring—polite clock, patient smile.

“Lovely composure,” he said. “Your Mentor is proud.” The metronome behind his glass clicked a fraction fast. “We’ll keep you safe.”

Wren smiled back. “Thank you for watching.”

The Tone Bit purred at her manners. The Audit ribbon grew a second tail.

High above, Tamsin rested her palm on the console as if it were marble gone cool after a hot day.

Tomorrow would be daylight. Daylight meant hustle—and hospitals that called themselves meadows.

Chapter Twenty-Two — Daylight: Hustle & Meadow

Day made the Labyrinth look like a park where nothing bad could happen.

Players in Safe Mode lined up for gig petitions and ribbon sorting shifts. The Participation Gardens were open for Thank-You Recitals—thirty seconds of gratitude per sponsor, by appointment. Each recital came with a small Gilt credit and a larger Processing fee labeled Community Elegance.

Kindness applied: Dignity Work Opportunities
Cost: Gilt Burn — Elegance, Register Use, Audit Pings

Wren rotated through three stations:

1. Thank-You Recital Booth: A velvet mic, a script card, a smile graded by bells. She read perfectly and watched the ledger take back half of what it gave—Poise Dressage is never free.
2. Ribbon Triage: Sorting Command from Caution for the prior night, fingers dusty with glitter that called itself Civic Pride. Each handful weighed like sand and billing.
3. Gig Petition Wall: Polite odd jobs posted by sponsors—polish my mirror; hold my line; recite my apology. The pay was Gilt, the cost was time, and the receipt was always gratitude.

Between booths, stewards hawked Coach Trials: “First minute waived!” The asterisk read: waiver converts to Confidence Investment; terms escalate pleasantly.

Wren declined with perfect tone and took a map-maker’s gig to redraw the Paper Gardens diagram “for schoolchildren.” She sketched all the Bees and none of the seams. The Mentor’s Finch clicked Cordial.

At noon, she crossed to Mercy Meadow.

The hymn poured itself like tea. Daisy heads nodded. The motto on the dome shone:

THE KINDEST THING IS WHAT APPEARS KIND.

Inside, her mother’s Petal Tally: 3 → 4. Not from cure. From grace under prolonged composure. The Meadow logged it with a chime delicate as good china and billed the family for Song Maintenance.

Kindness applied: Courage Sip (Calibrated)
Justice restored: Clarity in Application (Heart > Brain)

“Their tea is very brave,” her mother whispered, the corner of her mouth tipping up. “I drink it bravely.”

Wren laid her forehead against her mother’s and breathed on the off-beat. “I spoke in the Coliseum,” she said. “They turned truth into nobility and weight.”

“That sounds like them,” her mother said. “Did you take a shield?”

“Not yet,” Wren said. “I’m making it look like a prize first.”

She eased a step to the Coach Kiosk alcove in the Meadow corridor. The IFP pamphlet stack sat tucked like shame. Wren lifted the top pamphlet and angled it until the red watermark caught sunlight from the clerestory and glowed like a ribbon you’d want to wear in your hair.

The Mentor’s Finch clicked once, indifferent. The hall ribbon approved her decorum: “Educational Aesthetic Adjustment — Student Initiative.”

On the way out, a Meadow nurse pressed a vial into Wren’s hand. “Oil of Counsel, for a Coach consult if you decide to be brave about asking,” she said with the smile of someone paid to say that. The vial glittered. The label purred. The fine print said: Confidence Investment begins at use.

Wren handed it back with a thank-you so polite the Tone Bit wanted to embroider her name. “I have a Navigator,” she said, and let the word hang in the air like a myth. The nurse tilted her head, confused only after Wren had gone.

Outside, the city scrolled a Witchlight Advisory (LOW) and a Contributors’ Night announcement: donors to the Curtain Promenade this evening, select cases to be “heard,” refreshments provided.

Tamsin was waiting where the willow shadows wrote lace on the stones. She slipped Wren a folded scrap: a mapless map—three marks and a breath count.

“Confetti chutes are sealed,” Tamsin murmured. “They know we were buying air.”

“We’ll buy it someplace else,” Wren said. She showed the dew-lens she’d taken from the Swan’s chalice. “Under fog, the clock still ticks.”

“Can you call it out without the Tone Bit nipping you?”

“Pleasantly,” Wren said.

They stood a minute like two people who had nothing in common with plotting. The Lion Tower washed them in a red blink—all is safe—and the Tin inside the hill ticked the world toward night.

“Contributors’ Night,” Tamsin said. “Going to watch the elevator?”

“Yes,” Wren said. “I need to see what being heard looks like up close.”

“And your mother?”

“Four petals,” Wren said, and made the number sound like victory so the City wouldn’t correct it. “She’s stepping off the beat for me.”

Tamsin squeezed Wren’s wrist right over the Care Bond clasp. The false lock didn’t care; it never had a pulse to share. “One more midnight,” she said. “You keep moving. I’ll keep lying beautifully.”

Wren smiled, pleasant as a blade under velvet, and went to polish her weights so they’d sing prettier when she ran under them tonight.

Above the hill, the blindfolded Lion gleamed. Dorothy turned her hourglass. Tin tapped time into ledgers labeled Grace.

The City put on fresh perfume and changed into its evening kindness.

Chapter Twenty-Three — Contributors' Night (The Elevator She Can't Take)

Emerald City dressed itself for absolution.

Lanterns jeweled the Curtain Promenade; sponsor tiers glittered with necklaces that looked like receipts. At the hill's base stood the Contributors' Elevator—a glass column banded in gold text:

Kindness applied: Expedited Hearing (Patronage)

Note: Privacy Veil active during miracles

Players gathered at the velvet rope to watch people who did not wear collars glide upward smiling. A steward in porcelain gloves patted wrists and murmured: "Bless your bravery. Thank you for participating."

Wren stood with the other night runners, bells at her ankles, Grace Weights polished so they'd sing prettily. Tamsin took a maintenance path along the colonnade, safe as stone.

The first Coach-backed case entered the elevator with a hush. The Coach lifted two fingers; the Mercy Bowl on the dais brightened. The car rose behind a wash of Privacy Veil that turned testimony into tasteful fog.

Inside the lion's head, the Wizard's silhouette moved like a puppet remembering what ritual looks like. A ribbon bled through the veil anyway:

Order: Rule Retune (Clause 7—Appearances)

Resolution: Daisy Sleep Recommended — Kindest Outcome

Applause drifted down the hill like perfume. The Coach bowed. The client wept gracefully into a handkerchief embroidered with Courage. The city called it a miracle and billed Gilt as Civic Gratitude.

"Miracle," a sponsor sighed aloud, pressing Commend. Tin skimmed the press into Processing and called it participation.

The second case rose; the veil deepened. Another retune—a line of language nudged to look more fair—and again the daisy was offered with a ribbon that read gentlest. The elevator did not bring anyone down smiling with a changed life; it brought them down with praise.

Between cars, a Flying Monkey no one had invited skittered along the Promenade rail—small, brass, wings stamped clear:

EM-SER-17.

It snatched a scroll from a steward's tray—Service Acknowledged—and “accidentally” dropped it into the Switchways where tourists could walk and players could not.

“Witchlight mischief,” the steward chuckled, delighted to have an excuse laid out like a prop. “We do apologize.”

Kindness applied: Narrative Reassurance (External Agitation)

Wren watched where the scroll fell, marked the angle, the seam in the rail, the habit of a glove smoothing nothing flat.

“Do we try to serve him?” Tamsin breathed from the shadow of a pillar, voice a draft.
“Through his own statue?”

“Tonight?” Wren said. “We watch the lie stand up on its hind legs and bow.”

Across the rope, Calder stood two sections behind Wren's track, collar opals dull, Gilt thin. The sponsor board called him Community Favorite (Sleeper) again and patted itself for its taste.

The elevator descended empty except for perfume and a fresh box of praise. A steward turned to the players with a smile built of white porcelain and math.

“Be brave,” she said. “The Wizard hears.”

The Lion's blindfold gleamed. The Tin behind the face tapped the beat. Dorothy tipped more Time Stewardship off unlucky dockets to keep the night moving.

Wren kept her hands still and her smile pleasant. Inside her palm, her fingers traced the angle of the monkey's drop.

Chapter Twenty-Four — Grand Refresh (Posted)

Pre-dawn arrived already decided.

Placards bloomed on every gate and arch like flowers that had learned to write:

JUSTICE RESTORED: Grand Refresh (Citywide)

Kindness applied: Safety Retuning — For Your Own Good

Notes: Seams healed; rhythms recalibrated; courtesy thresholds clarified

The shine spiral Wren had left in Standing Stones now hummed half a tone higher; stepping there sang off-key. The stitch-gloss in Switchways had migrated two tiles right and reversed its polish. The Paper Gardens hives now required a double-wing to open the exact slit she'd used; the Delay Finch learned a new song.

At the Participation Gardens, stewards unveiled sealed chutes and new, slimmer Sprite tins engraved with SAFETY FIRST. Their sugar fed a reservoir one room further from the odds motor.

The false-lock gap on Care Bonds remained—millimeter narrower, still hungry for a red wedge if you had one.

Headmistress Porcelain convened the students beneath the motto. She pinned a green sash on Wren's shoulder:

LESSON PATHWAY — PLACED FOR YOUR OWN GOOD.

“Student safety is our highest kindness,” Porcelain said, and meant it, in that sincere way that turns steel into etiquette. “The machine now resists decorative flourishes.”

Tin’s avatar arrived on schedule, chest metronome full of health.

Justice restored: Audit Deepened (Miss Meadow)

Kindness applied: Supportive Monitoring — Escalated

The Lion’s blindfold washed the city red then softened: WITCHLIGHT Advisory MED → LOW. A little brass plate with EM-SER-17 stamped crisp made a polite circuit over the Promenade like a saint on a string, just in case anyone needed an explanation they could clap for.

At noon, ribbon memos explained the new labels:

- Composure Coaching now automatically “bundled” with Community Elegance (two fees, one word).
- Time Stewardship expanded to include Queue Harmony (Dorothy trimmed minutes faster).
- Civic Processing rebranded as Participation Pride (Tin skimmed with a smile).
- Helper Malfunction glossary entry updated to Moment of Overcare.

Tamsin slid beside Wren at the colonnade rail, eyes on the placards, expression boring and safe.

“They healed it two tiles over,” she murmured.

“I know,” Wren said.

“They moved the sugar room,” Tamsin added.

“I know.”

“They didn’t find your Bond gap.”

“They will,” Wren said. “Later.”

Tamsin’s fingers barely touched Wren’s sleeve. “What now?”

“Same as always,” Wren said. “Look where polish ends.”

Porcelain approached the rail with the Finch-feed glow still soft around her. “Lesson tonight,” she told Wren in a voice that could have been concern if it hadn’t been choreography. “Run Gate One again so your body learns the safer rhythm.”

Wren’s smile hid a blade; the Tone Bit purred. “Of course,” she said, and the Audit ribbon added a tassel.

The city set out its evening kindness. The Curtain Promenade glittered. The Wizard took his place behind the lion’s eyes. The odds reset; the bells tuned.

And the map that wasn’t a map folded itself a different way in Wren’s head. She adjusted breath to beat, seam to seam, grief to blade.

Chapter Twenty-Five — The Lovely Lie

Night again. Gate One again.

The Threshold of Courtesies relit, bells bright and tired of hearing what they required. The Dorothy tower held her hourglass at an angle that promised benevolence; the Lion played at piety with a whistle that called itself courage; Tin tapped time into ledgers named Grace and Pride and Processing and smiled like math.

Players took their marks. Calder staggered two sections behind Wren, still Community Favorite (Sleeper), still one breath from broke. The sponsor tiers wore hunger like jewelry.

Wren tightened the Grace Weights, snugged the Tone Bit so it would only sting when she wanted it to, and checked the Care Bond clasp with a thumb—the gap still there, the wedge still thin.

From above, Tamsin watched the new sugar rooms with eyes that looked at nothing. One palm rested on the console as if it were marble deciding to be cool.

The Wizard's voice drifted down from the lion's mouth—ritual cadence, ritual vowels, words that meant listening without doing it.

“Begin,” Gale sang, Mercy Bowl bright.

Wren stepped into the bells with the smile they'd taught her, exactly one tooth wrong to please them more later for “self-correction.” The bells rang virtue; Tin skimmed. She said thank you at the first altar in a tone the Tone Bit adored while her meaning slipped under the floor into a place that might, someday, ring.

At the far end of the ring, the Contributors' Elevator rose, veil lush as a lie. The city tilted its face to be absolved.

The Witchlight Advisory wavered low, then lower—Westreach blamed for a breeze. A small brass plate with EM-SER-17 in saintly orbit winked and passed.

Wren pressed her palm to the scripted apology post and gave the stone the exact sentiment it wanted in a voice full of pleasant.

“I'm sorry you are worried,” she said.

The post glowed; the bells applauded; Dorothy shaved Time for Harmony; Tin re-labeled fees into Pride; Lion blew velvet.

Above, donors ascended to be heard. Inside the head, a man moved language two words to the left and called it mercy.

Wren did not look up. She looked where polish ended.

The night pressed in, beautiful and hungry. The city sighed, grateful to itself. The mapless map in Wren's mind turned one last fold and showed a blank where the end should be.

Good, she thought.

She reached the Gate's lip and didn't hurry. She took the blade she kept under her manners and said—pleasant as satin over steel—

“I won't beat you.”

Another step—bells, praise, fees, sugar, fog.

“I'll learn where you end.”

The Lion's whistle rose; the city's collars bloomed Courage Coaching so the audience could feel brave about the shiver that went through them.

Hard cut to black on the whistle:

Begin.