

Unsquared - Sydney, Year 4, NSW

The vastness of the ocean amplified Raven's melancholy. At the horizon, the foamy crest of the ocean's waves morphed into streaky black clouds that contrasted the caramel sunset as if a knife had slashed Mother Nature's canvas. Above Raven loomed mourning palm trees that solemnly shook their leafy heads. In front, the ocean receded, duly and dully producing new layers of sand and shells along a perfectly straight shoreline that formed one side of a square island.

This coastline looks fake, Raven pondered sceptically, *shouldn't it be craggy?* She had become increasingly wary of the island's seeming perfection.

"What are you doing out here in the dark, my dear?" The wind carried Mrs. Sadler's gentle voice all the way from the top of the cliffs.

Stephanie Sadler was a co-founder and the current Director of Square Island, commonly known as "the Square." She was a beloved figure on the Square, having moulded kids into well-rounded high achievers for more than four decades.

"Just thinking," Raven replied as Mrs. Sadler descended. She looked at Raven with a perpetual smile that was edged into an age-worn hard-as-rock face. Her white hair, straight as a pencil, fringed her eyebrows, accentuating her steely-blue eyes.

"Well, to think is to be, my dear, but maybe you can do so somewhere warmer? Let's walk back together, rehearsals are about to start."

It was the eve of Open Day – that one day each year when parents could visit, and new students arrived. They would be treated to a perfectly orchestrated day of sports, games, music, and dance. Raven's best friend, Charlie, would compete in the main swimming event, a four-kilometre race to and from the coral reef. The water was safe and shallow up to the reef and then dropped steeply. Folklore had it that white sharks were circling the ocean's bottom just past the reef. Raven would perform in the opening show, a grand spectacle of music and dance. She played no instrument but her gift as a ballerina had earned her the Square's most prestigious symbol – a golden square emblem embroidered with a unicorn made of delicate blue and white threads. It was a public secret that her dance teacher, Ms Caperbell, had pushed for this accolade. She considered Raven her protege.

"Don't worry about tonight's rehearsal," Ms Caperbell told Raven, "Just shine like a diamond tomorrow."

Raven happily obliged as she was tired. On her way to her room, she reminisced about her first Open Day. It was only three years ago when she and her parents first set foot on the Square. It must have been a splendid day – dancers executing complex arrays of twirls and

jumps on stage, delightful music filling the auditorium, speeches, a tour. But the details seemed to have faded into oblivion; Raven couldn't remember much at all.

How odd, she thought. The wary undertow took hold of her again.

When she turned the corner, the sound of a brawl startled Raven.

"You're a hypocrite," Nick shouted as he knocked Harry out with a sucker punch.

Both wore an iridescent black square emblem, also known as the "badge of shame." In the brilliant moonlight reflected by the windowpanes, Raven noticed how a swath of blood from Harry's nose stained his badge with a red hue. Harry wailed in pain as Nick stood by helplessly, too embarrassed by what he had done.

Raven burst into Mrs. Sadler's office, cheeks fiery and crimson, perspiration dripping down her face.

"What's the matter, my dear?" asked Mrs Sadler.

"Harry and Nick... fighting," Raven stammered, catching her breath, "Harry's nose is bleeding... it... it might be broken."

Mrs. Sadler, disgusted by the thought of the two boys fighting, was pleased with Raven's forthcoming.

"You are the Square's poster child, my dear," Mrs. Sadler said fondly, "leave it to me and go to sleep, I'll ask Mr. Chancer to help bring the boys to the peace room."

Raven had heard of the peace room. Two classmates were sent there just last week, but neither could remember anything about it. Odder still, they couldn't remember why they were sent there. (Everyone knew they were caught at the Rock, the black boulder South of campus that is off limits to students.)

Raven had a change of heart. She hid in one of the building's niches and waited patiently until Mrs. Sadler and Mr. Chancer came out. They were pushing wheelchairs carrying Nick and Harry, who appeared fast asleep. Raven followed them stealthily as they headed to the Rock where Mr. Chancer moved aside several strings of leafy vines to uncover a panel on which he punched a five-digit code.

Raven listened intently to the different tones to decipher the code. *12544, a square, of course*, Raven thought. She waited a couple of minutes before she entered.

"This latest technology is really something Stephanie." Raven, hiding at the bottom of the stairs, could overhear Mr. Chancer boasting. "We can implement any skill by rewiring their

neural network... French, math, chess, fencing, you name it... Or tame their rowdiness as we'll do for these two no goods. The beauty of this technology is that it leaves no trace, and students won't remember a thing."

Raven raised her head slightly to take a glimpse. Her mouth agape, she was frozen in shock.

Besides Nick and Harry there were dozens of others hooked up to machines. Their eyes open despite the bright lights, they looked like zombies. Washed with fear, Raven's mind started racing.

Is this why I have no memories... why kids who fought don't remember... never fight again... why everyone is perfect... am I even a ballerina? In a daze she climbed the stairs and ran away from the Rock as fast as she could.

Charlie didn't know what to think as he listened to Raven's account. It sounded surreal, it couldn't be. But the fear in Raven's voice convinced him she was telling the truth.

"We have to escape by swimming beyond the reef," Raven insisted, "my parents are here for Open Day, their yacht is anchored not too far off the coast."

The water was cold and choppy. Several times, Raven had to rest by floating on her back while Charlie towed her, using his hands to lift her head out of the water and his legs to push forward. The water darkened after they passed the reef, as did Raven's mood – were they swimming in the right direction, would fatigue cause them to drown, or would they be eaten by white sharks? She felt cold and tired, and her mind and body were ready to capitulate when Charlie exclaimed "there, a light!"

Energized, Charlie towed Raven one final time to let her float on her back as he swam them to safety with his powerful kicks. His hands covered her ears, blocking out the noise of the ocean's waves. Raven did not hear herself crying, warm tears silently rolled down her face into an infinite pool. The thought of reuniting with her parents filled her with overwhelming joy. She felt serene as she gazed at the sky through a film of tears. The blurry image reminded her of Van Gogh's *Starry Night*. At last, she felt at ease with the vastness of her surroundings.

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A ray of sunlight pierced through a narrow slit between the blinds and window frame straight into Raven's eyes. She woke up groggily and sat up in bed. An attractive lady with brown curly hair stood next to her.

"Welcome back to the land of the living, Raven," the lady said.

"Thank you, Mrs...?"

“I am Deborah Dasler, the Director of Diamond Island, do you not remember me?”

Raven tried but could not produce a memory of Mrs. Dasler nor could she remember much at all. Mrs. Dasler sensed Raven was in limbo. “Don’t worry my dear, you’re experiencing normal symptoms after a sunstroke,” she explained, “fortunately, your parents brought you here in time. A couple of days of rest in our peace room did marvels and you’ll be as right as rain for your upcoming violin performance.”

Raven spotted the beautiful Stradivarius resting in its case on the other side of the room.

“May I?”

Mrs. Dasler nodded.

Raven took the violin out of its case and walked to the window. Without a music sheet she needed a moment to reflect on Bach’s Partita No. 2 in D minor. She looked outside. A familiar looking boy stood in line to partake in a swimming contest to and from the coral reef.

“Mrs. Dasler, what’s beyond the reef?” Raven asked.

“The reef forms a circle with a hundred- mile radius capturing nothing but ocean,” Mrs. Dasler replied, “one quarter of the circle to the Northwest is Square Island, a twin organisation within the Polyutopia Group.”

Raven nodded without understanding. She closed her eyes as she played Bach’s Partita.

Flawlessly.