

THE CURE



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Chapter 1: Vince (I)

There was an awkward silence, as always in any first session. Partly due to the nature of the session itself; the level of trust it requires from the patients. Also because Dr. Alexander Leach had a habit of keeping silence, waiting, forcing his patients to speak first. He had convinced himself he did so, to have a head start in analyzing them, while keeping the upper hand. In all honesty though, he would have had to admit he had this habit because he'd rather enjoyed it. Either way, this wasn't a normal consultation and Vince wasn't a normal patient. This was an experiment, and Vince was a participant. This time, he already knew exactly what was wrong with the patient, at least from a psycho-analytic point of view. Nevertheless he played his usual game for dominance just the same. Perhaps he felt he had to break the pattern of expectation, or maybe it just flattered the witty doctor's ego. After just a few seconds, the inmate caught on to the doctor's intention and broke the silence with a question which would set the pace for the remainder of the session.

“Why d'you figure I should trust you?”

He was moving the wires hanging from his head back and forth, searching for a spot where they would no longer bother him. Questions, he knew, are an efficient and safe way to be defiant of somebody in a dominant position. He put the doctor on the spot immediately, forcing him to admit whether or not he thinks that Vince should trust him. At the same time he was letting the Doctor know he understood the purpose of his little game. He understood why he was waiting for him to speak first. By confronting in the form of a question, he didn't actually have to commit to the confrontation itself and give himself away by doing so. And finally, by bringing up trust, he pointed out the irony of a psychologist playing petty mind games. Vince likes to be in control. More than that; Vince needs it. Dr. Leach already knew all of this. It was all carefully explained in the preliminary screening report which his assistant Michael had prepared for him. Dr. Leach stared at the monitor. A second was more than enough for him to interpret the squiggly colored lines that would seem random to almost everybody else. He turned towards Vince, took a relaxed breath, and replied with matching casualty:

“You volunteered for the project, didn't you?”

Vince smirked and nodded his head at the equipment.

“That is your version of a lie-detector?”

This was Vince backing out from a failed confrontation; and launching a new one all at the same time. It was too early to reveal the true nature of the experiment. That could very easily complicate things. And thus Vince had won round one. Alex knew this was bound to come up sooner or later. He was glad he could get it cleared right away, even at the cost of his head start. Another awkward silence. This time around, Vince was the one deliberately remaining silent, forcing the Doctor to speak.

“Look; there's no point in hiding who you are. You think I don't already know what your brain looks like? You killed nine young girls, Vince.”

Vince smirked again and lifted his chin and a small grin was forming. As soon as he did, Dr. Leach understood why. Vince wasn't used to people keeping a first name basis when they talked to him about his dolls. They would normally lose somewhat of their composure, even add something theatrical. “*You murdered nine young girls, for God's sake.*” they would say. Or if they were brave; “*You slashed up nine innocent little girls, you fucking bastard.*” In Vince's mind, by breaking character, Dr. Leach had just confessed not to be different from any of the other psychologists that had visited him during the trial. What makes those cold, emotionally detached shrinks any different from us sociopaths. He took specific pleasure in pointing out that thought. He decided to push his victory even further. He inhaled quickly, as if he was getting ready to say something. Then he didn't, he froze briefly, as if to maul things over. Only to fall back into his previous relaxed and over-confident position. He released the breath he was holding and smiled gently at the good doctor, remaining perfectly silent. The smile was to make sure the doctor understood he never intended to say anything. If he weren't aware of that, it would spoil things for Vince. His eyes on the other hand, were telling a whole different story. Staring, clear blue, angel-eyes boasting. He had just beaten a professor, psychology teacher at Brown University, in a battle of wits in less than a minute. He was letting Alex know there was no need to add anything further to that. Dr. Leach wasn't quite as narcissistic as Vince, so he could admit defeat rather easily and move on. Yet, he decided not to. Instead he smiled back and retaliated.

“Trust? You want me to talk to you about trust? How do you even know what that word means if you can't ever feel any emotional connection to anyone? The only thing you can have that comes even remotely close to trust is predictability. How well you can read, anticipate and manipulate me.”

Even though Alex wanted to, he had problems keeping eye-contact. He started to wonder why, for a second. Then the thought got lost, buried under the ongoing rant.

“That's what trust means to you, right? Then again, you don't really care about trust in the first place, do you Vince? You know that even if I'd speak on your behalf to a parole board, there's no amount of science that will ever

get you out of here. No, unlike the others, you didn't volunteer for the chance of early probation. You're simply bored of replying to your fan-mail. Just like you're bored of pretty much everything else in your mundane emotionless life." Vince just sat there the whole time, apparently unmoved by Alex's verbal attack; which by the looks of it was not stopping just yet.

"I can't even begin to imagine how that must be like; how it's like not to feel anything at all most of the time. As dry as the desert, so uneventful. Yet in this ever so short conversation, you've managed to smirk twice already. You're amused, and that by itself is an amazing accomplishment. So you'll probably continue with these sessions because you don't have anything better to look forward to."

Alex stole a quick glance to analyze the monitor; it stood in shrill contrast to Vince's calm demeanor.

"But then, you'll have to agree to my conditions. And among those conditions is that you'll have to be more cooperative instead of playing little mind games. You must know there are plenty of volunteers who do have an honest chance at parole and who are more than willing to cooperate with me in return for my help."

Dr. Leach knew that retaliating like this was a long shot. Off course Vince was a long shot to begin with, impossible to work with. He knew from the start he'd have much more success with the young sociopaths, one-time offenders who still deluded themselves in thinking they're perfectly normal just like the rest of us. Yet for some intuitive feeling, beyond Dr. Leach's conscious and rational understanding, he really wanted Vince in the experiment. Vince jumped up briskly, snapping some of the wires off his smoothly shaved, bald head. The guard rushed towards the glass door in half a panic, but then calmed and slowed down. Vince his body-language had suddenly become calm again while he casually removed the remainder of the equipment.

"Well, Good luck with them Doctor."

He turned towards the door and nodded with a resentful grin at the guard on the other side, suggesting him to open it.

A few seconds later, Michael entered the room. Even though he had followed the session through a one-way mirror from the other room; he still found it sensible to ask just what the hell had exactly happened here. What he was really saying was that he had told him so; that Vince had just proven to be a bad idea after all. Of course, understanding his role as an assistant he didn't really dare to say that out front; hence his more subtle reminder. Dr. Leach, rather than actually replying to either the question or the subtext, immediately reminded Michael of his position.

"Yes, Michael. Could you prep the room for the next session? I'm going to the warden's lounge for my afternoon prayer."

Michael looked at him in much the same way that people usually look at him when he arrogantly ignores a question. Dr. Leach, recognizing the look, replied with a warm gentle smile and added:

"I won't be long."

By the time Dr. Leach returned, Michael no longer desired to challenge him. As if to demonstrate this, he commented on what a rough start Vince had given them. Them; as in a team.

"Oh that's nothing."

He paused for a small chuckle.

"You should have seen the meetings with the head of the university and the head wardens of the institutions who're participating. It was hell getting the green light for the project. Vince is a walk in the park compared to that."

The current view on anti-social personality disorder; sociopathy and psychopathy; is that it is simply incurable. So to pitch an experiment as a quest for a cure is rather challenging. Dr. Alex Leach was convinced, based on religious grounds that it must be curable. He believed that people were put on earth as a test, and that each person has the choice to be either good or bad. In his mind, this translated to even a sociopath having the ability to change his ways. When he converted to Islam, he was still a student himself at brown, in his second year of psychology. His new-found faith affected his views of pretty much everything in this world. But his bias on sociopaths was even more fundamental. It was rooted in the past, rooted in the people he has loved in the past, and rooted in his need to believe that those people were not completely beyond hope. Of course, neither his personal beliefs nor his personal experience held any merit to either the wardens or the president of brown university. They hadn't lived through his experiences and they certainly didn't share his beliefs. Knowing this, Dr. Leach had approached the matter from a more scientifically plausible angle. This was not so hard to do. After all, neither the president of the university nor the warden could match his knowledge in psycho-analysis.

Michael was employed on a need-to know basis. Although he understood the controversial nature of the experiment well enough, he had not yet had an opportunity to discuss the finer details with the professor. Alex only stayed around as much as absolutely necessary, and in the brief moments that he had been around, he had deflected any attempts at

discussing the finer details. Nevertheless, this was a once in a lifetime opportunity for Michael. His one shot to enter the big league. That's why he didn't like taking any risks on wild cannons like Vince. Dr. Leach on the other hand would land well on his feet even if this project was a total failure, so he didn't mind indulging his curiosity and instincts.

"Look Michael, you shouldn't worry, worst case scenario we just have one less subject to collect data from. This doesn't affect the experiment."

Alex took a second to check if Michael was agreeing; and then added:

"So, who's our fourth for today?"

Chapter 2: Jayden (I)

Jayden was a lot more cooperative. It took him almost less than a second to break Dr. Leach's silence.

"So, what's the plan doc?"

Since Jayden seemed much more cooperative than Vince; Dr. Leach took a totally different approach and told him that they would just be having regular psycho-analytic session, but then with the added equipment merely to get faster results. As he explained this, Dr. Leach broke eye contact every few seconds to look at his monitor. A rather pointless effort. He didn't really need the machinery to see that Jayden was terribly uncomfortable with the idea of revealing the deepest parts of his psyche.

"Then what?"

Jayden tapped his fingers on his leg in a playful and rhythmic sequence. In response Alex leaned back in his chair.

"Have you ever felt like you were different from everybody else?"

The monitor told Alex what kind of explosion these words had set off in Jayden's head. After a second or so, the shock wore off, and in cue, Jayden answered.

"I guess in a way; we're all snowflakes and such, right? Yeah, well that don't count for nothing on the streets."

The doctor replied lowered the pitch in his voice just a bit.

"Look, there's not much point in avoiding me Jayden, that's why I've got the monitor. I already know you're different, I just wanted you to know that I know, so we could talk about it openly."

Another explosion, this time a lot more activity in areas correlated to fear and threat as well. And again, Jayden felt reluctant to expose himself.

"Look I dunno about no fancy brain-scans and such, for all I know you're just playing me. But I guess you have your mind made up already either way, so whatever man."

The session continued like this for about an hour, with Dr. Leach giving what's close to a monologue. Jayden occasionally replied something vague that neither outed him, nor appeared all too uncooperative at the same time. Nothing ground-breaking, but as far as first sessions go, Alex was pleased with the dynamic between them.

"At least this one didn't walk out on us." Michael wore a big smile, so his intention wouldn't be misunderstood. His first idea was actually to say: "walk out on you". But he was too submissive in nature for such a harsh confrontation, even if it were in the form of a casual joke. Again Alex wasn't in the mood for indulging him.

"Would you mind cleaning up the equipment by yourself, I have a six 'o'clock with my lawyer." Oh that's right, the divorce. Michael felt guilty for having completely forgotten about that. Perhaps that explained Alexander's recent behavior. He felt compelled to say something to show that he cared. Yet it felt somewhat inappropriate to inquire only now that he brought it up. They had spent most of the day together without Michael asking. It would make the question seem forced by social rules rather than out of genuine care. Pressed for a response and panicky from not really knowing how to handle the situation Michael finally asked:

"How's she hanging on?"

Alex stared for a second, and then coldly answered he had better asked her that.

"Oh, I'm sorry, I... I didn't mean to-"

Now Alex started to feel a bit guilty for lashing out. Again.

"It's quite alright Michael, I just, I don't like discussing my private life with colleagues."

Of course Michael was perfectly aware that they were both psychologists by profession, but to hear Alex refer to him as colleague was the highlight of his day.

"Don't you worry about a thing Alex, I'll take care of everything here, you've got bigger fish to fry, right?"

Alex nodded with a smile that was kind of like goodbye, and left without saying anything else.

Chapter 3: Maysa' (I)

Traffic was particularly smooth that evening so Alex arrived 17 minutes early. During most of those 1023 seconds, he was thinking about how his body language should be. Which position is most neutral, neither condescending nor weak. Whether he should just say hi, or ask her how she's doing as well. Since she was late, this mental exercise was extended for another 1268 seconds, albeit with increasing stress and unease. When she finally got there, before he could even decide on how to act, she walked straight passed him towards the conference room, without even attempting to make eye-contact. Her lawyer paused briefly for a quick smile, but then quickly caught up following her. Alex's lawyer saw the whole parade from behind his desk in his glass-walled office. He entered the hall and asked Alex whether he was ready. Alex, not seeing the point in replying, just stood up and entered the conference room as well. Most of the conversation was between Alex his lawyer and Maysa'. With Maysa's lawyer occasionally nodding to confirm when some technical law was explained. Alex himself hardly spoke a word. Even when asked a direct question; a simple 'yes' or 'no' was the maximum he managed to push through his swollen throat. He was completely thrown of guard again. She was using that tone of voice. That intoxicating charismatic voice. Full of life. That sweet and playful voice which made almost any man around fall instantly in love with her. No, it was more than just a voice. It went accompanied with a certain body language and vibe. Something Alex didn't even fully comprehend. It was a bit similar to those light-antennas that some predator fish have in front of them to lure their meals.

She always used that way of speaking when they first met. She never used again after their first week of marriage. Sure, he still heard it on plenty occasions, but never again when she was addressing him. She would use it ordering her meal at a restaurant, talking to her relatives, talking to a stranger on the street, talking to Alex his family, or buying a loaf of bread. And every time he heard it, he would hope that somehow her mood would have changed. He would think she was full of life again. An illusion she always burst into pieces seconds later. Decimating his hope by asking something in that cold and demanding way again. And it broke his heart. Every single time. And there she was. Using that tone again, enchanting his lawyer. The intoxicated prick barely understood what was happening. After most was settled and discussed, still drugged by her enthusiasm he asked Alex in an over-excited tone whether he agreed to those terms. Alex stared at him with his gaze focused on infinity. He continued staring several seconds, waiting for his lawyer to understand why. Soon enough as the awkwardness of the situation crept in and the inappropriateness of his excitement dawned on him; he changed his composure and cleared his throat.

“So Alex, what do you think?”

Alex thought a lot of things, but none of it was relevant here, so instead he just said:

“Sure.”, and nodded his head.

It was almost midnight when Alex heard his phone ringing. He had been so emotionally drained from crying in despair that he had fallen asleep on his sofa shortly after arriving home. Now the phone persisted in ringing. Still half asleep he answered it with nothing more than a dry yes.

“I'm sorry for calling so late Alex,”

An apology at least. He seemed to recognize the female voice but couldn't quite associate a face to it yet.

“I hope I didn't wake you,”

His brain started to picture his mother-in-law. Or rather, his ex-mother-in-law. No, his soon-to-be-ex-mother-in-law. Alex felt pride in finding the correct term for her in his mind. As she continued, the panicky undertone in her voice became more obvious. He forgot about terminology and decided to focus on the call.

“What is it?”

“It's Abdul-Ghaffar. He, he tried to kill himself.”

It was in such occasions that Alex's autism was most visible. Even though as a psychologist he was perfectly capable of knowing which words Sarah needed to hear, he didn't say them. Not being at his job, Sarah not being his patient, his mind simply didn't think of what she needed to hear. He didn't pick up on such things by default. And so, he replied:

“Now, why would he go and do that?”

It wasn't because of the element of surprise; neither was it the shock of somebody he supposedly ought to have an emotional attachment to attempting suicide. None of these caused Alex to repugnantly expose his self-absorbed nature. In fact whatever emotional attachment he had to his soon-to-be-ex-brother-in-law was negligible. He partly blamed him for his problems with Maysa'. The very same problems with Maysa' he had been crying about all evening, which he was so exhausted from. So exhausted that he yearned for sleep. Sleep that now was being disturbed by this would-be tragedy. The real tragedy, as far as Alex was concerned, was that he had only tried.

No, the real reason for this blunt reply, was merely that Alex was again engulfed in his passion for finding out how the world works. It was merely because the opportunity had risen to ask why, that he had done so rather than comforting a distressed mother. Sarah, forgiving as she is, ignored his bluntness and continued her side of the conversation.

“Vicodins and Vodka. Luckily I came back home during lunch to pick up my day-planner. Just to think if I hadn't forgotten it.”

She paused, allowing Alex room for a response. He didn't.

“Look, I know you two don't always get along. And I know it might be a bit awkward with the divorce and all.”

“Yes...?”

“But I was wondering, I mean, You're a-”

“You want me to go talk to him?”

“I don't know what to say to him Alex; he has emotionally shut me out years ago.”

She took another pause.

“Where can I find him?”

“You're too kind Alex, honestly I don't know why Maysa' has given up on you.”

For all her faults, he had to admit she always knew exactly what to say to make him feel better, regardless of how clumsy a way she did say so.

Chapter 4: Mike (I)

Mike was not what you expect from a sociopath. At least not if your idea of a sociopath is restricted to what Hollywood paints it out to be. He had neither the physical build, nor the mental inclination to be a cold-blooded-killer. The only major crime he had ever committed was tax fraud. What most people fail to understand, is that being a sociopath has nothing to do with blood lust and violence or any other inclination towards criminal behavior. It has, instead, everything to do with a complete lack of emotional connections to others and the empathy it should invoke. Many sociopaths do inhumane things all day which are at the same time perfectly legal. Mike from marketing, was exactly such a social sniper. And if it were not for his extreme self-love and vanity that lead him to believe he could have gotten away with it; he wouldn't even have chanced that tax-fraud. And thus wouldn't have found himself incarcerated as a result of such self-delusion. For that Alex had to be thankful, it had netted him another fine specimen. As usual Alex was waiting, hiding behind silence. A silence Mike cared little for.

“So, what's the deal here?”

Straight to the point, neutral. Mike decided to play the businessman for a while. Gotta play it safe.

“I'm sorry?”

“The deal, the angle. What can I do you for. What will it take for early release?”

He couldn't get any straighter to the point than that.

“Oh that. Don't you worry about that, you don't have to do anything other than cooperating with me, and I'll be glad to help you.”

“Come on pal, no need for that, keep me in the loop.”

As easy as that, the businessman had changed into a playful comrade. He didn't meet up to expectations though. Surely Doctor Alexander noticed the change in body-language, tone-of-voice and sociolinguistics. But he hardly noticed anything out of the ordinary on the monitor. As if the change-over was entirely subconscious, much like a blind chameleon wouldn't be aware of his change of camouflage. The only thing he could see, was that Mike was obviously annoyed. Most likely he wasn't used to work on a need to know basis.

“Well, what do you know about anti-social personality disorders?”

Mike started laughing heartily, he had changed to Mike the cocky jerk.

“Well perhaps I don't know all the technical terms and theories. But I do realize I'm different, if that's what you're getting at.”

Alex was surprised by Mike's openness. Not at all cocky, Mike was changing roles so quickly it was hard keeping up and reading through the overload of useless information. Mike probably thrived on this confusion, always one step ahead of whoever he was playing with.

“Interesting Mike. I surely appreciate your honesty. So well I guess I'll have to reciprocate. The purpose of my experiment, is to find a treatment against the anti-social personalit-”

“Ok, just so we're clear. I only need to cooperate; I don't actually need to be cured to get your help out of here, right?”

Almost optimistic, but then again, there must be an unexpected hurdle somewhere. It can't be this easy.

“Yes Mike. If the experiment fails, but you did your best regardless; I'll still keep my end of the deal. I can't say I'll be as convincing to a jury without successful results, but I'll still try.”
Somehow this amused Mike.

“However, I couldn't help notice some resentment on my monitor when you said 'cured'. Wouldn't you want to be cured?”

“No, not at all. I like who I am, and my 'disorder' is part of that. In fact, I love who I am. What you consider a disorder, I consider a blessing. I look at myself and I look at the world. And I can't help but feeling I'm perfectly equipped for it. We have what it takes. We're adapted. We're the next step in evolution.”

There was Mr. cocky again. Alex tried hard not to show his resentment. Here hid his hideous hurdle. Yet at the same time he could recognize some logic behind his arguments. This perhaps frustrated him even more.

“I understand your sentiment Mike. And certainly any characteristic that a human being has, will always have its benefits and its disadvantages. Weighing them out isn't always easy. Perhaps I could point out some disadvantages you might have missed, which may persuade you after all?”

Mike seemed to be enjoying himself. The intellectual debate brought up an element of competition, something Mike never walked away from. And the possibility of teaching an expert in the field how the cuckoo crumbles, surely felt promising.

“Take your best shot.”

He had a taunting way about him, contrasted by a friendly smile, keeping the atmosphere light and playful. He dared not risk scaring the respectable Doctor away. Not this soon either way. Of course, such subtleties rarely escaped Alex during his work. They would escape him during any other activity, but not while focused on it. He smiled as well, signaling he accepted the challenge without grudge, and made ready to take his best shot. The best, he thought, was the personal level; since Mike wouldn't care about anybody else.

“Well it seems to me Mike, that you love yourself more intensely than anyone else will ever love you; and more intensely than you will ever love anyone else. That looks like a very frustrating and painful situation to be in. You'll never have a profound and open relationship with anyone. Nobody will ever accept you for who you truly are. I'm sure you resent that.”

The atmosphere was no longer light, Mike frowned for a second and his response was rather snappy.

“I had plenty of relationships, and every single one of them adored-”

Alex cut in before he could go any further.

“But did they truly know the real you? Did you fool them, did you play them and manipulate them?”

“What if I did? Woman clearly like that, feel attracted to people like me. They must know I manipulate them, at least on some level. If they accept it, makes them fair game, right?”

“Well that surely is debatable, but even so, do they ever get to see the real you? Wouldn't they run away in fear if they knew how emotionally detached you are. Wouldn't they run away if they understood just how you see them?”

“How do I see them then?”

“Normal people, see themselves as an extension of their society, a link in the chain, another peer. You on the other hand, see society as an extension to yourself. Every relation is toward a purpose. You tolerate them for their usefulness.”

Mike's left foot started shaking up and down in a nervous twitch. It seemed meaningless, but the monitor claimed he was furious. Exploding would only signal loss. I can't lose, have to keep playing.

“True as that may be, aren't all human selfish? Don't all humans have a hidden agenda whenever they do something good for others?”

“Well, Albert Ellis said altruism exist on only two conditions. If there is a hidden selfish agenda, or if one has a dangerously low self-esteem-”

Mike cut in rather violently. There was a small tremor in his voice.

“Is that your cure? Should we all be self-destructive for the greater good of your important 'social' feelings?”

Surely you see the flaw in that. At least us sociopaths aren't hypocritical about being selfish. The only reason we hide our nature, like you said, those judgmental hypocritical idiots would run away.”

Repugnant. The only word ready to jump through Alex lips. He pursed them tight lest it should escape. It took a second to recover.

“Having multiple angles and motives isn't hypocrite. Having personal gain doesn't make altruism less good. Say that, you're right about evolution, and some thousand years from now, we would live in a world of only sociopaths. How would your relations then be? Sure sociopaths manage to co-exist as long as there is a mutual gain. But what kind of relationship would you have, if each step along the road you have to worry about being dropped like a bag of bricks because you've become somewhat of a burden.”

Mike shifted to another position; his foot was no longer twitching. Clearly Doctor Alexander had absolutely no insight into his point of view.

“I'd welcome such an utopia, at least life wouldn't be as dull, and I wouldn't have to hide in the shadows.”

“Sure you wouldn't hide, but you'd be less successful as well. As it is now, you have an advantage over the majority, in you cut-throat utopia you might no longer be the master-manipulator, but only second-rate.”

“It's funny how you admit my condition as an advantage, yet insist on it being a disorder.”

This was useless; he was running away from the obvious. Perhaps he was much too occupied with winning his games for him to see the flaws in his arguments. Have to find another way.

“Well, that's a matter of personal opinion I guess. I understand your point of view Mike. But this dullness, it wouldn't go away. I know that right now competition and predator games are the only source of entertainment in a dull gray existence, so I can understand how you feel about the idea of an anti-social humanity. But what if it disappoints, what if as usual, the fantasy is more promising and exiting than reality?”

Again Mike felt like he could score a goal and point out the bleeding-throat obvious.

“Either way, it won't happen in my life-time, so why should I care about the course of humanity. You do know I have no emotional attachment to humanity once-so-ever right?”

Alex looked back and forth from his monitor to his taunting subject. He felt exhausted. Every bone in his body shouted out that Mike was wrong; he just couldn't put those feelings into words. At least, no words that Mike would accept either way.

Chapter 5: Abdul-Ghaffar (I)

Abdul-Ghaffar was lying motionlessly on his hospital bed, staring outside the window. The twist in his neck made his position seem unnatural. As if he had chosen it purposely, away from the door, determined to show disinterest in anybody who dares venture through it. Anticipating being harassed. Nurses, doctors, family and relatives. Imagining how they would be demanding justifications, rather than inquiring for clarifications. Thinking of what specific questions they might ask, and how to defy them. Until he got sidetracked by those dreadful birds nesting in the tree outside his window. Did they put him in this room purposely? As if the freaking scenery was all it took to make him happy again. Idiots.

“Enjoying the scenery I take it?”

He recognized the voice, but turned to confirm nevertheless. So much for his resolution.

“What are you doing here?”

“I understand you don't want me here, and quite frankly I don't want to be here either.”

Abdul-Ghaffar was caught off guard by his honesty, but remained stoic and determined on hostility.

“Yeah, kick a brother while he's down, nice going Alex...”

“I'm just being honest, I don't expect you to lie or pretend to me either. I'm only here offering an opportunity to tell me whatever you want without strings attached.

The first response in body language. He leaned back in his bed and sighed.

“Is that so?”

“Think about it, I mean nothing to you and you mean nothing to me. There's no risk of disappointment. Just an opportunity to clear your heart, without having to compromise or damage a relationship with somebody that you care about.”

Abdul-Ghaffar his head was all over the place. Was Alex to be trusted? Why did he want to help? Or could he even help him? And did he want his help? Why would Alex think that he was worried about disappointing someone? And was he right? He wanted to ask him all off these things at once.

“Why?”

“Because I think you need it, and I can offer it. I could just walk away. I want to walk away, and leave you rot here, but I guess I'm not that kind of guy.”

“So are you planning to start make me happy anytime soon?”

Sarcasm drooled out of his mouth during that response. Alex didn't bother with being annoyed, and just cut to the chase.

“I know what you did to your sister.”

Abdul-Ghaffar seemed startled. Obviously it would make sense that Maysa' had told him sometime during their marriage. He had always figured that it was why Alex disliked him. Yet at the same time he had pushed the memory way back in a dusty corridor of his mental labyrinth. When Alex took him there, it felt like waking up from a long slumber. He had been stuck in a daydreaming for years, and now reality was bursting through. He thought of saying

something, but couldn't decide which way to go. So eventually he ended up waiting for what Alex was going to say next. Pushed by his silence, Alex continued.

“The only way you can go on with your life, the only way you can live with what you have done, is by forgiving yourself.”

Somehow, those words just hit home. Of course he knew that this was a part of his issues. Of course he knew the reason he hated himself. He knew that he had mentally scarred his sister while he was still a teenager. But to forgive himself was something he hadn't ever even considered. Let alone that somebody who doesn't even like him, like Alex, would want him to forgive himself. He burst out in tears. Through his sobbing he managed to speak a broken up sentence.

“Why would I, what's the point?”

Alex his eyebrows curled down and his voice seemed heavier due to its softness.

“Well obviously you'd be able to live your life. And consider the opposite: why wouldn't you? What's the purpose of keeping yourself hostage by your past?”

That little annoying voice inside Abdul-Ghaffar's head had a field-day. The purpose? How could I forgive myself and still be a good person? He shook his head while thinking, without even realizing it. Alex made an educated guess, and responded.

“You can be a good person. All you have to do is start doing the right things. And the only thing that's keeping you is that you're not willing to forgive your past transgressions.”

Easier said than done. Like this is something one can just forgive himself for and move on. This isn't just spilled milk.

“How? I mean, seriously?”

“You give up all hope of changing the past. It is what it is. You learn from it and move on.”

Abdul-Ghaffar was suddenly fascinated by the tree outside of his window again. Then he looked back and asked;

“Alex, you're a Muslim right?”

It was an obvious question. He felt tempted to respond with irony. Instead he closed his eyes briefly while he nodded, then waited patiently for the follow-up.

“I mean, not just by name like my father. You really believe in it, right?”

A second nod, this one a bit humbler. Alex never liked being praised for the strength of his faith.

“You think if there is a God, he'd forgive me?”

“You know, that Al-Ghaffar is one of the names of God right? You should look up the meaning of that. There are two things people do, which show they don't understand God. They underestimate God, and feel safe against his plans, feel certain of their place in paradise. Or they underestimate his ability to forgive, by feeling certain of their place in Hell. Either way stops them from being a better person. Don't judge yourself; it's not your place to do so. Just try to be the best you can be.”

The voice in Abdul-Ghaffar's head made a joke about joining the army. Off course he didn't dare repeat it out loud. Fighting the urge to laugh; he pretended to be burrowed in thought. Alex thought it'd be best not to over-do it, and made an excuse to leave. Not that he felt he needed one; he was done here after all.

Chapter 6: Adham (I)

Alex despised sociopaths on a professional level mostly. He understood their *Modus operandi*; had witnessed their destructive paths, and on many occasions had to glue together the pieces of a shattered soul one of them had left behind. In that sense he saw them as his antagonists in the world. More than enough grounds to incite a discriminatory repulsion against them. But none of that was personal, only an infinitesimally small percentage of the sociopaths in this world had wronged him personally. Therefor he usually managed to hide his hatred. Not for Adham though. He had been anxious and stressed the whole day leading up to his consult. It wasn't unusual for sociopaths to be religious, zealous even. But Alex couldn't imagine anything worse than him. A manipulating make-belief-Muslim. Preying on the praying. War-mongering by wickedly warping the weak-minded. Adham was a grim mockery of everything Alex stood for. Not only had he gotten a few of his followers so far to blow themselves up killing a total of 39 innocent bystanders in the process. He had convinced them it was a good thing to do, the right thing to do. He had strengthened popular belief that Islam was a threat to society, and had derived great pleasure in all of it. Alex had no idea on how to proceed here. This time around, the silence signaling the start of the session was not mere play, much rather a lack of cue-cards.

Adham looked at Alex's beard. It's wasn't one of those short-trimmed fashion statements that some kafirs¹ usually sport. Then again, it wasn't the full-length, wild beard either. It was neatly kept, curly and full, but not long. After a few second Adham was bored with the silence; and asked in a sort of contemptuous voice:

“So you're a Muslim?”

Normally the recognition of mutual faith inspires friendliness amongst Muslims, even if they are complete strangers. But the condescendence in his question would have caused shame in the hearts of most Muslims by peer pressure. When Alex responded emotionless and neutral, insisting a certain distance, he actually said allot more than just his words;

“Alhamdulillah²”

“Oh, Adham commented, you're one of them.”

Alex leaned back, smiling resentfully, showing he wasn't intimidated by him questioning his faith. Adham decided to turn it up a notch.

“You sell your faith so lightly, and buy a place in hell.”

Time to step into the game and turn the tables.

“You know what I believe Adham; I believe that you wouldn't know what faith is if it stared you right in the face. How could you understand it, with a heart darker than night and an empty hole where you soul ought to be. Munafiqun³!”

Alex his face twisted all up as he crammed that insult through his throat. One of the worst judgments a Muslim could pass on another. And clearly one that nobody had ever dared to call Adham in his face. A face now blank from shock, contrasted only by his eyes, so full of emotion. So hard to look into. Thanks to the monitor, he didn't have to. It was all genuine. Adham must have been one of those who don't have a clue. Who doesn't know just how different he is from the rest of the human race.

“How obvious your lack of knowledge is. What are your credentials to make takfir⁴?”

Again, Alex wasn't falling for these brain-washing tricks so commonly used among extremists. In his inexperienced youth he had fallen for it. Lived a few years bathing in literalism. It had cost him many of his friends and damaged relationships with most of his family. Not beyond repair, but damaged nonetheless. Once he had found out the lies and tricks salafism⁵ was based upon, he had become furious. A fire that was burning for some time now, pouring out all over any and every extremist that dared so much as look at him funny. And here he had the perfect target to pour all this frustration upon.

“Try as much as you like, your tricks don't work here you hypocrite. It is not even a personal judgment. I can tell you as a clear scientific fact that your brains lack the ability to make emotional connections with others, and there for you must also lack a conscience.”

“You have stronger faith in your science than in Islam?”

“I believe my religion is true, but I know my science is correct.”

“It's just a theory.”

“It's an undeniable observation of reality.”

They were at a standoff. Both realized this wasn't going to get either of them anywhere; and both realized the other was too stubborn to give in. Adham however, next to being stubborn was also manipulative, and saw an opportunity to change the subject.

“You know, when I agreed to this, I was under the impression that you would speak on my behalf for my early release. But quite frankly, I no longer trust you would do me any good.”

Alex immediately felt somewhat embarrassed for forgetting the purpose of the experiment and loosing himself in anger.

“I can assure you I always honor my agreements.”

And with that, the proverbial hatchet was laid resting on the table, ready to be picked up again any second. The following debate on religion, psychology and science was technical and draining. More importantly, it was also entirely fruitless. Slowly it started to dawn on Alex that no matter how many solid arguments he could bring to the table, none of them ever showed the right picture. Any description of the essence was unrepresentative due to the lack of context, whereas any explanation of the context was dismissed because it lacked essence. Alex could argue to the end of the universe and back. To Adham it was a matter of faith that there couldn't possibly be anything wrong with

¹Arabic for disbeliever, many Islamic groups often use it as a condescending insult.

²Arabic invocation meaning: “All praise to God”.

³Arabic for religious hypocrite.

⁴The act of declaring another person or group as disbelievers.

⁵A conservative branch of Islam with a rigid literalistic interpretation of religious texts.

himself.

Chapter 7: Aisha

The prospect of divorce made Alex appreciate picking up his children from school more than usual. Even mundane tasks were special when you are close to losing them. A shame the session with Adham still clouded his thought. He started wondering what age he ought to start arming them against that sort of narrow-minded pseudo-intellectual pressure. Between that and traffic, he hadn't really given them any attention so far. The cars in front of him came to a halt at a stoplight. Alex turned his head to the backseat.

“So how's everyone doing?”

Aisha Smiled, bless her heart. But Yunus his face wasn't as bright.

“Why can't I come and live with you instead?”

“It's only a one-bed-room apartment Yunnus.”

Yunnus looked outside his window sulking. There was a tense atmosphere. But traffic had started moving again and Alex was primarily occupied by that. Aisha, unaware of such things broke the silence.

“Daddy, what's a shaytan?”

O God, where did that come from. Where to begin.

“Well, remember how we talked about God creating humans and angels right? How we can make choices, good or bad. But that angels don't have any choice, and are always good, remember?”

Yunus cut in with a nagging voice.

“Keep it simple dad, she's only five.”

Alex felt simultaneously embarrassed and proud that his son intuitively felt what he could not.

“Yes. Simple.”

Aisha didn't even seem interested anymore and stared outside fidgeting with her clothes.

“I could sleep on the couch dad, I don't mind.”

It had started raining a minute ago and Alex still hadn't put on his windscreen wipers.

“Could you give it a rest? It's just bad timing now, maybe in a few months we'll talk about it. And I was talking to your sister.”

Yunnus turned to Aisha.

“Shaytan is a djinn who is always doing bad things. And everybody who follows him as a shaytan to.”

By now the view was all blurred from the rain, and he activated the wipers almost automatically. Close, but not how Alex would have explained it. He tried cutting in.

“Yes, well thats-”

“What's a djinn daddy?”

The car in front of him suddenly slowed down to make a turn. Try your signal lights, jerk. Where was I? Yes, djinns.

“Well, God Also made them. They live here on earth. We can't see, but they can see us.”

Aisha frowned.

“They are hiding?”

“They don't have to, honey. We can't see them even if they stand in front of us. Anyway, they also have choice. Just like us then can be good or bad.”

Yunnus felt the need to prove himself again.

“And the bad ones, they try to make us bad as well. They are all shaytans. And if you follow them, you are also a shaytan and you'll go to hell.”

“Don't scare your sister Yunnus.”

“Whatever.”

Aisha felt satisfied with that answer; after all, it had cost her enough patience to get just this much. “Oh, there's a parking-spot!”

Chapter 8: Victoria (I)

She said hi, and her lips curled into a brief comforting smile, which quickly disappeared into a neutral stare. And with that she had let him know that she wasn't gonna have any of his petty little games. Victoria was, like all the other subjects: perfectly human apart for her inability to feel emotionally attached to anybody. The small part of the brain that normally sees to this, was greatly underdeveloped to the point one could consider it non-existing. This small and

simple dysfunction had a wide range of consequences on her nature and behavior. The most important one being; that she had never experienced the unexplainable urge to do the right thing. Sure enough she was perfectly capable of understanding and recognizing the concept intellectually. She just never felt emotionally compelled to act accordingly. Nor had she ever felt distress for having done something she logically understood to be bad, unless of course she was considering a possibility of being caught. Perhaps the biggest difference between her and the others was that due to being a woman, her conscienceless manifested itself in quite a different way. She had in her possession a very different skill-set.

What intrigued Alex the most, was a combination of two things.

First off all, she appeared to be perfectly conscious of her being conscienceless. She didn't have just a suspicion or vague idea like Jayden and many others did. Instead she had a magnificently detailed insight on how different she was. She wasn't running away from that knowledge or fooling herself with delusions of normality. There were of course others who shared her level of understanding, like Vince and Mike. Which brings us to the second reason she intrigued Alex.

Vince, being a serial-killer beyond doubt, was very open and in-your-face about being a sociopath without even attempting to apologize for his behavior. Mike, on the other hand was self-righteous about it, and constantly defending his position. Victoria saw the virtue of reasonable deniability and attempted to hide her viscous nature as much as possible. This sounded promising. Unlike Vince and Mike who had obviously accepted who they were, he estimated there was a reasonable probability of Victoria not accepting herself. A chance of her not wanting to be a sociopath. Then again, it might just as well have been practical reasons that made her hide behind the curtain of denial. Nonetheless, Alex hoped optimistically. Being who she was, Alex had again planned a whole different strategy.

“I know, or at least I firmly believe you are a sociopath.”

A bold opening. As expected, Victoria's face displayed a very convincing mixture of anger, astonishment and pain. Just as any typical person would in response to such a blunt statement. She waited, counted the right amount of microseconds, preparing to answer just in time. Before she could, Alex cut in.

“I also know you're perfectly aware of this, and that you don't want people to find out. I can assure you despite these sessions being a scientific experiment; I am still bound to doctor-patient confidentiality.”

“You're wrong doctor; I don't know why you think I'm... some sort of psychopath!”

She mimicked disgust perfectly while pronouncing that last word. Hers was really a top act, making Jayden's denial seem ridiculous.

“Really, I'm not trying to fish here; I've already made up my mind. Is there no way we could short-circuit all these theatrics and discuss the subject openly?”

“Yes, please do. Why d'you think I have no conscience? Yes, I am in jail, and I am sure you know why. But people make mistakes don't they? Even when they do have that little nagging voice inside their head, right?”

Looking at the monitor; it was clear to Alex that Victoria purposely mistook her superego for her conscience. A mistake many laymen would make. Thus a mistake that persist on the illusion of her being perfectly normal.

“Very clever Victoria. Surely you understand the difference between the emotion-based conscience and the subconscious and complex superego. If not from being a sociopath, then at least from the trial and everything that went along with it.”

Victoria didn't respond, she just stared ahead blankly. She knew he was right, and that no good would come from trying denial again. So she invested no further energy into it and just waited patiently for the conversation to go forward. Loosing deniability meant nothing. People are forgetful, doubt can always be restored later on, at least as long as you don't slip to far into the open. If she'd been more confident, she might have even pushed the conversation to that point herself. Bringing up something irrelevant. Mixing up the emotions. Blowing a smokescreen. Somehow she sensed that wouldn't work on doctor Leach. In fact, he seemed to be waiting as well, curiously looking at how she would address the issue. He must have anticipated this silence after being caught on a lie. She had no choice but addressing it after all.

“Even if, for the sake of argument, I would accept that I had learned of this difference, and that it hadn't escaped my mind, that still proves nothing. Even if you caught me at trying to look normal. Isn't that exactly what any normal person would do when you throw something like this in their face? So how does it prove anything?”

Alex smiled with an air of vanity, happy with the opportunity to burst Victoria's bubble.

“Well, I'm not looking for proof Victoria. Even if I were extremely critical and would doubt the preliminary tests which provided you with the opportunity to participate; the readings displayed on my monitor, in combination

with the responses you gave me so far, already make the matter clear-cut. Beyond any shadow of doubt. What I'm looking for is not proof; rather to talk to you openly about it, without the complications of your denial." Cornered, but far from giving up. Far from exposing her nature, from giving up her camouflage.

"What exactly is the name of this magical equipment? I've never heard of any such device which could tell you something as complex based on these basic measurements."

"It has no name. I, the designer, hasn't found the time for naming it yet. Perhaps I ought to call it Victoria. Has a nice ring to it, don't you think?"

Victoria tried hard to make the sarcasm appear lost on her and continued on her vigorous quest for deniability.

"If this device is a prototype you developed, isn't there a chance it's faulty? Can't it produce a false positive? I know you're not that vain; surely you admit you could make a mistake?"

A smile and a compliment. It wasn't up until then, that Alex noticed Victoria was gradually relying more and more on her female charm. Just a little hint. A change in tone, flirtatious body language; nothing too much. Like when boiling a frog; you'd want to heat the water gradually. By the time they notice the change in temperature their legs are no longer in any shape for them to jump out. Alex was too watchful for this. All the resentment and anger towards Maysa' that he'd been suppressing was now oozing through the cracks of his stone-cold face.

"Are you questioning my scientific knowledge or just calling me a liar?"

"Oh dear, I hope I didn't hurt your feelings."

She tried hard hiding her smile. Alex noticed nonetheless and felt silly immediately after.

"Not at all, it's just frustrating. No matter how obvious it is, you will always have a reasonable amount of deniability, and you are perfectly aware of it."

Victoria cut in abruptly, throwing the ball back;

"You seem to have already made up your mind about me."

"You left your newborn baby-son to die."

"I left him to be found."

"In the basement of your apartment building"

"I panicked..."

"In a bucket with a towel covering the bucket."

She waited patiently for the moment of no further denial to pass. Annoyed by her silence Alex pressed on.

"How many people usually visit the basement at night?"

Her eyes turned moist and her mood heavy.

"I didn't even know I was pregnant. You have no idea what it's like to suddenly find yourself in labor."

"You did know you were pregnant, Victoria. You even tried hiding it from your boy-toy. Sending him out for a packet of sanitary pads every month."

"Well just in case."

"They found 6 packs of them stashed away in your closet."

"I was embarrassed; the predictor said I wasn't pregnant so I figured there was another reason. Thought something was wrong with me."

Oh she never gives up does she. Alex voice was louder now. Maybe I should pressure her harder.

"Even if I believe that, that still doesn't explain murder. You didn't feel an ounce of sympathy for that baby, did you?"

He was obviously too much in control of this conversation. This seems as good an occasion as any to start with anger. Let's see just how well he deals with that.

"You arrogant prick. You've no idea what I went through, and there you go slapping that in my face. Perhaps you're the one lacking any empathy!"

"As convincing as you may sound, the monitor clearly gives you away Victoria, there's no use denying..."

She was surprised at how quick he replied. The vibrations of her words had scarcely lost against the friction of air-molecules when his words cut through it. Too firm and fast for a fake gambit. Did this strange device really render him immune against her 24 years of training? Almost a quarter century that she, the lone wolf had lived among the sheep; and had out of dire necessity learned how to bleat lest she'd be exposed. She caught a micro-expression of condescend on his face. He clearly knows what he's doing. No, she hasn't got the time to think things through. Not while he is checking her every responses. Alex immediately knew of the panic that flooded her. A mere glance at the dancing lines and their color-scheme. So it surprised him to see her still acting. Still perfectly stereotypical. Still responding like conscience-bound people do. She collapsed as noticeable as one can while already being seated, without overacting. And then just laid there in her chair; weeping and winning; grumping and mumbling. All he could make out was:

"Just don't know, ... could you..."

And then a long but quick sentence of which he understood only a single word. The only word that was stressed with an extra dash of anger: “arrogant”. How disappointing that even under stress she remained perfectly capable of acting as an emotional being. Alex was just beginning to understand how unrealistic and naive the task he had put ahead of him was. She must think the monitor is a bluff. That turns an empowering device into nothing more than a smartass pointing out the bleeding obvious. It’s of no use in establishing true cooperation. It would be best to stop the session; and re-think the strategy. As long as she’s convinced it is just a bluff, she would hold it against him that he was so rough on her during their first session, and showed no sign of empathy in return. It would be a pain to have to deal with, so to avoid that road he decided it was time for some acting from his side as well.

“Look, Victoria. I know I can come across strong, but please believe me when I tell you that I’m really trying to help people with my research. My intentions are altruistic. I’m sorry if I did hurt you. Perhaps we should give ourselves some time to recollect our thoughts, and continue where we left next session. Unless of course, you welcome the opportunity to discuss what you’re feeling.”

As he started to speak, she looked up, to analyze his face.

“No, I don’t think I trust you quite enough.”

A few lines danced around on the screen signaling amusement. He thought she must have been amused because he appeared to have finally bought her act, and felt slightly annoyed by that idea. Only slightly. If he would knew what she was really amused by instead; that his act was so obvious and pitiful. If he knew she was amused because she felt pride for being the better despite all his fancy diplomas; then he would have been truly annoyed...

Chapter 9: Maysa' (II)

The heart-broken window.

Looking across the empty room of his 2nd floor apartment, Alex's attention was drawn by the over-sized white curtains playfully dancing in a mild summer breeze. As the wind grew momentarily stronger they revealed a clear blue sky behind them. A sky which, on any other day, he would certainly have found a pleasure to observe. That day though, the wide open space was much rather choking him. Choking him much in the same way he thought the impact of their childhood traumas had choked the life out of their relationship. He suddenly found himself living in an uneventful, unfurnished apartment, realizing that everything had changed. Not just the practical details of his marriage ending, but his lease on life, his long term plans and goals for the future, the shattered dreams and hopes.

About a week before Alex converted to Islam, one of his teachers told him something that left quite an impression on him. Well, technically, he didn’t say it to Alex specifically, rather to the whole class attending. However, considering the impeccable timing in his life, he might just as well have said it to him personally. What he explained was in fact rather mediocre, a variation of the classical everybody-needs-a-purpose-in-life. Some might find a *raison-d’être* in their work, others live for their family and yet some others find this fulfillment in a hobby or lifestyle. But if you’re not able to find and do something you’re passionate about; you’ll never be truly happy. Perhaps it was because he was so intensely searching spirituality at that time, that the advice found such a solid nesting-ground.

Alex wanted to be happy with her, Maysa'. And he did really try. Apparently trying was not enough if you have autism, not even high functioning autism. His whole live Alex had to psychologically analyze people as a survival-instinct. He came from a transitional generation where Asperger syndrome no longer meant you have what it takes to be a successful member of society. A time where new, more complex emotional insights and abilities were required of men. And also a time where not much was known about the syndrome and only a handful of people got diagnosed and helped along their way. Alex had to find his own ways to deal with people. But no matter how deep and profound his understanding of human psychology had become from years of 'round-the-clock analysis of practically everyone he met; he still failed miserably bringing all of his skill and expertise into his own personal life. She said she really liked him and appreciated all the things he'd done for her, yet sees no future in their relationship either way.

So there he was sitting in his apartment, looking at a quarter which bore only the slightest hints of being a living room. With just a desk and a PC, it looked more like a computer room now. And thus, sitting at his desk. Sitting there; looking away from the computer screen, mesmerized by curtains who in the rush of excitement thought of themselves as dancing dervishes. Sitting there drowning in the emptiness, thinking, spacing out, wondering. Any person with a good analytic mind does what he can do best. If he sees dots, he connects them. Not because he wants to. He must, simply because he can! Alex never had any control over the creative part of his mind. Rather the creative part of his mind had control over him. He always felt genuinely thankful though, for being gifted that way. These moments of

deep thought while apparently gazing at wind-driven window decoration was just one of the prices occasionally levied. The pieces of the puzzle were all there, the knowledge he has obtained, the capabilities he has acquired, the passionate opinions, the lack of distractions such as a marriage can be. Most importantly the sudden lack of a purpose in life. All pointed in the same direction. A new pet project. No, a purpose, a calling: "The cure".

Not that Alex thought himself capable of this. Not at first at least. In fact his alarming low self-esteem convinced him he wouldn't be successful at all. But still, he was seeing what it would take to make his world a better place. And despite thinking he'd never be able to pull it off; he couldn't stop thinking about it nonetheless. Once a thought enters, he must indulge it as much as he can, look at enough angles. Only then can it be classified as sufficiently dealt with. Only then can Alex his energy and time consuming mind be put on stand-by again. It is one of those survival instincts. If unpredictable situations cause stress; work out every possible permutation and variation in advance to successfully reduce stress-levels in the future. The habit runs so deep that at some point even unrealistic scenarios need to be fully analyzed and prepped. A prepared aspie is a happy aspie. So let us think of how we can change the world one step at the time; starting with an empty apartment housing an empty heart-broken soul. And then, his emptiness opened up.

The pool.

The emptiness opened up, but revealed absolutely nothing; apart for a false sense of enlightenment. Another trick of the subconscious designed to make up for the control in life that you haven't got. The illusion of control, while in reality one cannot even control his own emotions. As if his subconscious wanted to make a point, Alex cried twice as much the next day. Despite his habit of having to indulging all of his thoughts from every possible conceivable angle; he didn't do so now. The only one that really mattered now, he merely touched it briefly on the surface. Like a toe looking to find the temperature of a swimming pool; and then quickly retreated from the overwhelming coldness. Perhaps I'll draw a few laps tomorrow, when the sadness settles. But it didn't settle. Instead in everyday life he would find an event, a token, a habit even, that would remind him of her, forcing him to put his toe back in. For months to come; every single day he'd have at least one or two moments where he would break down into a pile of uncontrollable sobbing sorrow and hopelessness. An uncontrollable overwhelming cold shock, triggered by dipping his toe in that swimming pool. Even on good days he would count at least one such moment. He didn't keep track on bad days.

Chapter 10:Afanasi (I)

"- So you see, it wasn't my fault he got beaten up, If he wouldn't have put me in that position, I wouldn't have had to resort to that, right? Right?"

His thick Russian accent was even more appalling than his monotonous voice. Afanasi was so enthusiastic with his chance to justify this little incident, that he hadn't noticed Alex drifting off. Of course his sudden lack of response made it too obvious for even Afanasi's egocentrism to miss. And still that same egocentrism made this all about him, offended him. But it wasn't just Afanasi's monotonous accent that made it hard to concentrate. Alex was troubled by the resistance and denial he had met so far. The last few weeks he hadn't booked any progress and failure began to look like a promising outcome.

"-and, since it obviously does not interest you. Why don't we skip these sessions, and get you talking to my parole board right now?"

Afanasi did a poor job in hiding his agitation in an otherwise emotionless voice. Alex his subconsciousness violently threw him out of dreamland, it dawned to his conscious part that he had missed something vital. He considered his options briefly, and then decided he had no real choice but to admit this professional slip-up. Or at least to offer, what Alex considered an apology.

"It's not that Afanasi; I'm just frustrated. I mean, Imagine yourself in my place. Say that you are me, and are dealing with a whole bunch of sociopaths who-"

"I am not a sociopath."

The monitor didn't show tell-tale signs of deceit. Afanasi must have been genuinely convinced of it.

"Well, I'm sure you have your reasons to believe that, so let's put a pin in that for now. Imagine however, you had to deal with people who were clear cut cases. Who are beyond a doubt conscienceless. Then imagine, no matter how much you point out that they're wrong, they just keep denying and playing around."

"You're the shrink, right? Why d'you ask me?"

"I guess I'm just bouncing ideas off of you. How would you go about it?"

"Well, I guess, the first step should be, trust. Make sure they feel safe to expose themselves."

Alex sighed, this seemed like another pointless effort, but now the door was open, he might as well walk through it.

“You know I’m still bound to doctor-patient confidentiality right?”

“I know, but I’m not a sociopath.”

“Frankly, I believe you are. But I also believe that you genuinely don’t think you are. Some of the others however, clearly do know, and deny it nonetheless.”

“Then perhaps they have other fears and motives that keep them from admitting their true nature.”

Again according to both the best of Alex his knowledge, as well as his monitor Afanasi seemed completely oblivious of his condition.

“What else is there to fear then? How can I possibly wrong them, other than exposing them to the outside? In fact, although not official, their mere participation already puts them into the spotlight. So they mustn’t fear exposure that much apparently.”

“I’ve no idea Doctor. I’m not often at a loss, but I must admit one now.”

The lines all stayed within their margins, proportionally making up a nice combination of colors filling the screen. There was no doubt in Alex his mind; Afanasi did not know he lacked a conscience. Yet one line, the green line most to the bottom stayed ever so flat. Just as with any of his subjects. No empathy once-so-ever. If it wasn’t fear of exposure, there must be something else keeping them from showing their true identity. Alex had a hunch, but it seemed pointless to share with Afanasi. Just another brain-dead-end.

Chapter 11: Vince (II)

As Dr. Leach walked into the room, Vince was already sitting in the leather chair. This time without all those wires and Velcro headband. He was also missing his usual relaxed camouflage. This was Vince in his true colors, a vicious predator. His body language screamed others into unease in every way possible. And even with the guard just behind the glass door, Alex felt intimidated a great deal. When he came closer he noticed the dark circles around Vince’s eyes. Apparently there had been a few sleepless nights. His dilated pupils. His ice-cold stare. Something was definitely wrong. Alex suspected Vince had a whole speech planed in advance. Any opening on his part would only be perceived as being in the way. Alex worried that even taking the time to say hi would only add to the aggravation that was so obviously flowing out of his pores. So rather than provoking him any further he just sat down immediately and started with an open hearted, soft-toned “Yes...?”. Vince didn’t waste time on niceties either. He leaned forward and pointed his finger like a weapon towards him.

“Look, I don’t know what you did, but you’re going to undo it.”

Alex was puzzled, he could go defensive and ask just why Vince thinks he can force him to do anything at all. But that hardly seemed wise. Not to mention he was now slightly curious as well.

“Undo what exactly?”

“Don’t waste my time Alex. It’s gone. Ever since your session, your equipment,-”

“What’s gone?”

Vince started yelling now;

“My intuition, my darkness, my power. You fucked it up!”

“How would I-, What?”

It took a huge drain on Vince’s self-control not to jump up. It was the thought of the guard shortening their conversation that kept him seated.

“I can put one and one together. You’re rounding up all the motherfucking sociopaths from in here. Make us sign this agreement contract. Plenty of time in here to read the fucking fine prints. What’s that section about the fucking magnetic field stimulation shit? And now it’s gone, my sixth sense, my source, my power, my drive. Look I don’t care about you and whatever creepy little science project you have running; I just want you to undo what you did.”

Vince hesitated for a second. The frightened Doctor took a quick breath.

“And in return I won’t go talk to the other inmates and won’t convince them not to co-operate with you. You know. You damn well fucking know that I can, that I’m capable.”

Alex didn’t understand one bit what was going on, but he knew his response had better been good.

“Look, Vince... Yes, the equipment is meant to stimulate the amygdala to trigger emotional responses. But stimulation is only in phase two. For now, all it did was monitor your brain-activity. And even if I would have, there’s no way that-”

“Fuck you, asshole.”

Vince obviously didn’t deem this good enough.

“Look, I swear all I'm planning on is triggering a conscience. That's why the magnetic field would only work in key-moments. If it works at all.”

Alex his voice was panicky, partly due to Vince's stare, but also because of what Vince might have been referring to. Little by little he was recovering from the situation.

“I don't care, undo it!”

Something's definitely wrong.

“Hmm, that's odd. In our first session, you were all up on me, and now you can't even tell whether I'm lying or not. You're right; there is something off about you.”

Vince was surprised by Alexander's honesty, and calmed down just a little bit.

“From your description it seems like your superego is leaving you hanging. It could be temporary, teaching you a lesson. Have you made any decisions lately against the advice of your inner voice?”

“I don't care what it is, or how it changed; you can leave your pathetic psycho-analysis out of it and wasting my time.”

Vince was leaning forward, almost standing up. Before he could, Alex gestured his hand in the most submissive way he could.

“Wait; let me try to help you. No more equipment, just talks, you and me. What's the worst that could happen? I mean, I don't know what you believe in. The way you described it, it almost sounds like something metaphysical. If that's true; how could a scientist have messed that up? And if it turns out to be your superego, maybe I can help you after all?”

“You're stalling, either so I won't jump you or so I wouldn't mess up your other patients.”

“Actually, at this point I have little faith in them left either way. Keep playing both options then. You don't have to pick a side. Work your angle in sabotaging me to keep your leverage, and I'll keep an opening in my schedule if you feel like talking.”

Vince, despite being desperate no longer felt he had any angle to stay here.

“Fucking asshole.”

He didn't exhibit his usual control and threw the leather chair backwards almost half a meter while getting up. He didn't give as much as even a second look before leaving.

When Michael came in from the next room, Alex was still mauling over what just happened, letting it all in.

“What was that all about?”

“I don't know either Michael. Whatever it is, it's huge. He's not himself. We have to pursue this Michael.”

“Yeah, I know, but without the equipment he's no help to our research.”

Michael started rearranging the chair and setting things up for the next session.

“Well we can keep him as a side-project, right?”

“Sure, except if we meet him under the guise of this research, it could jeopardize the integrity of it all.”

Off course, Michael was thinking of himself, for him this risk was higher, more was at stake.

“Well, worst case scenario, we could say that, we agreed to meet without equipment in the hope to later on convince him to participate again. And that we'd exclude him if he didn't.

“Yeah, I guess, still have my doubts though.”

“I know Michael; all my rational thought is telling me the same. I got a gut-feeling about this though, like we really can't cut him loose.”

“Got your own sixth sense there?”

Even though Michael just said it jokingly, it annoyed Alex that he persisted.

“I wish; nothing the kind though. Just, something is off. Something big. Something important. I can't put my finger on it, but -

Alex thought about how to describe this best and then finally decided to say:

“Oh never mind Michael.”

Chapter 12: Jayden (II)

“So, Jayden.”

He waited for eye-contact.

“How have you been since our latest session?”

“Bored shitless. Even picked up a book from the library.”

“Oh really, what are you reading?”

“Some old European book. Translated of course. Something about a prince.”

Alex couldn't believe it, what a coincidence! He looked at the monitor, excitement was dominating Jayden's mind. Was this the breakthrough he was hoping for, so fast?

“Oh, you mean “*Le petit prince*”?”

“Has some crazy advice in it.”

Again Alex didn't believe what he was hearing, and checked the monitor again.

“You surprise me Jayden, not only that you're into that book, but that you find the advice in it useful. I must say it's one of my favorites, I read it every few years.”

“Really? You into that shit to? Fucking-A! Sure, it be about kings and how they should act and shit, but still down-to-earth advice, right?”

“Wait,...” Alex said, barely masking his disappointment.

“You must mean Machiavelli's ‘El Principe’.”

“Yeah, Mac-dude, that's the one!”

Relentlessly, Alex pushed away his disappointment and tried another angle.

“Did you know some people actually believe the book is meant as a satire to expose the evilness of rulers, rather than genuine advice?”

The monitor showed Jayden panicked a bit, felt exposed. Alex attempted to smooth it out, and commented how he could see, that from a pragmatic point of view a lot of the advice is practical nonetheless. Not in those words of course. But it was too late anyway.

“Yeah for those people who think only in practical terms.”

Jayden Picked up the ball Alex threw him, distinguishing himself from those people. The monitor told a different story. Again Alex just switched on to another angle.

“About those people, ever wonder?”

“Wonder what?”

Alex took a second considering how to go about this.

“Wonder what it takes, what it'd be like to be as practical as them?”

“I dunno, self-preservation right?”

Alex smiled.

“Look Jayden, I already know you're allot smarter than you make yourself look. I know how it works on the streets and in these cells. But everything here is confidential; you don't have to keep up your mask on in here.

Jayden felt his heart throbbing in his throat again.

“Sure, self-preservation is an important drive, but there's more to the story than just that.”

Jayden shrugged his shoulders and shook his head, forfeiting his turn to speak. Alex took a second before continuing.

“Well, we all have our drives and desire? Some of them we can pursue, some we can't, right?”

“Sure...”

“But why? Well practical restrictions for one, but what else?”

Jayden rolled his eyes; this looked too much like a classroom.

“I dunno, you tell me doc? A conscience?”

This guy is so obvious. Seriously?

“Of course man, just cause I'm incarcerated doesn't mean I ain't human man. My conscience nags me all the time, gotta do this, do that, so and so.”

Alex smiled, and failed to hide it.

“Well, that isn't a conscience! What you described is your superego, an internalization of external authority.”

Jayden said nothing and stared indifferently. Even this will pass.

“It's a group-survival-mechanism. It pushes you to behave how society wants you to behave. At least how you think society expects you to behave. All it cares for is trying to make you fit into your group. And when it's out of tune, it can make you do all sorts of stuff. Like if it thinks that violence is what it takes then that's exactly what it will dictate. That's not your conscience. A conscience is a feeling. An overpowering urge to do what is right based on your emotional connections with other people. It's raw and basic, not complex and logical.”

Again the same explosion on Jayden's monitor. Alex continued:

“Those people, we've been talking about, they've numbed out their emotional connections, they don't feel for anyone but themselves. That's why they don't have these urges to do right for others.”

He's not going to drop this.

“Well, that's very interesting and all. Thing is though, I do care about people. So I don't see what any of that ‘s got anything to do with me.”

He slipped away again, words completely out of sync with the monitor.

“Look Jayden, all I am saying is; if you'd have this problem, I don't think it's hopeless. I believe there's a way to get better, to become whole again.”

Jayden stared a couple of seconds;

“Don't you think that's stupid?”

He took Alex by surprise with that. It was the first time Jayden actually took the lead in the conversation.

“How so?”

“Well, let's say; if I was like that and all, it wouldn't it help me get what I want more often, right? Not caring about others nor having any emotional restrictions; why would I want to get better then? Why would I choose to be limited and feel bad half of the time? I'm thinking of course, if I were like that, right?”

The monitor showed a certain amount of pride. Fracking smartass.

“Well that's a good point. But on the other hand if you were like this; you'd probably feel lonely and empty and bored most of the time.”

Alex looked him straight in the eyes trying to seem as empathic as he could fake.

“The world would seem uneventful. No relationship you ever had would be fulfilling, except in the sense that you might find somebody who makes your life a bit more comfortable. Not to mention you're in jail and I'm probably your only chance of getting out here anytime soon.”

Jayden seemed to be thinking it all over for a while. Alex held his breath.

“Yeah, didn't think of that doc, guess it's hard to imagine how I'd respond if my brain was like those people.”

Seems like Jayden is very good in sympathetic smiles and lies after all. If it weren't for the monitor.

Chapter 13: Iblies (I)

Before the dawn of men, earth was already occupied by pan-dimensional beings; far more intelligent than humans. Djinn. These beings are not confined nor tethered to the four dimensions of the time-space continuum, and free in most of the eleven dimensions of reality. They are in their natural form invisible to humans. They have their own cultures, their own governments, their own religions, their own sciences. Even their own wars. They live besides us unnoticed. Or perhaps that isn't really accurate. Although we are completely unaware of their presence most of the time; they do purposely interact with us and leave a significant footprint in our lives. Each with their own agenda off course. Some are on a zealous mission to manipulate and change our fates. Some just play games with us for their entertainment. Some feel wronged by one of us, and are out for revenge. Some even fall in love with a specific human and stalk them. They are far from being a monolithic group. That is of course because they have free will just like human beings. Divided as they might be by their individuality and personal views; one group seems to have overcome this. This group has a strong influence over most djinns spread out over the world. Their success as a group is mostly thanks to the guidance of their leader. The oldest, most extraordinary, most mysterious and influential among them: Iblies.

Iblies and his disciples see mankind as a pest, heretics to their faith. Abominations which they must destroy in the name of God. They are a pretty well organized group. State funded, training schools all over the world, research & development facilities, recruitment-centers, ... much more than I care to list. But without a doubt, their most impressive feature is their vast army of qarins. An army of special agents that well exceeds the human population. Typically, a qarinn gets assigned to a specific human, or 'mark', following them from birth to death. The human's birth and death of course. As djinn have a much longer life-span, some of the oldest veteran qarins have followed over a hundred of different humans birth-to-death in their career. Of course, an organization this big, with such a cause to fight for, and such complexity has a lot of mysticism surrounding their beliefs. Despite the many questions left unanswered; Iblies; with his unsurpassed knowledge and insight seems to have little problems keeping his followers in line. Neither do other groups or individuals cause him many problems. The faith-less djinns usually don't see any problem with indulging him in return for the protection he offers them against their mutual enemy. And under Iblies' protection they enjoy the freedom and advantages of being allowed to manipulating humans as much as it pleases them. As long as such doesn't interfere with qarins, and sabotage their work. Most of them regardless their beliefs, don't care a great deal about the fate nor faith of humans either way. No, the only group that troubles him are the Muslim djinns. Peculiarly, Islam it's the only faith shared by both djinns and humans. There's an obvious reason for that too, but whether it's actually the humans that inspired the djinns to Islam, or vice versa, depends on whose side you're listening to. Iblies tells his disciples that these heretic djinns have made up this fake belief in order to boycott the disciples of fire and attempt to take control of the world. The Muslim djinns on the other hand claim they're following a genuine, human prophet called Mohammed which was sent by God. There exist plenty arguments to defend either point of view. But of course, none of the arguments actually matter, since in the end of the day, it's a

matter of faith.

Chapter 14: Acheron (I)

As soon as Alex entered, he noticed Victoria's burning stare. Alex did not see a qarin leaning against the table. He turned his head away from Alex towards Victoria.

"How bout *we* let him talk first this time, I think *we*'ll enjoy that."

And he didn't doubt that she would.

As almost every human does, Victoria mistakenly thought Acheron's voice was her superego.

As almost every qarin does, Acheron addressed her as '*we*' to keep the illusion of being a part of her own mind.

As almost always, Acheron turned out to be right. Alex did speak first, and she sure did enjoy it.

"So, how are we today Miss Victoria?"

Acheron knew that sometimes a single word or at least only a few was the best way to go. One avoids accidentally talking in a way that does not seem natural to the mind of the mark. That's the most vital part. They have to be convinced it's their own mind, their own thoughts. Rather than chewing it all up for her, he only pushed ever so lightly and mentioned what she was already inclined to believe either way.

"Condescending prick"

"I'm not one of your patients."

Her voice was heavy.

"And I'm certainly not your miss."

Of course this wasn't how she really felt. She was merely attempting to catch him off-guard.

"You're very forgiving, aren't you?"

Acheron figured she could deal with that remark on her own. It wasn't threatening either-way. Alexander was just stalling, waiting for an opening to attack. Instead Acheron looked up at Sallia who was standing behind Alex.

"So, you're just going to stand there like a mute the whole session? Just like last time?"

"I have my orders. Beside, once he's working there's no stopping him anyway."

"Well you could tell me what he's up to at least.

"Sorry he's too erratic to predict. He did bring some brain-scans of a sociopath from class."

Alexander was already bringing up the subject while Sallia was trying to warn Acheron.

"So since you think my equipment is a farce, I brought you a classical brain-scan of a sociopath."

This time rather than talking to her he projected a mental image of mule stubbornly resisting the directions of its farmer. Images and ideas are even more effective. Not just because they tell so much in such short time, but because our own thought are not in words either most of the time.

"See this spot, it's underdeveloped. Would you allow me to take an MRI for comparison?"

The farmer was now trying to kick the mule's leg from underneath it, and it put a smile on Victoria's face. Fuck he wouldn't actually go so far, would he? Quick on his feet, Acheron changed the projection to an X-ray-photograph of a hand with a metallic implant.

Sallia held her breath as she saw the image projected on Victoria's brain. Alex had seen her medical record. Before the panic of a lie falling flat was over, Victoria had already cut in.

"That's not fair!"

There was a hint of disappointment in her voice.

"I can't have an MRI; I had an allergic reaction to the contrast-fluid last time."

Relieved that she didn't go for the implant, Sallia could exhale again. Alex couldn't even tell from the monitor whether that was a lie. There were no emotions and feelings involved. How convenient for you.

"Why can't you just come out in the open, Victoria? What are you afraid of?"

"Don't fucking trust you, asshole!"

Acheron was shouting now. High risk, but he was experienced enough to get away with it.

"But I am right here... I don't know what you want from me."

Victoria was such a natural liar, she almost believed it herself, thus trumping the monitor. Acheron laughed proudly at the sight.

"He sure bit off more than he could chew didn't he?"

"Not really Acheron. She's not fooling him one second. All he needs is one slip up. One moment of you losing control. One moment of being open and there's no telling what kind of rubbish he'll pour into her head. So stop enjoying this and stop taking risks. He can't be successful, not on a single mark. You've got any idea what's at stake here!?"

Chapter 15: Argon

Qarin Argon was looking at Michael unraveling the twisted wires of the machine. Filthy human. Startled by a knocking, Michael and looked up. He spotted the guard waving politely whilst his other hand was latched strongly on the cuffs of Vince Miller, a.k.a. The doll-keeper. When Michael jumped up to open the door; his eyes briefly met with Vince's ice cold stare. Instinctively Michael looked down.

“Welcome back Mister Miller.”

He tried his most apologetic tone of voice. Argon sighed;

“Embarrassing, I know”,

The admittance to Ifrit was as if he was caught with his hands in the cookie jar. Ifrit was somewhat irritated by Argon's lay-back attitude. Or perhaps he imagined a lay-back attitude, while deep down what really annoyed him was Argon's absolute lack of passion. Vince still hadn't replied to Michael's welcome.

“Today you won't be talking to me, you'll meet Dr. Leach. He's leading this project. He'll do all the sessions.”

He knew Argon was a very capable high-level qarin. Yet he never seemed to dream beyond the instructions of a mission. Never experimented how far he could bring his mark. He had none of the fame that Ifrit enjoyed amongst djinns. Secretly, Ifrit despised Argon for having a slightly higher success-rate. 87.8% compared to his 85.4%. Most djinns chalked it down to pure luck with his assignments. Most argue that Ifrit is still the best qarin ever. Especially considering how much his work has not only affected his marks, but the whole world. Yet to see him display this utter lack of passion for their cause always made that 2.4% hard to swallow.

“I'll be attaching some wires to your head, which is part of the project. Don't worry, you won't feel a thing.”

Even worse was Ifrit's suspicion that Argon didn't believe in the cause at all. That he had just joined the agency looking for personal gain and fame.

“So you figured out what the equipment is for already?”

“About that.”

Argon hesitated.

“What?!”

Now he was even more annoyed.

“Well, looks like it's meant to do a little more than just monitoring.”

Ifrit repeated his eloquent question, with more strength this time;

“What?!”

“Looks like, he's going to try to stimulate emotional attachment with an electromagnetic field during key-points in their sessions.

“Fuck, no! Build them a conscience? You know how much work it took to get this little fucker the way he is?

And now you're telling me...?”

Ifrit's voice started trembling with that last shout.

“I know, I know. I just found out myself, that bitch keeps holding out on me.”

Ifrit calmed down a notch, realizing he was directing his anger towards the wrong djinn.

“Can't wait to meet that cunt today.”

“If it's any consolation, from what I could make out, seems like they will keep the amygdala-stimulation for a later phase, so we still have some time to figure out how to best deal with it. Also, as soon as I found out, I went ahead and requested a meeting with Iblies tonight. You me, and fuck-up-girl.”

Michael was done setting up the equipment; he stood up and nodded politely to Vince, trying hard to avoid any eye-contact. As he walked towards the door Argon stood up as well.

“Guess that's my cue to leave, see you tonight.”

Chapter 16: Ifrit (I)

A young looking qarin walked through the door. She seems rather excited to be here, although her face showed hints of being undernourished and emotionally exhausted as well.

“Oh my, I can't believe I actually got the chance to meet you Ifrit. It's an honor. You've got no Idea what I had to do in order to get Vince into this project!”

Such behavior from rookies was commonplace. Especially female rookies. After-all, the textbooks they read at school

are filled with anecdotes of him. Ifrit the qarin of Menes the first pharaoh. He already became somewhat of a legend after that, but his portfolio doesn't end there; Barabbas, Nero Claudius, Gilles de Rais, Henry VIII, Ivan IV, Mary Ann Cotton, Mao Zedong, almost all of his marks had found a place in our history books. Although he couldn't deny the praise was flattering, at times like these he found it highly inappropriate, not to mention he was already upset for her lousy incomplete reports. And on top of all that he now found out that this sorry excuse for a qarin actually had an influence in Vince's participation.

"Just start by telling me what your fucking mark is up to."

A bit embarrassed by his stern tone of voice, Sallia quickly changed composure and replied.

"Well, he's trying to find a treatment for when we managed to numb out the empathy of a mark. The monitor is first used as feedback during psycho-analytic sessions. His main goal is to first try and get them want to 'want' be changed. That's why monitoring is crucial. Then in the second phase, he will stimulate the amygdala with electromagnetic waves during moments of introspection, nurturing the amygdala's growth. Eventually, aiding the mark to forms emotional connections to others."

Vince looks up as the door opens. Dr. Leach walked in, and gave him a quick nod. Now that he saw him, the despair on Sallia's face he had noticed made more sense and his anger started to flow away.

"He's Muslim, isn't he? That's why you look so hungry, that's why you need my help."

Sallia smiled admittedly,

"Yeah he's got that heretic bismillah⁶ voodoo stuff on all of his food so I can't share it with him. Nothing I try works, and if it does, it's only temporarily. He really exhausts me. But, the order to include you actually came from above."

Ifrit leaned back.

"I see. Still; a little heads up would have been nice though."

Alex had already taken his seat and sorted the files of the folder he carried in on the small table in front of him, which was just high enough for Vince not to be able to see them, from in the comfy chair. There was an awkward silence, as always in any first session. Ifrit turned to Vince;

"Oh look at that arrogant prick, doesn't even bother with breaking the ice. Guess he expect *us* to just lie down and roll over."

He was far beyond projected images and small sentences. It was a form of art, choosing the exact right words that the mark would accept as his own. Ifrit was intuitively skilled in it, and could have thirty minutes rant, still convincing his marks that it was their own cognitive thinking.

"Why d'you figure I should trust you?"

"And that monitor, is he kidding *us*? What kind of amateur psychologist is he to need to rely on such a device?"

"You volunteered for the project didn't you?"

Vince smirked while nodding his head at the equipment.

"Is that your version of a lie-detector?"

"Man that's really impressive, you got him trained like a dog."

"Shut up bitch."

"Look; there's no point in hiding who you are. You think I don't already know what your brain looks like? You killed nine young girls, Vince."

"Man, he's so obvious, even keeping a first name basis, should *we* even bother pointing it out?"

"What the fuck are you doing Ifrit?"

"Trust me, play along, fuel his pride."

Sallia looked a bit confused, but didn't dare disregard Ifrit's advice.

"Oh look at that, little psychopath thinks he's better than *us*. Damned narcissist probably doesn't even realize."

"Trust? You want me to talk to you about trust? How do you even know what that word means if you can't even feel-"

"He'll probably go on a rant for a while now."

Alex was still continuing in the background as she said that.

"You sure this is the best way to play them Ifrit?"

"Well it's not like you've given me time to prepare, I gotta work with what I can."

"... You must know there's plenty of volunteers who do have an honest chance at parole and who are more than willing to cooperate with me in order to get my help."

"Oh, no he didn't! *We* wouldn't be here if he didn't really need *us*, would *we*? Fucking idiot."

⁶Arabic for, "in the name of Allah". In Islamic belief it is recommended to say this before eating.

Vince jumped up from his chair.

“Fuck Ifrit; you're making him leave!?! You're supposed to help me.”

“He'll be back, and for now let it be a lesson to give fellow qarin a heads up for something like this.”

“Well, Good luck with them Doctor.”

“Oh he's a real charmer, that one. Not nearly as extraordinary as your work on Constantine the great, but I can still see your trademark written all over him.”

“You better get your shit together before we come back, rookie. I mean a convert? And a psychologist? You actually let a psychologist fall for that heretic brainwashing crap? Pathetic cunt.”

Chapter 17: Mahalla

Mike was draining as ever. Were it not that his wristwatch disagreed, Alex would have estimated today's session already exceeded well over an hour. And all of it was complete waste of time. His viewpoints on morality and ethics were so deeply biased by his impenetrable narcissism. He simply didn't feel for anything except himself. Any argument aimed at convincing Mike that change was really in his best interest, was only perceived as an attack and responded to accordingly. In lack of another strategy, Alex re-visited an earlier attempt.

“Remember that sociopath-world we spoke of the other day? Perhaps, you can consider a more pragmatic approach. As you said, such an evolution, if it ever happens, won't happen in our life time. And the world as it is now is incredibly dull to you. Your abilities are more than sufficient for this dull world. Surely you could wager the risk of some emotional restrictions in your pursuit of meaning.”

Mike frowned in disbelief. Mike's qarin, Mahalla, leaned over and whispered;

“Like *we* would need that.”

“Wager? There's hardly any wager in it. I'm successful, I get what I want. Apart from this temporary setback.”

Mike lifted his two arms upwards on either side and looked left to right to show what he meant.

“You simpletons keep attaching meaning and happiness to transient things, and curse the world and everything in it when the fleeting finally fleets. What use do I have for weakening empathy and crippling conscience, while I can cash-in on my invested self-love whenever I see fit.”

“Well not everyone attaches as much importance to worldly things. There are plenty of spiritual traditions and cultures in which...”

Again Mahalla intervened with a mocking whisper:

“Oh-oh, here comes the preacher.”

Mike smiled gently.

“You're not going to suggest one has to turn into a Buddhist monk? Being happy with life only because he's given up on trying to live it?”

Alex ignored the sarcasm, it took some effort.

“Forget that. That's an extreme. One can live life materialistically, yet assign little attachment to such things.

One can be occupied with daily life, and yet find its purpose elsewhere.”

The monitor was almost blank. As if the combination of words simply didn't register as meaningful to Mike. It seemed pointless. Mahalla noticed the moment of despair, and cut in with another angle.

“What an annoying bigot, this one...”

“You know doctor, the idea came to me the other day, that you're kind of a bigot, aren't you.”

Alex was offended. Bigotry was one of the worst things in this world as far as he was concerned. To be called on it, was thus a great insult in his point of view.

“Really, how so?”

“Well, you're trying to cure antisocial disorder. You're trying to change who we are. You are convinced that you're better than us, and try to make us better.”

“I'm trying to help you.”

“Yes, I can see you think that. Still, it goes to show, you do not form an emotional attachment to us, we are outside of the range of your conscience. You might rationally still consider us human and treat us humanely, but I'm sure your conscience wouldn't have you hopping burning circles to the same extent as it would make you do for other humans. You don't accept us for what we are. We are inferior humans to you, and that by the very definition of it, is bigotry.”

Aaaah that twisted little devil. Alex's heart was racing.

“You twist things around; it's nothing of the kind. I would gladly accept who you were if you weren't such a burden to the people that surround you. People like you, they leave nothing but havoc and destruction behind them.”

“Sure we're a burden, but so is a person with any other handicap to its surrounding.”

“Yes, and if I were able to help them, I'd be just as much inclined to do so.”

“You're missing the point; you do accept them for what they are.”

Mahalla smiled with pride at Sallia. Then he leaned towards Mike again.

“And what about autism?”

“You wouldn't want to cure autistic people, would you doctor? I mean, many of them, despite their disability see their unique mind as a gift with ample benefits.”

This really hit home, and Alex no longer tried to hide just how much he was annoyed by Mike's idiocy.

“Sensitive issue.”

Mahalla added some laughter while commenting this.

Mike stared at Alexander in disbelief and smiled;

“Really, who would have guessed? Doctor rainman? You seem so skilled in reading body language!?”

Alex tried pretending he had no clue what Mike was talking about, while trying to come up with a change of topic. He could see on the monitor that trick wasn't going to work. So instead he said time was over, with 8 minutes left on the clock.

Chapter 18: Iblies (II)

Ifrit slowed his pace as he came near the door. He knew the secretary would let him pass, but did so out of courtesy any way.

“Qarin Ifrit. Please continue, the others are already inside.”

He gave her a short smile and continued forward into the spacious office. Sallia and Argon were standing in front of Iblies his desk facing him.

“He's finally sleeping?”

Iblies had a soft tone of voice. Like a father letting his child know it's ok to be late; telling him he understands.

“As a matter of fact, I had to leave him awake. He's waiting for Michael who was supposed to bring him a visit tonight.

Iblies seemed surprised. He hated to be the last one to find something out. He stared angrily at Argon for a second, then turned back to Ifrit

“Michael? Why? At this hour?”

Argon cut in apologetically:

“It's nothing, nothing to worry about.”

Iblies stared at Argon for a while, effectively silencing him. After making sure the stare was successful, he quickly looked back towards Ifrit. Even Ifrit could only mustard to look back a few seconds before looking down at his feet. That in itself was enough, and Iblies decided not to waste more time on it. He stood up and walked towards Sallia.

“Sallia, you failed to rapport a crucial part of their intention?”

He paused to stare. She didn't even look up feeling it.

“I, I didn't know.”

“Either way you messed up. It's your job to know, isn't it?”

Still looking down, but a quicker reply:

“Yes sir.”

“When is he planning to use this?”

She had expected a much more severe reprimand. Maybe it's still coming? Still she was a bit relieved, and felt slightly more confident with full sentences.

“He seems to be working under the assumption that it'll only work once they co-operate, once their subjects want it to work.”

“I see.”

Iblies started walking back and forth.

“In light of this, continue as planned with the boycott. Hopefully he'll never actually get his try. Argon you'll try to get Michael to convince him the machine needs more testing. Sallia, you'll need to pitch in there too. He can't ever use it, understand!”

“Yes sir.”

He stared at her for a while, seeing what she'd do. She caught on and replied:

“Yes sir, he won't sir.”

“That'll be all qarins.”

Sallia turned and left immediately without looking back. Argon lifted his hand casually as goodbye and left as well. Ifrit remained there for a couple of seconds, determined to have a word in private first. Iblies noticed, turned to him and asked:

“Could you stay another moment, we have something else to discuss.”

Chapter 19: Fintan

The session with Afanasi was yet another dead-end. Alex looked into the mirror for a few seconds hoping inspiration would hit. Afanasi beat him to it.

“You know, I was thinking of what you said the other day, about how the sociopaths seemed to fear exposing themselves.”

As most of the time, the yellow line signaling pride was most dominant on the screen. Surely he felt a sense of accomplishment for coming up with a theory which, as far as he could tell, Alex did not know off.

“Maybe they are afraid of themselves. Maybe they-”

Suddenly, out of nowhere the monitor showed a surge of both purple doubt and a red increase in adrenaline. For a split second, Alex saw it as a welcome sunrise. Must be self-reflection. Most probably he was considering whether this theory of him was actually a reflection of his own predicament. Afraid that his paradigm would fail him. That he would be left confused and naked in a chaotic universe without that false sense of safety and predictability.

His qarin, Fintan who noticed the same without the monitor quickly whispered into his ear.

“Not that road. Paranoia!”

The surge slowly subsided. Alex noticed the cue and greased his pride.

“Please, tell me more of this theory of yours.”

After a short hesitation, the yellow pride-line dominated the purple and red again.

“Maybe they only partly realize what they are. Like, when you think you might have cancer, but don't want to get checked, because then instead of *might have*, you face the possibility of having to deal with *do have*.”

Alex waited a few seconds and appeared to be analyzing the monitor. It didn't have much interesting to show, but Alex pretended there was more to see than just a hint of purple.

“That son of a bitch...”

“I don't understand, it's not like him to lie”; said Sallia apologetically.

Fintan yelled in Afanasi's ear:

“Trickster!”

Immediately the purple broke down in red and blue. Alex tried to cut it off as soon as possible, not even waiting for Afanasi to comment.

“Why are you suddenly so afraid? Are your inner voices telling you to run away?”

Fintan projected an image of Afanasi in a straightjacket hitting his head against a padded wall. As if the image wasn't enough; Fintan started to whisper as well:

“But what if he is right? What if *we're* wrong? What if *we're* not *me*”

Then in a third tone of voice:

“How could *we* not be *me*. *We* have always been *me*, since *we* were born, and now *he*' is trying to turn *us* against *ourselves*! And honestly, if *we* weren't *me*, would *me* be tricked so easily?”

By now the monitor was yellow all over again. Sallia smiled.

“You make it seem so easy.”

Chapter 20: Sallia (I)

The four percent.

Four percent. In class Alex learned this was the estimated percentage of people with antisocial personality disorder in a standard population. It doesn't seem all that much at first. After all, sometimes it feels like the whole world is out to get us. So knowing that 96% of the population actually does have a conscience seems comforting at first. That's just one way of looking at it, though. Alex was autistic, so he saw the world in a whole different light. To him, when he learned this, the first thing that came to his mind was, statistically speaking, it's likely for at least two people in this classroom to be sociopaths, and a few seconds later he pondered over the statistical fact that at least one of his close relatives ought to be one. Somehow the second felt less threatening, a relief actually. He had always felt awkward thinking in that way of his mother. Now that he had statistical science backing his thoughts, he felt slightly more

confident. The first thought about the classmates annoyed him terribly on the other hand. Not so much the idea that there was a viscous predator nearby. Rather, not knowing which one of them was very likely to lie. Autistic people rarely lie. And just like any other human being, they unknowingly project their own characteristics on to others. It can be a terrible tragedy to go through life always expecting others to be telling the truth. And a depressing life, having to find out time after time again that you were wrong to do so. He still didn't understand the human mind sufficiently to identify those frauds. Sociopaths are masters of disguise, and Alex was approaching the matter far too theoretically, ignoring the emotional aspect and intuition. So instead, Alex found himself to occasionally remind himself. "Four percent", he would say. Statistically, at least one of my acquaintances is a sociopath. Roughly seven people in this mosque right now must be sociopaths. At least four people invited to my marriage here are sociopaths. Of course, out of those hundred people, the last one he suspected was his bride Maysa'.

They say, people with autism have no empathy. Rubbish. Sure Alex had enormous difficulties to gauge other people's feeling, reading their body language, or even making his own emotions known from his posture. This was off course, because he approached the issue logically and empirically. The idea of just trusting his intuition without any tangible proof offended him. Anyway, this incapability was just a problem of communication. It didn't mean by far a lack of empathy. Any occasion he did understand what others felt, if anything; Alex felt empathy much more intense than most of us would. Perhaps even felt the emotions more intensely than the person he's empathizing with. Too much to bear even. The more isolated you become from society the easier it becomes to see just how wrong and messed up everything and everyone really is. Alex did have a tremendous amount of empathy for her. He immediately recognized the emotional trauma's she'd been through. She didn't think it was that obvious from her behavior. But he felt it, because he himself had been terribly hurt from a loved one as well, and because his whole life he had studied human behavior as a survival instinct. And just like she did, he as well had for some time in the past chosen to shield off his heart. Closed for business. Your heart can't break if you don't allow anyone to touch it. A dangerous condition, because before you realize it, it's not just a stone wall covering your heart, but your heart itself becomes a stone and you become part of the problem of this world. He hadn't thought it through, he hadn't connected the dots. Naively he thought that giving her time and love would heal her wounds. What he didn't realize, was why she had converted to Islam. Although her father was a Muslim, he had left when she was two years old, so she was raised without faith. It was only much later in her life, at about a similar age as Alex, that she converted to Islam. The difference though, is that with her it wasn't due to a strong feeling of enlightenment, or a series of small miracles pointing the way, nor out of a profound understanding and agreement of the theoretical teachings. She might have tricked herself into believing that those were her actual reasons. And even though all these things did actually occur, none of them held much of the weight of her decision. In reality the choice was determined by something completely different. Most, if not all women have an internal conflict between their subconscious emotional desires and their rational conscious wishes. Consciously, they want to remain in control, or at least want to have the illusion of control. But they are by their nature drawn to dominant men. Of course not all women give in to this desire of a dominant man, but all women do have it to some extent. If not more than least a vague and exotic day-dream. They want to be swept off their feet and feel protected. Mostly because dominant men appear to be confident, and confidence is an attractive feature. It makes men seem able to take care of you. However, a man that is kind-hearted, reliable and at the same time confident is a rare combination. A hard thing to find in a society where feminism has conditioned most of the western men to be insecure submissive weasels. So in the end women are thus drawn to the assholes and jerks. Ironically, their indifference and self-confidence sends out just the right signals that women mistakenly perceive as protective. After Maysa' had been molested as a child by her older brother, that part of her subconscious took a real dark twist. Her qarin, Hail, took advantage of the situation and intensified her internal female conflict to self-destructive levels. Her borderline personality was just scratches away from full blown antisocial personality disorder.

Consciously, she chose to walk proud and love herself more intense than anyone other person ever could love her; more intensely than she could ever love anybody else. On the other hand, subconsciously she despised herself and felt she deserved to be treated badly. She craved to be subjugated, humiliated and objectified. Still subconsciously, she stereotypically felt the best place to find a man both decent and dominant, was to look among Muslims. And there she found Alex foolishly thinking that she had found Islam much the same way he had. Like how a butterfly finds a flower, rather than a moth attracted to a flame.

The midnight swim.

It was 3:02 at night and Alex still couldn't sleep. Sallia wasn't sleeping either; she looked at him with much concern from the other side of the bed. The past few days he had been indulging the thoughts deeper and deeper, putting more than just a toe into the icy pool. Letting go more information when talking to people about all that had happened. He

had been constantly triggered to engage in new thoughts and new angles to look at things. Eventually even Sallia couldn't console him, and it got to a point where he just had to dive in. The water was still ice cold, but the thoughts were set in motion with an unstoppable momentum. Everything that happened between them, every moment they had shared, every little detail, so many words told. Words once accepted as truth without doubt. And so little time in just one night to reconsider, re-analyze and re-interpret them all. How could he have missed all these things for such a long time, how could he not have connected these dots earlier? The notion that he would have to get up and ready for work in a couple of hours seemed trivial. Imaginary lines are being drawn, far more important than sleeping. A pattern emerges, suggestive, open for interpretation, but undeniably a recognizable pattern. There's no sense denying. There's no point. Yet at the same time the idea seems too silly for words. I'm too strong, too smart, a psychology teacher; he reassured himself. His pride was not yet ready to admit he could have been abused and manipulated like that. Sallia, with much care and love whispered a single word ever so softly into Alex his ear:

“Boot”

Although,.. Alex continued admitting to himself, when it comes to emotions he was very vulnerable. He likes to think of himself as emotionally strong, likes to think he can keep himself from acting on emotions and whims most of the time. Yet, he did have a low self-esteem, to the point of even putting others before himself. And she did know that from the start, didn't she. Oh how she took his sympathy to town. Once he started analyzing his own behavior from a professional point of view, it was a clear text-book response for being abused. The more she treated him badly, the kinder and more patient he would try his best to be. The more she'd grind him down, the more his self-esteem relied on the absence of her kindness. Till the point he'd gotten himself convinced that he actually was a bad person; convinced she didn't deserve him. Always making excuses for her inexplicable behavior. Always hoping that with patience and kindness she'd change. Bending over backwards, and thinking he did it by choice. To please her, to sooth her, out of kindness. But what if she knew? Oh, impossible, the mere thought. How dare he indulge that thought? But what if she did? NO! What if she knew just how to push his buttons? Sallia nestled a bit closer to Alex, put her hand on his chest. Her eyes were red with anguish over seeing Alex hurt. She softly repeated:

“Boot”

No, that doesn't matter. Abuse is abuse, whether she realized it or not. Even if it was so, that still doesn't make her a sociopath of course. Borderline personality for sure, but really beyond hope? He knew she didn't intentionally refrain from loving him. She did decide to marry him. Did she want to love him as well? Surely she needed to love somebody, and needed to be well loved in return. Yet the hardest he tried was never enough. Sallia was becoming more and more desperate; she wanted to spill it all out. However she understood that if she went against his current line of thinking too much, there was a risk of him becoming somewhat aware of her presence in his mind. He had to get there by himself to avoid so. Therefore, she just repeated, louder than before, almost yelling.

“Boot!”

This time it finally registered. And immediately by association, a memory followed. Something Maysa' had told him shortly after divorce. She had said that, it was really all his fault, since he had always given her the feeling she could walk all over him. Sallia always hated Hail for making her think that. And hated him even more for making her spill it to Alex. Even if at some level she was jealous of his ability to manipulate Maysa'. Right now she was just relieved that she could use this against her.

“*Our* fault?”, Sallia whispered.

In his mind, Alex hadn't allowed her to walk over him; he had just been patient and kind by choice. Though that technical difference seemed to matter little now.

“No.”, Sallia interrupted, “She had a choice.”

And suddenly Alex was filled with despise. It's hard to hate somebody you love so much, but even harder to try and keep your emotions from pouring there once the dam breaks. The dam had been cracked for weeks now, letting go an occasional rush of thoughts. At least once in a good day and many more in any other day he cried relentlessly. Cried for not having been able to mend her wounds. For loving so much and not being loved in return. For not having been able to teach her the things she so desperately needed to learn. They say the mature thing to do is accept that sometimes things don't work out between two people and that it's nobody's fault. But now the dam was scattered

“Well, call *us* immature and see if *we* care!”

Sallia yelled.

“*We* decided to go all in. Open *our* heart to the fullest to her. Marry her. Put in all of *our* chips.”

She waited a second, and then in a much softer voice added:

“Sadly, she didn't.”

Even so, that still doesn't make her a sociopath of course. Borderline personality for sure, but really beyond hope? He couldn't know for sure; there were too many details, too much room for interpretation, too many angles. The ideas were still too fresh to put into perspective and his mind was still numb from this ice cold midnight swim. There had

definitely been manipulation. That much was clear. Sallia now rested her head on his chest.

“See, it's not *our* fault; we shouldn't be so hard on *ourselves*”

He had always suspected by the temperature of their marriage that there must have been chunks of ice in their pool. Never though had he considered an iceberg of this magnitude. No wonder the pool had felt too cold to enter months afterwards. No wonder their ship went down. Titanic eat your heart out.

Chapter 21 Niyol

Sallia didn't bother to stick around. Alex and Adham would inevitably be drawn into religious debate yet again. She didn't even wait to check and walked straight into the next room.

“Something wrong, Sallia?”, asked Argon in an annoyed tone of voice.

“Did you do something to the equipment?”

“What? Like what? Why would I?”

Sallia couldn't read Argon one bit. Very few people could as a matter of fact.

“Doesn't it seem tampered with? I don't quite understand the physics behind it, but-”

Argon interrupted.

“No, I didn't notice, why would I care about it.”

“Well I hope you don't think sabotage like that would work, that he wouldn't notice-”

“Sallia, you were there when we got our orders weren't you?”

She stared at him, looking for something, looking for anything. Of course, there was nothing. What was she thinking trying to get anything from facing off a top 5 veteran? She turned around and re-entered the examination room; completely ignoring a debate on whether or not *sahih*⁷ *hadeeth*⁸ were actually infallible in content, and what the *sahih* status meant in *fiqh*⁹.

“So you decided to join us after all?”

Niyol, Adhams *qarin*, was even more irritated. She ignored him and just turned towards the machinery to take a closer look. She didn't remember in great detail how it looked before, so it was impossible to spot anything different. Nothing in our outside seemed broken either, and she lacked to insight in the design to verify if everything was connected and wired up properly. She could however see the trace residue of a punctured 11th dimension. That could only mean one thing, somebody changed something. Physically forcing through the membrane that separated them. But what reason does a *djinn* have to travel there? Who would take such a huge risk? Specifically near the equipment. She was the only lower-ranked *qarin* who knew that much of the equipment, because of the key-position of her mark: Alex. All others were kept in the dark. That left only two of the five level-one *qarins*; *Ifrid* and Argon. But they had their orders. She knows, she was there, they were quite clear. Why would any of them do this? You don't get to live as long as those two have by taking big risks like crossing the dimensions.

“You're still planning on giving me a hand here anytime soon?”

Niyol still looked agitated. Sallia turned her head to observe the debate a few seconds; it had progressed to *usul fiqh*¹⁰.

“Your mark is incompatible with our *Wahhabi*-brainwash. We need to end this debate before he compromises my mark as well.”

Suddenly, Sallia seemed spooked. She was analyzing the brainwaves Alex was emitting, trying to predict his next line.

“Fuck, it's getting worse...”

“You know, Adham, you belief life on earth is a test right? So, what are we tested about?”

Adham didn't quite get where Alex was heading at, so he shrugged his shoulders.

“What kind of silly question is that? It's about who will go to heaven and who will go to hell.”

“Yes, yes that's what we're tested for, but what are we tested about?”

The monitor clearly showed Adham was getting annoyed by these questions.

“Whether we're good or bad, obviously”

“And what does that mean. How does God test that? By giving us a puzzle which we have to solve rationally? To see which one is the smartest and can come to the correct religion or division through logical reasoning? Does being smart give you higher chances of success in the afterlife? Are you more likely to be good when you can arrive at the 'logical' conclusion? Or are we tested on how we deal with our emotions?”

⁷The *sahih* status, given to a *hadeeth* means that the chain of narrators are deemed reliable.

⁸A saying by Muhammed, normally accompanied with the chain of narrators going back all the way to the Prophet

⁹Islamic jurisprudence. The science of deriving rules from religious scripture.

¹⁰The fundamentals and methodology of Islamic jurisprudence.

Alex took a pause to let things sink in, but all Adham did was think how he could defeat his arguments. Alex continued:

“I mean you keep approaching the matter strictly rational. Arguments and what not. Do you really think that you believe whatever it is you believe, simply because of your conscious rational arguments? Or would you accept that a subconscious part of your mind makes that decisions for you. That you are driven by emotions. And that your rational conscious mind just looks for rational arguments to justify what you wanted to believe in the first place? Are we tested in this life to see how logical and rational we can be, or are we tested to see which emotions we choose to follow?”

Halfway during that long speech Argon had stepped through the mirror to join the conversation as well.

“Get your shit together you bunch of amateurs.”

Niyol looked at Argon in despair, hoping for help;

“I'm all out of distractions.”

“Oh really, said Adham, and what kind of emotion do I follow then, according to you?”

Argon just stared with an obnoxiously calm gaze, without any sign of empathy for Niyol's failure. It took him a while to figure out why, eventually he finally managed to asks;

“Why would distractions be useless?”

“Your self-love. You love how these other insecure kids hang on your lips with every word you speak. You love being the leader of the pack, the alpha-dog. That's why you must be right, and that's where your qarin is hiding, behind your pride.”

Adham was shocked by the mere suggestion of that idea, and considering what to do with it, while Niyol was really freaking out.

“Fucking bastard. Calling me out on that.”

“You're not out of distractions,” intervened Argon, “It's the scenario. He's panicking; he feels there's no alternative. There's nothing you could possibly occupy his mind with now.”

“It's a case of no-atheists-in-foxholes?”

“Similar.”

A bit relieved, still uncertain in the presence of a legend, Niyol asked for confirmation;

“So, I should just leave him be and do damage-control after the situation is remedied?”

By now even a one-word-answer seemed too much of an effort to respond. This is all covered in level two basic tactics after-all. Argon decided to respond merely with one of his cold, detached, and alarmingly relaxed stares. And then, deus ex-machina, a distraction. Alex took his ringing phone out of his pocket and looked at the caller idea. It just showed an unrecognized number. He considered for a while whether it was worth its while to break professionalism. Sallia finally started pitching in, and gave it all she had:

“What if it's about Yunnus or Aisha?”

And with that thought, Alex no longer felt he had any choice in the matter and picked up.

“Yes...”

“Hi Mister Leach; this is Nurse Stephanie Walker from the Rhode Island Hospital. I'm sorry I'm afraid I have some bad news for you.”

Now he was really panicking, was his intuition right again?

“Yes?”

“It's about Abdul-Ghaffar; he had another attempt on his life.”

Immediately, Sallia commented:

“What a relief.”

And then, from another angle;

“How dare *we* think that, shame on *us*.”

“Luckily I came in for my routine check-up just in time, so don't worry he's safe now.”

Alex was a bit annoyed, off course the nurse would assume he'd be filled with concern and worry now, he couldn't blame her for assuming that. Off course she couldn't know that his mind was really occupied with thinking why she had called him. Luckily his patience paid off.

“He's not talking to any of the doctors. So, I went ahead and asked him if I could call somebody for him that he would talk to.”

Chapter 22: Xanthos

This time, Abdul-Ghaffar was watching the television-set on his room. Or at least, he was staring at it, thought Alex.

Watching would be rather challenging, seeing how he switched the channel every other second.

“You wanted to talk to me?”

Abdul-Ghaffar stopped channel-hopping for a second, with the remote still pointing forward. He stared at Alex just a bit too long for comfort, and then continued changing to different frequencies while replying;

“No, not really. Can't see the point in it.”

Alex wanted to ask him to stop it, but decided against it. Not so much out of courtesy, rather because he understood it was a power-play. Abdul-Ghaffar wanted him to ask exactly that, so that he could defy him by continuing. Alex knew, and that's why he didn't ask. The change in sounds and volumes from each channel was rather annoying nonetheless.

“I heard you tried to kill yourself again.”

Abdul-Ghaffar didn't respond, other than changing the channel yet again.

“... and that you failed at it again.”

That seemed to do the trick. Alex could scarcely dodge the remote. The lid where the batteries were kept flew open when it hit the wall. One of the batteries rolled under the bed. The TV now showed an actor with a chef's hat pitching a ridiculously over-priced knife-set. It would probably be stuck on that channel for a while. Gathering the batteries would be too much of a hassle for Abdul-Ghaffar, definitely with Alex staring. It would defeat the purpose of the drama that had lead up to it.

“Maybe you should call; his knives might do the trick.”

“The fuck's wrong with you bitch!”

“Well, I figured if you don't want to talk I might as well help you with your drama.”

Of course Abdul-Ghaffar realized how silly he was for avoiding conversation. He would have come around, if it weren't for what qarin Xanthos told him.

“Man this fucker is going to be so sorry for his disrespect when *we* actually do manage to off *ourselves*.”

“You saying I failed on purpose?”

Of course Alex knew better than to debate him, instead he suggested Abdul-Ghaffar was filling in the dots all by himself;

“*Am* I saying that?”

“Slippery weasel.”; whispered Xanthos.

With that thought Abdul-Ghaffar sighed.

“Look, just say what you wanted to, so we can get this over with.”

Alex welcomed the openness and his body-language changed accordingly, almost pleading him.

“I don't have anything off importance to say. What's important is that you have a chance to say what you have to say. You really think I've come all the way here just to annoy you?”

And with that, the last possibility to appeal to defiance was gone. Xanthos tried to remedy that by projecting a painful image. In the image, there were two versions of Abdul-Ghaffar. One wearing the pyjamas he was now actually wearing, lying on the floor covering his head with his arms. And a second version wearing a doctor's uniform viciously kicking the first one. Somehow the Image felt just right to Abdul-Ghaffar who welcomed it.

“Either way, it's still pointless.”

“How so?”

Xanthos tried cutting in by suggesting that even explaining the pointlessness of life was in itself pointless. Afraid that Alex would miss the subtleties of it all, Abdul-Ghaffar decided to attempt to explain it after all.

“It's everywhere, the sadness. In every person, in every argument, in every event. There's no point fighting it, either way it turns out, it all goes to shit, everything.”

Alex felt trapped. He could tackle any logical, rational argument, but he couldn't argue against emotions. Then again, he couldn't refrain from trying.

“Plenty of people love you and care for you. Doesn't that give meaning to your life?”

“But *we* don't deserve it!”; tried Xanthos.

“Even that will perish.”; said Abdul-Ghaffar with a minimum of effort and emotion. Unwilling to show he was emotionally invested in that statement.

“Yes off course; we're not here forever, but that doesn't make it any less real or purposeless. Just think how your mom would feel.”

Xanthos stared at Sallia.

“Fuck man; this guy is relentless.”

Then he turned back to Abdul-Ghaffar;

“She should understand it's not about her, it's about *us*.”

The echo through Abdul-Ghaffar's lips sounded similar;

“So I should just soldier up and continue suffering in this god-forsaken world for her sake?”

“Has she given up on you? Don't you think she knows what you did to your sister?”

Of course she knew, he knew that. But he never admitted it to himself. He couldn't. And here it was again, that thought. She knew what he had done to his sister, and yet she still loved her son, unconditionally.

Chapter 23: Acheron (II)

“Of course I hate myself for what I did to my son.”

Victoria was at her usual denial, and Alex was worn out. He kept thinking about what Abdul-Ghaffar said. He couldn't quite put his finger on it yet, but something really hit home.

“I wonder were Argon is.”, said Sallia. Diplomatically trying to start a tangent conversation with Victoria's qarin. Acheron looked at Alex, who was barely trying anymore. The marks didn't need their full attention obviously. He then turned toward the one-way mirror, and where humans would merely see a reflection, he didn't see Argon neither Michael in the adjacent room.

“Maybe Michael had a day off?”

“Maybe.”

Sallia felt she couldn't let this opportunity slip. Acheron was clearly a very capable qarin; he seemed to have a strong intuition.

“You know-”

Sallia stopped; somehow that wasn't the right start. She tried thinking of another way.

“Why don't you just tell me what's on your mind, Sallia?”

She smiled a bit embarrassed.

“There's no easy way to say this, I have reasons to believe a high-ranked qarin has gone renegade.

Acheron looked back to the mirror for a second, either to make sure the room was really empty, or perhaps hoping to see any additional hints he missed the first time. Sallia couldn't tell which.

“Argon?”

“Either him or Ifrit, I haven't pinned it down yet.”

“Fuck girl, you know what a pile of shit you're raking up? You got any proof of this?”

“Nothing direct, that's why I have to figure this out first before I take it any further. Which one do you think is most likely to defect?”

“Ah shit. Don't bring me into it; I'm staying clear from that.”

“You don't have to do anything. Just, you know, let me bounce some ideas off you. Give me your two cents?”

Acheron looked around a bit, hesitating.

“Look, it's just impossible. Both of them have perfect track records. Ifrit is the right hand of Iblies, his PR-man. If he's not a true believer, then I don't know who is. And Argon is Iblies his go-to guy. His soldier, his general who would fight his way through hell and back. I just can't see either of them slip away. You sure you're on the right track here?”

Perhaps his intuition was not that strong after all. It had to be Argon. Acheron confirmed it, Ifrit was the obvious believer. Argon always seemed emotionally detached.

“Sallia?”

His voice brought her back to reality. Was there any point in taking this any further? Maybe Acheron was right.

Maybe she should play this one out on the sidelines and not get involved. But what if Alex...?

She looked at the magnetic pulse generator again. She had become quite certain this was the part that was tampered with. Yet as far as she could tell, everything looked like it was hooked up right to function. Unless, it wasn't sabotaged but fine-tuned. Then she remembered what Iblies said; to convince Alex the machine needed more testing. Did Argon went ahead and figure the best way to do that was to tamper with the machine?

“Sallia? We still have a mission here, remember?”

“Oh fuck that, Victoria's fine. I need to go prep for Vince.”

And with that she left her mark with Acheron and Victoria who bored him to death.

Chapter 24: Beryll

Sallia was shocked. She had thought for hours on how to best approach Ifrit with Argon lurking in the other room.

When Vince finally arrived, all her hope shattered. What she saw was Beryll. A young cocky-looking djinn. What was he doing with Vince? Why was Ifrit replaced? What did this mean? Did Argon outplay Ifrit already, was she too late?

Or was she wrong, was Ifrit the defector? Had he already been caught?

“Hello Vince.”

Alex sat down and waited patiently to see how he would respond. Vince looked worse than ever. The contrast between his usual apparent self-control and the now twitchy nervous wreck was unimaginable.

“I ... I need help doctor Leach.”

Nobody in the room believed what they heard, not even Vince. Beryll looked at Sallia.

“It's not like Ifrit handed me the manual on his little toy.”

Of course, this is why marks normally have one qarin their whole life. It takes years of following them and analyzing their unique mental make-up. Watching their mind as it develops from birth, all the milestones.

“You surprise me Vince. Please, continue. What kind of help.”

How could he possibly have gotten like this? Did Ifrit do this, or was it just Beryll's failure? Beryll whispered to Vince.

“Can *we* trust an outsider.”

He wasn't sure that Vince would accept his voice as one of his own, but he had to chance it.

“I don't know doctor. I feel like... like... I never felt this way before, like something dormant in me has been woken up.”

“Could you describe this?”

“Well, it started the other day when I attacked Michael.”

Again the whole room was filled with surprise. Alex spoke first.

“What, when? Why wasn't I told?”

Sallia thought exactly the same. Then she thought of the meeting with Iblies. Somehow she couldn't shake the idea that she had missed something vital.

“I asked to see him a few days ago, things got out of hand.”

Vince seemed embarrassed. Of course, they met unattended! Argon and Ifrit both at the meeting. Nobody knew, or those that knew couldn't have known the importance of it. She had to get more details, she quickly whispered to Alex.

“Why?”

But it was too late. The little control she had over him was useless now. A much more pertinent question was filling Alex his mind already.

“How did that make you 'feel'?”

Vince's eyes were filled with tears. His voice stayed neutral as ever:

“I'm a monster. It made me feel like I'm a monster, and for the first time in my life, I didn't like that feeling.”

“I can't believe it, how could you fuck him up that bad Beryll!”

“It was like this when I got it. You think second-hand marks are a day in the park?”

“Impossible, how can I be that weak, I used to be so independent? Fuck what did you do to me?”

“Honest to God, Vince I didn't do anything, I don't understand it myself.”

Beryll looked at Sallia with suspicion.

“Why does he think Alex did anything?”

“Oh, Ifrit left him hanging dry a day or two...”

“What; in this place?!”

Now Beryll realized his mistake. Now he knew what to do. He hadn't tried tweaking with his intuition so far, stirring a sense of danger. He had been too afraid to mess it up. Luckily no situation had occurred so far where he had needed to. But if Ifrit left him intuition-less for a few days as well, that might have been a bad decision after all. So Beryll, without giving it much further thought brute-forced the feeling. As soon as he placed his finger on Vince's neck, a cold shiver ran all the way down his spine, a rush of adrenaline, heightened senses. A rookie mistake. Now that Vince felt he still had a dark presence in him, there was no longer any reason to distrust Alex. Vince looked up with disbelief. He was telling the truth after-all. He hadn't done anything. And now his darkness tried to warn him, to scare him, tried to turn him away from him. And then Vince realized it. He realized that he hadn't been in control of his own life for a very long time. That's why he was feeling like shit the last few days. He wasn't breaking down, he was actually getting better. Getting used to living life again.

“Doctor, maybe next time you could bring your equipment again?”

Chapter 25: Sallia (II)

Vince was sitting in the leather chair waiting for Michael. Somehow the thought of meeting him again made him extremely nervous. When he finally got there, Vince had no idea on how to behave himself.

Ever since the last meeting, Beryll had worked day and night on numbing out his empathy again. Attacking him from all angles, battling for control, and he was close to grinding him down. This meeting was definitely key. If Alex got to use his equipment on him, this little splinter of premature enlightenment still left, could grow into a proper fully-grown emotion. Yet the rules forbade him to alter Vince's mind against his free will. He had to work with emotions that were already there; stimulating him to think of the ones that were useful, and distracting him from the dangerous ones. Michael didn't say hi either.

"Don't provoke him." whispered Argon.

Beryll looked towards Argon who encouraged him;

"Just as we planned, you can do it."

Argon turned to Vince

"He's still angry."

Vince looked at his feet, a reflex from these newly formed brain cells signaling that they were still there. That was Argon's cue:

"Let *us* get to work quickly."

Michael started unraveling the wires of the device. Beryll's turn again.

"Maybe he got it wrong."

"Alex designed this device, right?"

Michael looked Vince in the eye for the first time;

"Yes, he did..."

Beryll and Argon simultaneously screamed at their marks; each a different message. Argon yelled to Micheal;

"Smart as he might be, he's not a physicist!"

Whereas Beryll approached his mark with;

"We shouldn't be the first to test it!"

Michael, still looking at Vince fidgeting uncomfortably with the wires he was holding. The room was hot, but it couldn't possibly account for the sweat on Vince's forehead.

"What kind of test did you ran, you know, before you got the go-ahead to use it here?"

Argon was really going at it.

"He's always so certain of himself, isn't he? Can we really allow him to take this risk?"

Since Michael stopped responding, Vince became more paranoid.

"What are the risks, Michael?"

Keeping a first-name basis startled Michael. It made Vince seem so vulnerable. So humane, while asking that question, so emotion-bound. Michael couldn't think of him as an ice-cold dark parasite anymore.

"I'm sorry, could you just wait here for a second."

Vince was sitting there for about 15 minutes with Beryll pacing back and forth hoping everything was working out as planned.

Then suddenly Alex, followed by Michael stormed back through the door.

"You shouldn't, I still think it's dangerous."

Argon was constantly shadowing his mark Michael, yelling to him:

"Don't stop him; he'll fire '*us*'!"

Sallia took a shortcut trough the wall, every second was vital. She ran towards the device, to no avail. Beryll tackled her. Was he conspiring with Argon? In desperation she tried to reason with him.

"We can't let him use it on his self, it's been tampered with, amped up, he won't survive it!"

Alex was already attaching the wires and putting on the headband on his own head.

"So Vince, I hear you have little faith in the safety of my device."

Beryll clearly disproved of Sallia's emotions.

"So what, he's just a human."

In her panic for what was almost about to occur, she found the strength to push Beryll away and make a jump for the machine. Argon let go of Michael's mind and ran to protect the device. He slammed her body down to the floor just seconds before she could reach it. Alex his hand was already moving toward the on-switch. She had to struggle with two male djinns now to save him.

"See? Safe as sundaes. You happy?"

Beryll left Sallia in Argon's hands and rushed to Vince.

"What about phase two?"

Vince shook his head.

"No, what about the electromagnetic stimulation."

The monitor showed Alexander's frustration. Luckily for him, he was the only one who could interpret the patterns.

His hand moved to a trigger marked: EM. The plug connecting the headband was just outside Sallia's reach. She shook and squirmed and gave it everything she had to gain those last few inches. Then suddenly pain. So much pain. Not just Beryll his foot crushing her hand. Also the pain of all her hope being shattered into pieces. By now Alex his hand had reached the trigger. All three djinns froze when they saw Alex falling to the floor unconsciously. She had to help him, stop the damage, but it was pointless, the two of them were too strong and already she could feel them pushing the life out of her. She stopped holding Argon back and moved her one free arm towards Alex, who was lying also just out of reach. Then with her last breath, she whispered:

"I'm sorry my love."

Beryll relaxed and smiled at the idea of a successful mission, but Argon sensed something was wrong. The electromagnetic field had only been up for a fraction of a second, had he amped it up so much it had blown a fuse? It wasn't until he stood up that he noticed Michael was no longer standing at the door. He found him standing next to the mirror, still holding the extension cord he had just unplugged.

"Son of a--"

The guard ran inside and checked Alex his pulse.

"He's ok."

But everyone else in the room knew that was far from the truth.

Chapter 26: Yunnus

Yunnus was observing his father from a distance, trying to find the courage to proceed. One of the other patients, Rupert, approached Dr. Leach and snapped the remote control of the television set out of his hands in a child-like fashion. Alex looked up with a gentle smile at the skinny, pale, forty-year old guy who was now clutching a remote tightly in his thin frail hands. Rupert was looking back anxiously to see how this victim of his perfect crime would respond. Alex continued to smile which made Rupert even more anxious. But then finally reassured him with a comforting nod. Yunnus opened the door to the ward and walked towards his father. Rupert was gone by the time Yunnus approaches his dad.

"Why didn't you stand up for yourself, dad?"

He was clearly distressed at seeing his father had become such a push-over.

"Aselam aleykum; I'm sorry son, You shouldn't worry. It's alright; Rupert's just a patient in a mental hospital after-all."

The despair in Yunnus his voice increased as he felt urged to remind his father that he was a patient there as well now. Alex noticed the sentiment, and commented before Yunnus could say anything.

"I know, I'm sorry for that too, son."

Yunnus sighed deeply;

"It'll be alright dad; I didn't come to make you feel sorry.

"Yes, I'm sor--"

Alex held briefly; then restarted:

"Yes, I know that, you're very kind Yunnus, and I love you with all my heart."

The despair moved back in; he contemplated reassuring his dad, telling him that this is not the end of the world; that he still has so much to live for. Eventually he decided against it and tried to change the subject instead;

"I brought you something to read".

His father didn't seem at all interested. Not until he saw the book.

"Le petit prince; your favorite right?"

That caught his attention. Alex looked down at the book presented to him on the table. Again emotions got the better of him. Yunnus frowned as he searched Alex's face for a glimpse of what used to be his father.

"I'm sorry son, but--"

Alex his eyes were getting wet. Yunnus interrupted and tried to change the subject again.

"I asked mom if I could take Aisha to see you. But she just kept on yelling and throwing her usual fits. I guess I'll just go behind her back and pick her up after school or something."

Now the tears were really running, even dripping off his chin. Though, Alex seemed to ignore them and didn't change composure the least nor do anything different because of it. He just continued in a neutral tone of voice;

"I know you have a hard time with your mother son, I'm sorry. If only I--"

Yunnus couldn't take it anymore;

"Will you stop apologizing already!"

Alex continued to cry silently and just waited for his son to calm down. After a few seconds he continued;

“You don't understand son, I'm not just being polite. I really am sorry. I can see it now, what Abdul-Ghaffar talked about; the sadness, everywhere, all around us, there's no point in trying. I thought I could change the world. I was over-confident. It was shirk¹¹. I'm a disgrace, I failed miserably. And all I can think of, is that I'm so sorry for everything. My mistakes, the world, everything. I wanted to find a cure so badly, she is still your mother after all.”

“Dad; you're not responsible for the whole world, and even so, a Muslim should never feel safe against Allah's plan, nor feel despair in being able to get Allah's mercy; you taught me that yourself remember? A life lived neither in vain nor in vanity?”

“No, it's my fault, I should have seen the signs, I failed her and in doing so I failed you and your sister.”

Now Yunnus was crying too;

“Dad, it's not your fault. I know you tried, but mom-”.

“No-”

His father tried to interrupt, but Yunnus continued with strong determination;

“Mom's... she's... I mean, you know-”

He's wrong. I shouldn't have let her walk all over me, if only I hadn't been so insecure.

“You don't understand Yunnus, she wasn't always- Sure she was narcissistic and had problems forming attachment. But I should have been able to help her. And I wanted, I loved her so intensely, but it clouded my judgment. She needed me ... she needed me to be strong, and instead I was too impatient with her mood swings. I should have known better, I ... I could have helped her if I wouldn't be so caught up in my own world. Instead I pushed her over her border.”

For a few agonizing seconds, neither wanted to say anything. Then Yunnus took another deep breath.

“Have you prayed Dohr¹² yet? Let's just find a nice and quiet place around here where we can pray, right?”

Alex looked up now with half a smile;

“I'd like that son. I'd like that very much.”

Chapter 27: Ifrit (II)

Sallia turned and left immediately without looking back. Argon waved casually with his hand and left as well. Ifrit remained there for a couple of seconds, determined to have a word in private first. Iblies noticed, turned to him and asked:

“Could you stay another moment, we have something else to discuss.”

They both waited for Argon to leave. When he finally did, Ifrit took the initiative.

“There are some questions haunting my mind lately.”

Of course Iblies already knew that he was losing his grip on Ifrit. This certainly didn't come as a surprise. A strategy was still being devised on how to deal with it, and now Ifrit had caught him unprepared. Ifrit had been a most useful tool in convincing other djinns of the cause. That made him powerful, if he had to cut him loose, it would be a huge blow to the agency. So he hoped it wouldn't have to come to this yet.

“Lately, said Ifrit, I've seen something in you that I didn't see before.”

Iblies was still trying to play it light, and replied with a big smile on his face.

“Really what's that then?”

“I can't shake the idea you're not telling us the truth. Ever since I've been working with you, there were things that sat wrong in my heart. I suppressed and denied it, out of respect and admiration for you. But now that I feel emotionally betrayed, suddenly the logic starts breaking down as well.”

Iblies didn't quite know how to respond to this, did Ifrit already make his mind up, or was he fishing for a reaction? Either way, he had to assume the latter; if that assumption would turn out wrong, he could always act accordingly then.

“You have doubts, but I know you still have faith Ifrit.”

Ifrit seemed consumed by thought, then shook off whatever had filled his mind and continued.

“Well there's so many things, like how come some of these Muslims are so difficult to work with. It's like their religion makes them immune to most of our tricks.”

Iblies replied, without hiding that he was quite annoyed.

“Their heresy is immune to most of our tricks because it was created by other djinns; others who know our modus operandi, remember.

¹¹Islamic term for breaking monotheism by associating a partner with God.

¹²Midday prayer

Ifrit, disappointed by the same old answer just moved to his next question.

“And another thing, it just never feels right, getting them to be violent against another, and so on.”

“Stomping out their empathy is a necessary evil to prevent them from pulling each other back into heresy all the time.”

“I know, but isn't that in itself worse?”

“We are tested through them. God wants us to prepare them for when it'll be time for them to receive their true faith, the only way to do that is to rid them of all their false beliefs, or at least replacing a big heresy by a little one. But you already know all of this, right? What are you getting at?”

“Well, we have to take your word for it; you're the only djinn who ever talked to God.”

Iblies was furious, how dare he question him. Yet he knew he had to keep his cool.

“That makes me your prophet, doesn't it?”

Ifrit paused. Then decided to take it further after all.

“Their version is; that you were asked to bow for them as a test and that you failed because you looked down on them. Determined for revenge, you wanted to prove your point by showing their evilness, by misleading them.

“Well think about that, doesn't make sense does it that I'd try to save my ass, by getting myself in an even worse predicament?”

“Unless you've got your own plans off course.”

“Oh, So I'm thinking I'll outsmart my own creator?”

“No, I don't think you're so vain to think you'll outsmart him. Vain enough though, to refuse to believe he's given up on you. You have to, because if you accept all is lost, there's no purpose in anything anymore. You have to keep hope that he'll give you a way out if you do his dirty work.”

By now, Iblies his eyes were burning with fire. How dare he. He needs to be put in his place before he spreads such malicious doubts. Off course Ifrit saw.

“So it is true!?”

His words were not yet cold, and Ifrit was already lying on his back. Iblies was trying to hit the floor through his face. One hit after another. It only took two hits for Ifrit to die, but it took twenty-three for Iblies to calm down. He fell back drained by his rage and yelled “Fuuuuuck!!!!” in a last surge of uncontrolled emotion. After sitting there in self-pity for a while, thinking what an ass Ifrit was for letting him down; he sent for Argon. Then he waited, cooled down to his usual self, plotting and conspiring, waiting, thinking.

Upon arriving, Argon remained inert as ever gazing at Ifrit's lifeless body.

“I see you've remodeled his face then?”

It annoyed Iblies tremendously that he took this so lightly. But then again, it confirmed that he had called for the right kind of djinn. One that cared only for himself. Iblies pointed casually towards Ifrit's body;

“After you get rid of 'that', I'm gonna need you to tamper with Alex his device. Then we get him to test his machine on himself and blast his brain to a bigger pulp than this son-of-a-bitch. Fucker cost me one of my best qarins.”

Argon chuckled; he found Iblies his loss of self-control and anger pretty amusing. Iblies changed the subject.

“Oh, one more thing. What's your thought on Michael? I can't seem to put my finger on it, but there's something off about him. What d'you reckon is the chance of him interfering with our plan?”

Argon laughed. Of course he could not deny the sanity in thoroughly considering everyone involved. But Michael didn't seem to matter much to anyone.

“Zero; for a mark he's as generic as they come. His commonness and predictability is so plain, it's almost eerie.”

Chapter 28: Sivan

Sivan took one last glance at Alex before leaving him. The episode earlier with Yunnus must have drained him intensely. He was fast asleep and the nurses wouldn't wake him till supper. Young and adventurous Sivan had far more entertaining ideas. This place was far too much fun to sit there and watch Alex snore. No more than roughly 15 seconds after Sivan had walked through it, the door opened without being knocked on first. Michael came in, but strangely he wasn't accompanied by Argon. That made it a peculiar event. After several seconds of being stared at, Alex woke up from a very deep sleep. It took him a while to gather his thoughts. Michael's reassurance and soft words helped. Still something was off and Alex didn't feel at ease. The hairs on his neck stood up and a cold shiver ran down his spine. A rush of adrenaline saw to it that he was on edge, a razor's edge; and sharp as it too for that matter. He didn't ask what Michael was doing there, nor bothered to say hi. Instead he just asked;

“Yes?”

“You're not well, but you'll heal.”

Even if Michael wouldn't usually be so insecure and timid, this statement would still have seemed unnatural. Drenched in such confidence, he made it sound as if the future were equally clear to him as the past. Alex doesn't question him. Instead he stared at Michael, looking for clues that would tell him anything more about this odd encounter. Michael told him not to worry and held his hand against his head. Immediately Alex felt a bit more relaxed. In fact, considering the last few days he felt pretty neutral now, which was quite an accomplishment in itself.

“Vince was a loose cannon. You've no idea what was at stake here. It's important that you understand, it's not your fault”

“Your career will be just fine Michael, you shouldn't worry about it.”

Michael smiled warm and gently, like how you smile to a child when it naively says something funny. Of course Alex thought he was referring to his career, he still hadn't any clue of what had happened in the twists and shadows of the 11-dimensions of the space-time-continuum.

“Never mind that. I came across your book, while I was cleaning up the office. I wanted to bring it.”

Alex smiled at the irony. Silly how many people think a book would help him get out of here. Perhaps if a set of keys were hidden between the pages or even a metal-file. Half-jokingly he indulged the thought of filing through the bars at his window day by day. Other than that, a book was currently no more than a sad waste of death tree in Alex's mind. Then he saw Michael holding up a Qur'an. His copy of the Qur'an actually. Immediately he started feeling insecure for ridiculing the power of books, even if the ridicule was only indulged in thoughts. Somewhat guilty even, for thinking a book could do him no good. Alex held out his hand hesitantly to accept it humbly. Michael ignored his gesture. Again, not at all his usual behavior. Instead he confidently flipped some pages, and found what he was looking for almost instantly.

“It was lying open on this page; I wanted you to know that.”

Alex looked up even more confused than he was before. This wasn't Michael. And if he isn't, then who is he? Perhaps it was the medication that made Alex jump to conclusions so quickly. He no longer cared for the eventuality of this being Michael after all; and spoke without fear of saying something stupid he'd regret.

“How can I beat them, I mean, no matter how much I fight these voices.”

Michael smiled and disregarded the question. Instead he just started reading out loud the page that was open.

When Sivan returned; Michael was already finished. He had just left the room and he ran into him just outside the room in the hallway. Sivan was alerted by Argon's absence. Michael stopped right there and then and looked straight at where he was standing. For a second Sivan considered whether he was actually able to see him. Impossible of course. He did notice Michael struggling to hide a small smile in the corner of his mouth, which freaked him out even more. It was a split second only, as soon as he regained self-control, he continued walking. Straight through the qarin in fact, who felt rather uncomfortable because of it. Sivan now quickly turned his attention to his mark and glanced into the room. Alex was sitting on his bed reading a book. The same few verses over and over again. He could recognize the whispers through the walls and didn't dare to come any closer:

In the name of God, the most kind, the most merciful;

By the essence of all time.

Verily, all humankind is in deep loss.

Except those who believe and perform good deeds and recommend one another to the truth and recommend one another to patience.

Afterword:

On the subject of djinns little is known in the Islamic teachings; and many questions surrounding the matter persist in the mind of critical thinking Muslims. The fictional world described in this book is but a speculation on how some of those questions might actually have logical answers. Some parts may actually reflect the actual Islamic point of view in this matter, while others might not. So please keep in mind that this fictional work should in no way be seen as neither source nor reference on the Islamic point of view on this subject.

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