

## ONE

IT OFTEN HAPPENS TO ME, this sudden feeling of having been here before, in an indefinite past time, at this place. Before me lay a city bathed in the early sun rays, smoke, and panic. My Tesla sped through the streets of Globalized London, streets that looked so different on that day. My medical beeper buzzed relentlessly. The Ancient Greeks called this feeling *anamnesis*. Like waking up to some ineffable truth, peaking behind a curtain that is far beyond myself, just for a split second.

“... unclear if the explosion on Trafalgar Square is a terrorist attack,” a male voice in the late forties broke my thoughts through the crackling radio, trying to sound matter-of-fact. But I sensed the tremor behind it. Trafalgar Square. I would have to pass right by it to get to the hospital. I accelerated instinctively. My mind objected, as did the display on my lenses, raising a red warning sign that I was driving too fast.

“Danger in Trafalgar Square“ the display on my eyes read, and I blinked to erase the information.

The feeling of *anamnesis* refused to leave me. It was one of the side-effects of the ecstatic state my mind would escape to when it sensed danger. My brain was releasing dopamine and

norepinephrine into my system, chemicals that increased heart rate, tightened focus, and boosted pattern recognition capabilities, allowing me to make connections between information I hadn't noticed before. And this was only the first stage. The ecstatic experience was like breathing, like a sport the world chased since the biotechnological revolution. Still, it always made me uneasy.

Countless pedestrians were fleeing. Ambulances and police cars rushed past me. Sirens resounded everywhere. Armed men and women from the London Global Police roamed the streets, joined by soldiers and special forces in their black exoskeletons and blue helmets. What had become of this city? A European megapolis, a city that never sleeps, advanced, a model for the rising global world. Amidst the chaos stood the red double decker bus, and a gorgeous blonde woman waved at me from the large screen attached to it, advertising tooth-paste. The screen blinked, and went dark. London was crumbling around me, yet another city unable to escape the increasing terror that roamed our world.

I pushed a button on the left-hand side.

"Auto-pilot activated," a female computer voice spoke, too soothing to fit the tension that hung in the air. I tried to relax.

Except for the strange feeling, this morning had started very quietly. As usual, I woke up from a nightmare of flames and fire burning, a nightmare I had since I was little, and thus gave up trying to make sense of. As on every morning, I took two white pills and sipped my dark coffee while watching the sun slowly chase away the dancing street lights. My head still buzzed from the alcohol and the deafening music from the night before. I bathed in the memories of the tender shape and smooth skin that belonged to the woman I had been with. Carly, right? On the dance floor it was she who made the first move. Her words rung in my ears: "I've always fancied red-headed men." But it was the look she gave me that had sealed the deal. In the background, the newscaster as usual discussed the issue of the endless waves of refugees storming from the Outer Areas, the danger of terror that had hit countless Global cities in Europe and beyond over the course of the past five years. Then, the earth shook.

Now here I was, driving to the hospital. The air thickened, smoke and dirt condensed in the atmosphere. I knew I was close.

Chaos. The whole of Trafalgar Square was bathed in it. The monument of Admiral Nelson rose above the turmoil, coldly staring at the spectacle.

*Just drive by, Adama. You have to get to the hospital.*

Then I saw them. The people lying on the ground, injured, most of them so severely they wouldn't make it.

*Just drive.*

"Auto-pilot off," I shouted.

With a sudden movement, I steered the Tesla to the roadside, opened the door, and dismounted before my logic could contradict.

The air outside my car smelled of death, a foul mixture of blood, bones, and dirt. My hands trembled.

A red exclamation mark popped up in the corner of my lenses, indicating a dangerous area. I blinked to make it disappear and focused on what I saw in front of me.

Was this really true? It felt like a nightmare, like I would wake up any minute, because it was so different from the calm and restless life I lead. This sight was not new to me. How many times had I seen this on the television from the other global cities? The panic, the cries, the traces of the bloody corpses.

The Outer Areas that had been created over three decades ago in the global reform now turned against us, with the violence they once served to prevent. But until then the news had been always far away, like a movie. I could switch it off, and the horror would end. But now, standing in the midst of it, feeling the dirt on my skin, the smell in my nostrils, I feared that I was unable to handle the moment.

My medical bag was in the trunk, and I snatched it while throwing the buzzing medical beeper inside.

*Now, Adama.* I took a deep breath.

Smoke and chaos swallowed me as I marched directly towards the scene. They enveloped me like a blanket. Time began to slow down. No, I was thinking faster. I fell into the well of darkness, giving up control. The conscious mind is slow. It can only process

about twelve thousand bits of information at once, which equals two people talking. But unconscious processing can handle billions of bits at once, like a big data computer. I let my unconscious slowly take over, entering the depths of ecstasis.

A girl was on my right. Her white shirt was smeared with blood, her eyes wide with horror.

I bent down to examine her. My lenses switched to face-analysis.

*Amanda Faux. 22.*—Letters appeared on the screen, and disappeared with the blink of an eye.

She had just a minor injury, some insignificant splitters.

The man next to her tried to stand up, and I asked him to help her.

*Daren Green. 41.*

“Switch off face control,” I commanded. Not knowing the names made the sight easier to bear.

My feet took me further, directly into the eye of the storm. While I ran, I connected my brain to the web, retrieving information of when the ambulances left the nearest hospitals. The information appeared as text on my lenses, one after the other. My mind calculated: There was another ambulance coming in five minutes, and it would arrive a hundred meters north. I knew it because I passed one of the hospitals on my way here. Another would arrive south in seven.

My feet stepped onto watery ground. The two fountains had been destroyed by the explosion wave, their water spread all over the square. Remains of a bronze lion’s head lay scattered on the ground.

I could see where the bomb had been ignited. What was left was a pitch dark space, blood and human debris. A place of death. The suicide bomber’s body must have been torn into pieces in seconds. As was everybody’s who stood next to this beast.

My brain automatically downloaded the newest information on the matter: Terrorist suicide bomber ... refugee ... religiously motivated.

I knew the drill, so I switched off the notices. I had to concentrate on my surroundings.

I looked around. There were too many injured. How could I decide whom to take care of first? How would I live with my decisions? But my subconscious made me act faster than I could fathom. A girl next to me had torn off legs, and was screaming at the top of her lungs. She would pass out soon, but so would her chance of survival as she was losing too much blood. A man in his fifties was holding his head like a madman, bleeding from his ears. Probably a concussion due to the detonation. The girl had to go first. I ran towards her, took my belt and tried to stop the bleeding.

“A belt! I need another belt!” I shouted into the chaos, and looked around. Another victim offered me his, barely able to loosen it as he himself had a huge splinter in his left palm, his face twisted with pain.

I snatched the belt and tied it around the girl’s other leg, or what was left of it. She yelled again, and I had to suppress the rising panic. The ambulance. Two minutes left. I took the girl in my arms and carried her. In the distance, I could make out the sound of the siren. My hands were covered in blood, and I felt that my clothes also started to soak it in. The ambulance came to a halt while I ran, the emergency physician stormed out, just in time for me to pass the girl into his arms. He stared at me, dumbstruck. Then at the girl. No time to talk, no time to ask questions.

“Who ...” His voice faded into the distance. I sprinted like a racer. There was a man to my right whose stomach was completely open. He was bleeding out. If he was not dead already, it wouldn’t take long. A hurt spread inside my lungs, and I felt like I was unable to breathe.

*Adama, stop thinking.*

I had to leave him there. He was dead. And so was the woman with a smashed head several meters away. The air thickened, and although it was hard to see, my mind suddenly fixated on all the corpses surrounding me. So many. Panic spread inside my guts, and anger rose in my throat. I needed to go deeper.

*Stop. Thinking. Now.*

It felt like a switch had suddenly turned. I gave myself completely to ecstasis, allowing my consciousness to vanish,

replacing it by an intense euphoria and what felt like a powerful connection to a greater intelligence. It took over everything, and my conscious mind vanished in a well of darkness.

I started running like a madman.

The man with the huge splinter in his palm slowly limped in my direction. My medical bag had to be close. As soon as I found it, I bandaged his two largest wounds to stop blood loss temporarily.

“Can you walk?”

He nodded.

“To the left.” I signaled with my hands. “An ambulance should be there any minute.”

I watched him limp and turned around to see two children. Children? Why would children be here on their own?

I hurried towards them. Children always went out in groups with several overseers. Could they have gotten lost in the chaos? As I came closer, a girl was sitting next to another child on the ground. It was a blonde boy around nine or ten years old. Several big splinters had hit his lungs. He was desperately fighting for oxygen. It was too late.

“Face control,” I commanded.

My lenses scanned his face, but there was no information on this boy. A refugee.

His lungs had filled with air, and he would suffocate in minutes. Only then did I carefully observe the girl. No information on her either. What was it about her? Thin and dirty dark blonde hair was thrown back and forth by the wind, her deep blue eyes filled with tears. A contusion spread all over her right shoulder down to the elbow, the wound still fresh. But she did not seem to mind the pain. She held the boy’s hand, watching him die. This girl looked so familiar. She felt like a distant memory, but it was only anamnesis again, the side-effect of my altered state.

I lifted her while she cried and refused to let go of the boy. She fought me, threw her arms into all directions, and yelled while I tore her away from the suffocating child.

I was silent, but the pain she expressed was the same pain that ate me from the inside.

That day I stayed on Trafalgar Square for hours, ran several dozen kilometers, always carrying my medical bag with me. There were flames all around me, dirt and ash in the air. My clothes were drenched in blood that had half dried. Same with my hands. But my ability to rely on ecstasis made it bearable, as I could switch off my mind and let go of time and space.

The ecstatic experience was a trend the world had embraced during the past years in all its forms, but it was military training that had taught me to master it to such an extent. We would float in sensory deprivation tanks for hours, enveloped in utter darkness, all distraction eliminated. This way, we learned to train specific brain-waves and regulate heart rate frequency.

Still, my body gave up at some point, and I saw flickering images of fire in front of my eyes, images of yelling people. My nightmares were projected by my subconscious. Those flames relentlessly flashed before my eyes, and I started hyperventilating. Where was my car? I ran towards it, opened the trunk, threw the bag inside and grabbed a bottle of water, felt how the cool drops streamed down my throat, how my breath slowly became steadier.

This was when everything broke down. It all came back to me again, the horror, the blood, those images of the dying that flooded Trafalgar Square. I yelled as loud as I could, yelled into the open where nobody was to hear me. My hands shook from the stress, my muscles tensed, my fists clenched. I sat down and buried my head inside my palms.

*This will be over soon, I told myself. The situation is nearly under control.*

Slowly, my mind steadied. The horrors in Trafalgar Square subsided. Barriers were placed by workers in bright colors. The dust cloud fell and revealed the destruction in its wholeness: a mixture of blood, water, stone, splinters, and bronze from the lions that once majestically decorated this place. The war was fought in the hospitals now, where I should have been headed long ago.

I threw the empty bottle into the trunk and was about to close it. Something touched my back. A piece of metal, spreading its

cold past my bloody t-shirt to my shivering skin. My instincts knew before my mind realized it: It was a weapon.

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RAHAB HAD BEEN TOSSING and turning for hours. It was freezing cold.

Finally, she decided to open her eyes when Caleb woke up. His warming presence left her as he got out of the stone bed that she had softened with straw and fur. Rahab heard him getting ready for the field work and the hunt, and she started watching his muscular body. Who was this stranger sharing her bed? She tried to recall the shimmering in his pale gray eyes when they first met, but the shimmer has slowly waned, like the foggy mountains. Even now, as she was observing him, he never even looked back. Rahab made a move, sat up straight, her back turned towards him, and let her feet swing down from the bed, hoping he would notice her, acknowledge her at least. Nothing. He just stopped for a moment, eyeing the wall, breathing out. She could sense his disappointment from the other end of the bed. Everything had changed since that terrible day. He took his shotgun and went out into the early morning, which was still dark.

Rahab took a look into the dirty broken mirror they should have sold months ago. Her long brown hair was getting thinner, as was her body, tired of putting up with those stretches of hunger. Her bare feet touched the wood plank floor, and she impulsively pulled them back from the cold. It smelled of musty earth and cattle. The wind sung a burdensome song that echoed through the drafty windows. The moon shone from the outside, giving shape to the furnishings in this tiny hut Caleb and Rahab had built over seven years ago. She got up, clothing herself in a simple rugged long coat, pants, wool socks, and worn leather boots. She had to hurry before the moment would pass. Picking up a pile of wood from the cutting stump, she lit the fireplace in the middle of the house that was filled with ash and blackened wood chunks from the night before. The flames came slowly, crackling through the silence. All else was quiet,



except for the soft snoring of Samuel who was soundly asleep in the far corner. The sky was getting brighter by the second. Rahab pulled a shotgun from her hiding place amongst the straw, a hunting weapon she secretly acquired from a merchant years ago. It was much better than Caleb's, so she made sure he never knew of it. Nobody knew, except for Samuel. Hunting was not considered a woman's business in Area Three. She pushed the creaky front door open, and left the broken remains of what they called a house behind. Her feet led her through wild paths, the grass still fresh from the morning dew.

A whole new world spread before her, the sky now orange from the sun that didn't pass the horizon yet, the huge shadows of the mountains covering the lands. It would be a rare sunny day. She walked on, knowing she had to get the right view and might miss the spectacle any moment. It was a steep way up, but she was used walking on this path. Her breath got heavier, her eyes observed nature awakening with the first rays, and her sorrows yearned to vanish with the darkness.

And there she was, on top of a hill, right when the sun started to spread upon the horizon, illuminating the far end of the lakes spreading before her in all directions. The beauty took her breath away again—the calmness and majestic peace at the end of the horizon. This was her favorite moment, and it used to remind Rahab of what lay beyond the hardships she had to endure for being separated from the Inner Cities. Usually, it would give her a hope that she was unable to explain with plain reason. She closed her eyes and let the sun warm her face, the wind blow through her hair, waiting for this hope. But it never came. Too dark was the shadow that hung over her now, the shadow of this terrible decision.

Rahab looked down at her right hand—a little iron ring on the fourth finger, a careless scar at the back of the hand. She knew it was time to face the day soon. The decision had seemed inevitable back then, necessary. But now, it felt like pure pain.

*What have we done?*

Rahab breathed deeply as tears streamed down her face.

*What have we done ...*

She wiped them away, took the shotgun and directed her thoughts on the hunt ahead.

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THE COLD METAL of a weapon touched my bloody back. But something felt off about it. Panic spread inside my guts paired with the cold of the metal. A deep male voice spoke: “Stay silent.” It was a mere whisper. “Now, slowly, turn around.”

I did as I was told, panic in my throat, unable to utter a single word.

The barrel of an old shotgun stared at me, one that I only knew from movies of the nineties and early two-thousands. Did those bullets still get produced? Its owner was a wardrobe-shaped man with a massive brown beard that hung in his face like a sponge. His brown eyes narrowed as he watched me carefully. Unlike his two companions, he stood his ground firmly, holding the weapon as if it were an extension of his arm. The two boys next to him could not be older than eighteen, dressed in rags. One of them clumsily held a smaller shotgun that looked even older. The dirt and smell covering all of their bodies were evidence of a long and tiring journey. They were muscular, but only the bearded man sent a shiver down my spine.

My lenses scanned their faces, but there was no face recognition. Refugees.

“Listen,” I started, “Whatever you need, food ...”

“Be quiet,” the wardrobe-shaped man said, and pressed the barrel against my shirt. I gasped. “The keys,” he muttered.

Okay, they wanted the car. This could be over in a second. I gave him the key without hesitation.

“What’s your name?” he asked.

Why would he want to know?

“Adama.”

The two boys sunk into an inaudible whisper. He, on the other hand, showed no reaction, just eyed me from head to toe yet again.

“You drive,” he muttered, and pushed my body with the gun

towards the driver's seat. While I sat down, he mounted the passenger seat, pointing the gun at my side. The boys sat in the back. The electrical engine started soundlessly. We drove.

Quiet covered us. Where were they taking me? And why?

The man in the passenger seat would only mutter directions from time to time.

“Left. Right.” Every time he said it, he pressed the metal of the barrel into my skin, like a bee stinging my ego.

My anger rose, my nerves tense like steel ropes. Those refugees could be the suicide-bomber's companions, using me to escape. I despised everything they represented. My mind began to make plans of how to escape, how to kill them. I refused to be intimidated, but the guns took the better of my illustrious plans. As long as two of them were pointed at me, what choice did I have?

Soon, we left the city center of London and drove through the suburbs. They were aiming for the border. Like a hammer my heart pounded against my chest. No, not to the Outer Areas. Not this terrible place of chaos. But it made sense, autopilot would not take them beyond the border, and they needed a chip to pass it. My chip. I involuntarily glanced at the back of my right hand, where it was implanted. As long as we were on this side of the border, they would keep me alive. A chip was useless once the owner was dead. But how did they plan to smuggle themselves behind this construction of digital ones and zeros?

London grew more colorful out here in the suburbs. The houses became smaller, retail shops decorated the streets, and big advertising screens fought for attention. The suburbs were a place full of local artists and students, with painted garbage cans and strangely clothed figures inventing their own fashion trends, where the housing was cheaper and time pressure was lower. Gas stations still stood, and one could hear the hum of an old petrol car here and there compared to the soundless electric cars populating the strict environmental area in the city centre. There was the crackle of bikes and skateboards. The clubs hid in musty cellars and behind graffiti walls, shabby, rebellious, and even more excessive. This reminded me of my time in Oxford Medical School, a suburb that held the charm of centuries long gone.

It always gave me a sense of nostalgia, but the dread that held me now only evoked the feeling that the colorful streets were mocking me.

I diverted my attention to the news displayed on my lenses to stop my hands from shaking, if just for a split of a second, ignoring the traffic. The media was filled with the attack on Trafalgar Square which seemed to have ignited yet another debate about the flood of refugees who entered the cities from the Outer Areas. Nearly a year ago, the law of allowing only children to enter the border was passed, but did not seem to have affected security. Discussions about whether even children were brainwashed to commit suicide attacks spread all across the net.

“Hey!” a loud cry tore me from my musings, I blinked and saw that I nearly crashed into an oncoming car, steering the wheel back into my lane instinctively. The bearded man cursed and pressed the cold steel of the weapon against my side. My muscles tensed with the sensation.

“You’re nearly done,” he said, in what appeared a menacing tone. I’m nearly redundant, he meant.

Soon, houses became rarer, and then vanished completely, replaced by the industrial area where huge farms, corporate buildings, and factories of all kinds marked the landscape. The atmosphere grew even grimmer as the mighty border emerged from afar. Had we been driving for so long already? Steel pillars rose over hundred meters above the ground, marking the end of the Global Union. They were situated at the Birmingham Suburb and formed an invisible wall of ones and zeros governed by a computer. The programming would scan genetic codes and only allow living things to pass with an RFID chip, blocking the rest with a shock, like a wall that consisted of electrical impulses.

It was the first time that I’d seen this border so close. Before, I’d only flown above, observing it from the safe distance of a plane, wondering what horrors lay beyond—a wild wasteland, geographically divided into Areas. Everybody who left for the Areas and decided to live outside the Global Order would be delivered into poverty and ancient laws. My mind was flooded with the pictures I

constantly saw on the news of chaos, crime, and death that ruled this terrible place.

The car approached the border, and I slowed down involuntarily. We were about to cross to the Neutral Zone that lay between London and Liverpool. Maybe the drones roaming it might see me, maybe I still stood a chance to get out of here alive.

In the rear view mirror I saw one of the youngest boys taking out a device that looked like a black metal stick. He unfolded it and prolonged it into an antenna, then pressed a button. Nothing happened except that it emitted a soft, high-pitched tone. The border came closer. What was this device about?

“As soon as we pass the border, you push the gas pedal, understood?” my captor commanded, and stung me with the weapon. I nodded.

The metal pillars seemed to grow, like menacing signs, warning not to drive any further. Was this really happening? The whole ride seemed like a dream, so far away was it from my reality. Last night’s party seemed so far away. I thought about the raw pleasures of this night, the alcohol, the dancing, the beautiful woman I came home with. I allowed my mind to drift into how she had felt, the taste of her skin and her lips. My head buzzed. If there ever was a next time, I should drink less. A vain resolution. I yearned for the calmness and solitude of my apartment, the dark marble floor that reflected the dim lights, the hot black coffee. But the nightmare was not ending yet.

A red exclamation mark flickered before my eyes, warning me that I was approaching a danger area. The closer we came, the faster it flickered, tensing my nerves. I was unable to switch it off by blinking.

As we approached two of the glittering monsters, it was as if the invisible wall was illuminated for a split of a second, and opened up before us like a curtain. The device interrupted the signal. I stared in disbelief, mesmerized by the view while we drove right under the curtain and it slowly closed behind us. If the terrorists were in possession of such a thing, they could easily cross the border back

and forth without a chip. But a signal interruption could not go unnoticed, could it?

The boy folded the device in a hurry.

“Drive!” the passenger yelled at me. I pushed the metal, and the Tesla accelerated to a speed I had never the opportunity to drive before. We basically flew through the streets of the Neutral Area that looked like no-man’s land. My lenses suddenly went completely quiet. No warning signs. My brain felt no wireless connection. We were off the grid now, in a place of nothingness.

My captors constantly looked back and forth. They feared that a drone would detect them, following the interruption signal from the border. That’s why they needed to get as far away as possible. We rushed by broken down houses and ruins of a city that once stood here. Some people dressed in rags stood at the side of the street, warming their hands in the fires they made by the houses. But we drove too fast for me to see more. The Neutral Areas were said to be roamed by criminals and burglars, psychopaths who sought to escape judgment.

“Stop,” the front passenger suddenly uttered.

I glanced at him.

“Stop!” he yelled, and I hit the brakes. He signaled with his head to the left, a former driveway that had become overgrown with moss and trees. I slowly drove in while the Tesla was scratched by the branches.

So this was it. I was of no use anymore, was I?

As I dismounted, the shape of the borders broke the horizon in the distance. This was all my fault, it occurred to me. If I just had passed by Trafalgar Square, driven to the hospital as I was supposed to, I wouldn’t be here.

Two guns were pointed at me as I walked around the car. As I walked, I made another decision. I would kill those bastards or die trying. They were very likely responsible for this terror attack. It was my duty to at least try, if today was my last day anyway. So I tore my thoughts away from the fear of imminent death, and concentrated them on the attack. I closed my eyes, and forced my mind into ecstasis. Fall down into the well of darkness, stop thinking, and just follow

the instincts that guide you. That's what they told us in Special Force Training. It had been years ago, but I've been using the technique as a doctor ever since. As I began to fall into ecstasis, time slowed. I could predict my captors' steps, feel their movements behind me. Another breath. Now.

I turned around as fast as I could to use the moment of surprise, estimating bullets to fly at me any second. But they didn't, and it took me off guard. Why would they not shoot me? I attacked the one closest to me, the boy with the gun, smashing my fist into his belly and then his head. Those movements came naturally, I had rehearsed them night and day in military training. He staggered back, trying to stay conscious. But no shot came. Instead, seeing that I would overwhelm him, he threw his weapon away so that I could not use it. It was my only chance. But now, the wardrobe-man came running at me. My anger rose, and I started to hit the boy as hard as I could. He went down. As the bearded man approached, I attacked, but it was in vain. He overwhelmed me with ease, threw me to the ground. The metal stick hit my head, and the world went black.

I remember thinking in those last seconds that life was a funny thing. Ironic, at the best. The whole day, I was trying to save other people's lives. By the end of that same day, I would be the one who died. I was not completely wrong then, I guess. To a certain extent, they took my life this day.