

## Mustaqbil Justin Morgan

The streets were guzzling the rain, like they couldn't get enough, and all the people I passed were holding on to their hats and their umbrellas, not looking where they were going. A brown fedora pirouetted into the road and was instantly flattened by a passing truck. Its owner quickly swiped it up and put it back on his head, as though it really could protect him, as though anything could protect him from the ceaseless battering of nature onto his soaking coat. To complement the voices of the drowning were the shouts and chatters emanating from passing night clubs and lounges, voices of the refugees, laughing, crying, gesticulating and thundering into my ears like the thorns of a bush as they pierce the fleshy mass of a newly harvested lettuce on a day of mourning and solemnity. As if I could expect anything less.

I was on my way. My task was as simple as a ruby: break into the cellars of the infamous dealer Pareshaan, and bring back a sample of Mustaqbil, the feared and misunderstood Mustaqbil that was stalking the city's throats. For me, the whole ordeal rang solid, resounding like a block of granite through my desensitised nerve cells, and this meant that I could do it, that I wasn't going to fail, and that's all that mattered.

A couple of people dashed up to me with the buoyancy of a rice pudding, slashing my retinas with their trance-like smiles and waving around a piece of paper as though to swat me with it. Some sounds emerged: did I know the way to such-and-such a place, which they were late in arriving at and which some friends of theirs had said was just on the way to such-and-such a street but they had been there and hadn't found anything other than construction work and a number of overenthusiastic rodents? In short, did I have the key to their sorrows, could I awaken within their quest the spark of truth, of reality, which would finally solidify their existence and make their world, in that moment, a tangible experience, a place worth dying for? I told them no, that nobody could do that, that it was an impossibility, a violation of the very nature of this world and of this city in particular. They said, but what about Mustaqbil? Does it not have the power to do this? And this I ignored. That was too far beyond my comprehension.

Because I wasn't doing this for Mustaqbil. I had no interest in the drug.

I was to enter Pareshaan's cellars via the Club Intezaar, which was just a short distance down a side street. I came to the entrance, which was flanked by a pair of bouncers, each with the size and build of a medium-strength disinfectant, filling out their charcoal suits as though they could ever hope to compensate for the emptiness that sizzled through their minds. One of them lifted a hand and pointed to a sign with a finger from that hand, and in response I took out my PDA and connected to the nearby authorisation server, and identified myself as Lyndon Kalter, whoever that was. One of the guards pressed a button on the wall, and the other one kicked open the door, which I followed into the club. After snaking my way through the corridors, stared down at every corner by a painting of this or that wealthy magnate rendered in iridescent smudges of colour, I came to the main lounge, where my ear drums were assaulted on all sides by a cocktail of industrial buzz and remixed pseudo-electronica. Most of the room was consumed by dancing booths, where dancers and dancees were connecting to each other and gulping down the incessant vibrations like the fuel tanks of starving jumbo jets. That part of the room was of no interest to me.

I translated myself to the edge of the bar, which was staffed by a tall somebody in a sharp white suit and an arresting beard. He was tapping his nails on the counter as though either impatient or nervous – click clack click, clack click clack, over and over. I gave him the password. Wordlessly he extracted one of his hands from the bar and flicked an inconspicuous switch, while his other hand stayed where it was, going click click clack, clack click click. I pushed through the now unlocked door to my right, then let it swing shut behind me, sucking all of the shadow to the top of the staircase as it did so, and droning shut with a sound that could have dispersed wildebeest from the bottom of a dusty, windswept crater.

At the bottom of the stairs I became the subject of an enthusiastic greeting ritual from Shiir and Shair, the wizards who would be getting me through to Pareshaan. Judging by the surface of the table, the pair of them had either been in the middle of a card game, or a hacking session, or a drinking game, or a food fight, or some twisted combination of all of these things. I didn't care. I was thrust into a seat and patted roughly on the shoulder; one hand was equipped with a bottle of beer, the other with a cigarette, the other with a map of Pareshaan's underground facilities; and then a printout of an article about Mustaqbil slid over the table towards me like a serpent advancing on its prey in a patch of desert enclosed on all sides by vigilant sand dunes. Exuberant fingers pointed here and there at bits and pieces of the map and of the article that I should be paying attention to – here a camera, there a sensor, here a quote from a tripster preaching the wholehearted effectiveness of the mysterious drug.

It's all lies, said Shiir. Nothing about Mustaqbil is true. They make it all up, painting it as the must-have acid sensation and stirring the whole city into a frenzy, but it's nothing more than a power game – how many people had already ended up dead after talking about their Mustaqbil trips? Shiir was damned if he was going to get sucked into those pincer-esque lies. They say it's the ultimate painkiller, said Shair. People with 'war wounds', people with their eyes tied shut, with their legs twisted round in the other direction, people who can't otherwise stay upright because of the pain, have had that all washed away, like there was never anything wrong with them. They say it can solve *all* of your problems, whatever they are. They say a lot of things about Mustaqbil, said Shiir. They even say it gives you visions of the future. But none of it's true, and that's the goddamned truth. Nobody can prove a single goddamned *thing* about the drug no matter how much the rumours shoot through the Network like machine gun bullets at a military target range.

They asked if I was ready, and I made an assenting movement. There was an instant frenzy of activity, like a bomb had gone off. Computer terminals were woken up, scripts began running and dense lattices of data filled up the monitors in a trice; a memory card was thrust across the table towards me; the cigarette was swiped out of my fingers and another one put in its place; my gun was removed from its holster, stocked up with ammo and returned; chocolate bars were hurled across the room; and every time the two of them crossed paths in the middle of the room, they would make their next move in the card game, muttering to each other about reversed gambits and illegal tactics. There must have been about seven decks in play, all of them stacked. The rules of the game, whatever it was, were completely opaque to me. I settled for snatching up the memory card and slotting it into my PDA, installing the software and making the necessary arrangements.

Some time later, I was climbing down the ladder at the back of their hideout, escorted down the metal shaft by their shouts of encouragement and last-minute snippets of advice, which echoed all around me like pesky chihuahuas running in circles round and round. When I got to the bottom, I shut the hatch above me, not knowing if it was possible to get it open again, and then all I could hear was the humming of electric current, the clanking of distant machinery and the sound of my silent confidence buzzing from neuron to neuron in my head, like deadly messengers in a secret realm of backstabbing and intrigue. With this as my accompaniment I had nothing to fear at all. I made my way through the cellars, over steel walkways and through iron gates, disabling and enabling equipment as I went, and taking photographs of every turn in the path and of every salient machine, as instructed.

Eventually I arrived in the most important location for the job. It wasn't a big room, perhaps barely the size of a millionaire's dressing room. The white-painted and windowless walls were scratched and flaky, and fluorescent strips were casting a light that was dizzy and inebriated, suffusing everything with a faint orange glow. Some of the walls were lined with glass cupboards filled with vials and bottles, standing to attention like traitorous soldiers. The tables were covered with packages and petri dishes and test tubes, some of them filled with a clear liquid. First of all, however, I went over to the computer terminal in the corner, carefully disabled its defences and then sucked out all of the information that was pertinent – delivery timetables, names, addresses, suppliers, chemical analyses, technical drawings.

Only then did I turn my attention to the liquids on the tables. I performed a quick analysis on one of the substances to check that it was indeed what I was looking for. Mustaqbil. The first time I had ever seen it. I took out my own, specially sterilised container, and transferred into it the exact quantity that I had been asked for. After sealing the container I stashed it away in my jacket and turned towards the doorway, ready to make a successful exit.

A light above the doorway suddenly flashed red, there were two beeping noises, and the door shut, just as I was about to get through. Never mind. Clearly I had made some minor miscalculation, but it was nothing serious. I gained access to the security system again and set the hacking software to work. It was probably going to take fifteen minutes or so for the program to generate the correct code, but it was of no detriment to me. Pareshaan was not here and was not going to be, not tonight. The information from the computer confirmed this. I was alone. I was alone down here, with Mustaqbil. I went and sat against the wall. I stared ahead into the orange-tinted air molecules, dancing to and fro in front of my eyes, in front of the tables, above the vials and dishes, seducing my eyeballs, leading them. There was something they were trying to say. Something I wasn't allowed to let them say. I shut my eyelids tight, but they just flipped back open. One of my hands was drifting across the wall, and the other was tapping impatiently on the wooden floor as though keeping time with an inaudible beat. My legs pushed me into a standing position. Then they bent down and pushed me onto the floor again. I was on my own here.

I was stood up. Suddenly the table was getting closer, and the vials were looking fairly big, right in front of me, just there. I was then witness to a series of inexplicable, relentless processes. A dropper found its way into my hand, and then continued its journey into one of the vials, and it said something to my fingers, and they complied. Then the fluid was dripping into a test tube. And then some more, and some more. The test tube became full. It seemed to enjoy being between my fingers, it seemed to like their warmth pressing against it, their sweat dripping down the side. My lips were dry. There was something about the dryness of the lips which was sending a signal out to the test tube, and the test tube sent back a surreptitious message like a forbidden lover, promising its cooperation, its complicity. I saw an arm moving upwards, and before I knew it, the test tube was colluding with the lips, and a fine, silky liquid was trickling down my throat.

I was in the dark, somewhere, somewhere vaguely familiar. And there were people all around me but most of them seemed scarcely important – except for one. It was me. I was there, looking at me, my face completely expressionless, just a cold and lifeless landscape, an inhospitable environment where surely nothing could live. This person, who was me, he was taking his gun out of his holster, although it was a better gun than mine, and his face remained the same throughout the whole process. He pointed the gun at me and fired not once, not twice but three times, and my vision immediately filled up with red. I was drowning all of a sudden in a vat of red, and I felt things kicking at me and pushing me, and my head was floating and swirling and fizzling. My mind was in a cage that was getting smaller and smaller, smaller and smaller, until there was no space left for it, and I faded into a compact, hazy oblivion.

And when the fog cleared around my mind and those vertiginous photons penetrated my eyelids once more, there was already a slicing pain oozing up and down my spine, and bile surging up my throat. The test tube had smashed on the ground, and so had I. My lips were bleeding, my mind was rattling in my skull as though desperate to get out, to escape from the piercing shackles of that skull and turn around on me and smash me into a million tiny shards. The people were still surrounding me, but they were faint and the light didn't seem to be affecting them, but I knew they were there and they were laughing at me. One of them came right down towards my face and laughed, laughed hard into my burning eyes. After that, I couldn't see them anymore. An intense heat was washing through my nerves. My blood had been replaced by lava, and it was swelling my arteries, and it was burning through them and setting fire to my skin. My hand slammed down onto the floor and pushed me up, and my other hand slammed into my gun holster and wrapped itself around the comforting form of the gun, and then I took hold of it and pushed it firmly into my neck, and my finger cried out for the trigger and I let it rub it and toy with it and caress it. The gun was slipping

down my neck and I pushed it back up towards my skull, which was still rattling and laughing and vibrating as though about to shatter at any moment.

Then I was sick, and the gun fell out of my hand and shuffled around on the floor uneasily. An electric tingling washed through my body like a school of a hundred thousand poisonous fish surging through an underwater tunnel caked with seaweed and littered with the sharp and pointy remains of restless shipwrecks and the skeletons of unfortunate storm victims lying in the crevices, abandoned and pitiable, carelessly discarded by fate in a black and hopeless cave. That's what it was like, and with extra salt. My brain's incessant shivering movements eventually came to a stop, though not before I had emptied my stomach again. I managed to pull myself up and fall against the wall. I heard some clanging noise in the distance, a door slamming shut. I heard voices. The doorway was already wide open; the light bulb above it, green. I collected my gun and stared at it for just a few seconds, wondering what it had been doing.

The journey back through the tunnels, over the walkways, past the machinery, was a journey I made on autopilot. There was a part of my mind for doing that, and there was another part of my mind for shouting at myself, and this latter region of my consciousness was gradually waking up and getting out of bed and asserting itself, and it was throwing plates and furniture across the room. It was furious. Because I had broken the rules.

I climbed up the ladder towards the hideout, my head still throbbing and my limbs still tingling, but otherwise quite functional. When I made it to the top, I could hear that Shiir and Shair were in a different room, arguing about the contents of the refrigerator. They hadn't heard me come back, and I did not want to speak to them. I let myself out as discreetly as I could, returning to the club. The barman was no longer at his post, but I didn't care about that either. I simply walked out, gliding down the corridors, passing all manner of lifeforms who were laughing and talking and living and slicing through the airstream all around me. I left the club and shrank my way back down the street, the still completely sodden street, and all sorts of humans were surging past me, all death-bound, all insignificant. One of the 'war-wounded' passed me, moaning into the air, his disfigurement apparently making it difficult for him to breathe.

I had broken the rules. Life is someone you should never get involved with. Didn't I know that? Never get involved with life – rules number one, zero and minus one. People can be fooled into thinking that life is treating them well, but then it picks you up and bangs you against the floor several hundred times, and then feeds your body into a blender and mixes you up into a cocktail of confusion, passion, desperation, greed, hatred, despair, attachment, grief, mango juice. And it pours this cocktail into a thin-stemmed glass, and it drinks it, and then you're reborn into life and it loves you and you think it's all going fine again, and all is forgiven and forgotten and you start to wonder if maybe you have a purpose. Then, it flips you over, grips you by the neck and slices you open with the sharp end of a crisp packet, and pours in salt, bags and bags of the stuff, and then it rips you a little bit further open and gets its foot and its spike-studded boot and stamps right onto your heart without even flinching. I knew all this. My job was simply to do what I was told – no thinking, no questions, no involvement – just do as you're told. I owed all of my success to this very strategy. And then I had gone and ruined it. I had broken the rules.

All of this was rattling around in my brain as I returned home and lay awake in bed.

By the morning, my thoughts had turned to other matters. Rays of sunlight were invading, piercing through the curtains and landing on my retina like javelins. My body slumped off the bed and paced into the bathroom. Hands dipped themselves into the sink basin and poured water into a face, the same one that was watching me from the mirror. Feet navigated me behind a shower curtain, where I was rained on for a good fifteen minutes. A towel wrapped itself around me, then a stick with chalk on the end of it scrubbed through my mouth. Various fabrics arranged themselves on my limbs like paint pots falling off a ladder and spilling onto the carpet. And through all of this there

were images flickering over and over through my head, of me, of the expression on my face as three bullets propelled themselves into somebody's brain – somebody's, but whose? The memory of it all was shimmering through my thoughts like a crab trying to escape from a record player.

The room darkened. I had a call from HQ. I let it come through the speakers and listened to one of the administrators telling me to report to Maazi at nine minutes past nine.

I left the flat immediately, stabbing on my hat and burrowing into my coat as I went out the door. I went down in the lift and stormed out into the day. The currents shifted me along to the subway station and down the steps. I leaned against a pillar, pulled my jacket tighter around me, surveyed the scene. A gruff-looking man, certainly homeless, came along and rummaged through the dustbin that was attached to the pillar opposite me. Words were spray-painted on the top part of the pillar. *Fuck the police. Mustaqbil is the law.*

When I eventually arrived at HQ, it was eight minutes past nine. I dashed up to the entrance to the audience chamber, and presented myself to the guard outside the door. He looked at me, looked at his watch, shook his head, sighed. When he got the signal a few seconds later, he pushed open the door and let me in. I walked to the end of the chamber and stood in front of Maazi, who was surrounded by a number of important officials and bodyguards. First she congratulated me. My mission had been a success. They had received the data that I had sent them and had already managed to glean an enormous amount of exceptionally useful information from it. Now they felt as though Pareshaan was in their grasp. She asked me for the sample. I removed it swiftly from my pocket and handed it to one of her advisors. It was going to be tested; they were going to find out what it did and how it worked. And then I said it, without even thinking. *I've already tried it.* There was silence for a good sixty seconds, during which Maazi's face cycled through a number of unreadable expressions. Her opinion of me had changed – that much was certain. I had killed any respect she had for me.

I quickly added that I had only consumed a very small quantity and that it had only had a minor sedatory effect. She waved a hand, dismissing the comment as irrelevant. My task had been to bring back the data and the sample. I had not been sanctioned to do anything with the drug itself. I had made a mistake. Good. Everyone made mistakes. But it was important to learn from them. People who didn't learn from their mistakes generally didn't live long enough to make another one. But all was not lost. I was to be given a second chance. The data that I had secured had allowed Maazi and her advisors to find out many things about Pareshaan, including his future plans. It turned out that he was plotting far more than they had previously realised. He could not be allowed to continue with these plans and obtain more power over the city than he was already commanding. The next day, he was going to be meeting with the proprietor of the Axbaar media conglomerate in the Hotel Geraan, and would be staying in room 415. I was to break into the room prior to Pareshaan's arrival, wait for him – and eliminate him as quickly and efficiently as possible.

Of course, I agreed without hesitation, and was rewarded with the tiniest of smiles, contorting Maazi's face like a crease on an inflated balloon. One of the guards stepped forward and took the gun out of my holster, then another came forward and presented me with a new firearm. I paused for about five hundred milliseconds, although each of them felt like a life sentence in a pitch black dungeon filled with smells and noises and scratching creatures that you can't identify. Because I recognised that gun.

The meeting was over, and I melted. My body became liquid, and I spilt onto the floor, my liquefied lungs mixing with my liquefied liver. I spread out over the floor but then collected myself, channelling my viscous form into a little stream that went and seeped underneath the door. It flowed down the corridor and into the toilets, and sloshed over to a grating in the corner and simply drained away, down into the pipes and into the sewers. There, underneath the city, I surged through the tubes and tunnels, my puréed brain homogenising with my puréed stomach, until I came to the right junction, and I spewed myself up through the grating, and swam along the gutters, down this street and the next, all the way home. When I finally made it into my own room, I stopped flowing and

just lay there on the floor. I was just a puddle now, spreading out on the ground and seeping into the carpet. The meeting was over, and I had melted.

The next morning I had somehow coalesced into a solid form, but it was cracked and broken and smudged, like clay. I wasn't quite sure where one limb ended and another began, and my organs had certainly changed places. It was surprising that my vision was still working, although my other senses appeared to have turned into lemon juice and lizard tongues, judging by the sensations I was receiving. I felt as though I was fast approaching death, although the idea makes little sense, because that's what life means. But there is the normal period of life, where death is at the other end of a tunnel, and you're slogging through dense, tangled, thorny, sinewy undergrowth, so that you can barely see the other side, and it takes such an effort just to cut through the next section; and then there is the time when you've already cut down all the bushes and burnt away all of the bracken, and the tunnel is no longer horizontal but vertical, and then it's all very clear indeed, and you can see exactly the destination you're hurtling towards, and there's nothing to hold on to.

Of course my mission could not fail. I would go to the hotel room with the Magnum, and Pareshaan would soon be dead and out of the picture. I had killed before, and there was no reason that this would be any different, just because the victim was somewhat more important and the consequences of failure somewhat more terrifying. No, there was no question of my competence or my force of will. There was just the question of how much longer I would last. I had made too many mistakes. Maazi could no longer trust me. I could no longer even trust myself.

Several hours later I was inside room 415 of the Hotel Geraan, having disabled security cameras and redirected all of the staff away from the room. The room itself was palatial, spanning two floors. Pareshaan had clearly become very wealthy all of a sudden. I had first met him when I was young, when he was a regular dealer, doing regular stuff. I remembered exactly how many grams I had bought from him and what percentage of it I had actually consumed. I probably wouldn't have got through childhood without it, without Pareshaan. After the war, things were different. I was in Maazi's employ, and Pareshaan, on the brink of death, had come to offer his services to her as well. We worked alongside each other for around a year, although I hadn't learned much about him at all. Then of course came the schism, when Pareshaan led a group of rebels who made themselves enemies of Maazi and broke away. The reasons remain unclear. Exactly as unclear as *Mustaqbil*, that is. Years later I was waiting for him in room 415 of the Hotel Geraan, and the door was opening.

He had bodyguards. There were just two of them, but even so it would have been insane to try anything. I was underneath the bed in the adjacent room, but could see them through the open doorway, sitting down on the sofa. They didn't talk much, and when they did it was about the most mundane trivialities. How to set the temperature of the minibar. What TV stations were available. What the best lighting combination was. How to operate the safe. Please would this and that be put in the safe. Please could there be no disturbance once they had gone. Please could the security be tightened by the morning. After all of this, one of the guards lit a cigarette, and Pareshaan stripped it from his grasp and slammed it into a fruit bowl on the table. His eyes were red and tired and wrinkled and furious, like tubes that lead directly to a faulty incinerator. There shall be no smoking in his presence.

He bid them leave, and they left. He immediately switched on the screen, navigated to a news aggregator, and browsed through the articles. I stayed where I was. I wanted to wait until I had a perfect line of sight. I ended up losing myself in the articles on screen, about power station disasters, about slum clear-outs, about massacres in shopping malls and about the latest rumours concerning *Mustaqbil*. A new viral advertisement had been snaking through the Network. *Mustaqbil is everywhere. It will reach us all.* I couldn't see Pareshaan properly from that position, so I had no idea what he was thinking about this. Whether he had masterminded it or not.

He stood up. There was my chance. He stood up and came into the bedroom. I took aim. And then he simply sat down on the floor, right in front of me, and looked right into the barrel of my silencer, and greeted me. He greeted me. It was nice to see me again, even if the circumstances were somewhat... unusual. He said he was going to cut straight to the chase. What did I think of Mustaqbil?

At this point I had let the gun droop, and I was staring into his cavernous face, looking down his tubular eyes. He was still very thin. He had always looked unhealthy and even now he was the same. His hair was unkempt, his breath was musty. I, on the other hand, had frozen. I was frozen in place, locked up in crystal, every contour of my body simply set in place, never to move again. Well, what did I think of it? Did I think he didn't know about my little adventure? About what Maazi had been planning? He knew everything about it. Things hadn't changed a bit since he left, and he still knew the same old tricks that Maazi always played. Of course she was going to want to bump him off. There was never any doubt about that. You cross Maazi, you go on her death list. So pathetic, wasn't it? So very petty. Pareshaan wasn't like that. Pareshaan was a sensible, level-headed and – what was important – *moral* agent in the battle for control of the city. He had the key to the city's success, and he was going to use his sense of righteousness to bring it to the people, to everyone, not just to the chosen few, not just to the ones who pleased him. With Mustaqbil, there could never be any strife ever again. The city was slowly waking up to that fact. When he unleashed it upon the masses... there would be no looking back.

It was very warm. The ice around me was beginning to melt, and my skin was beginning to tingle and my limbs were becoming more supple. It was hot. There were flames licking my tongue, fire was spreading out across the palms of my hands and through my nervous system, burning away every obstacle, spreading through the forest of neurons and synapses in my brain, setting me alight. It was all burning – the room and Pareshaan and the hotel and the world. Soon the entire universe would flake away into an inky, barren, irredeemable oblivion, consumed by flame, eaten away from the core, from the inside of every proton, outwards. That was coming. That would come for sure. But not before I had raised the gun into Pareshaan's face and fired three times. Not before.

I was walking back down the corridor towards the audience chamber, my head high, my stride purposeful and vivid, like a wall-length expressionist painting under a bright, bright lamp, full of shock purples and sanguine reds and gleaming skin-tone browns. The guard let me in, glancing at me with a faceless expression. The door shut behind me with a noise that could have cracked eggshells and released a storm of hungry prisoners, ready to fight along the crevices of a world torn asunder by an endless quake of wrenching electric slicing. It was in the reverberations of this scene that I approached her. She watched me with idle interest, smoking like a fuel tanker, the cigarette sliding between her riven lips like a dagger into the gap between two scarred rib bones. I stopped in the designated position and nodded.

Maazi said nothing for around fifty-five seconds. Then she asked me how quietly Pareshaan had expired. I took this as a rhetorical question. She nodded, and called over her advisors, spoke softly to them, then sent them away. Then she called over one of her bodyguards, who took the Magnum away from me and stood next to her chair, holding it in both hands as though about to serve it up to someone at a restaurant. Maazi said that I had done very well, that I had been a loyal and effective member, and that I had redeemed myself. I would not be called upon to do such an assignment for a long while, however, and so it was best that the gun were taken away from me. She said this all very quickly, as though desperate to get me out of the room again. I wondered how long it would take.

I looked over at one of the advisors, who was staring into a monitor over by the computers, and he was pressing a button and watching something – which I couldn't see clearly – over and over again. Checking it. He called someone over to look, and they looked at it together, over and over, and then they looked at each other and nodded. The advisor broke away from the computer and spoke to the bodyguard, then he turned away and spoke into his headset, communicating with Maazi. I saw

Maazi's face, twisting and contorting itself from emotion to emotion, like a little microcosm of life. I saw how her world was changed, transformed, destroyed, there and then, all in the creases of her grey and sponge-like cheeks, in the wrinkles around her shapeless eyes.

Pareshaan had been spotted on a security camera, quarter of an hour ago, leaving the Hotel Geraan. I did not respond. I simply waited, waited for what was due to me, what I wanted to come. My reward. There was nothing worth saying. It was obvious that I hadn't done my duty. It was obvious that I hadn't learned from my mistakes. It was obvious that I could no longer be in her service, that I was useless and despicable, that I must be cast aside, disposed of. It was all there in her facial expressions, though it had been there all along before.

Then she said it all. Redundantly, she said it all. She could not tolerate mistakes of this kind. My insolence. Her rage became more and more tangible, like tentacles of thunder shooting out at me, clawing around at everything in sight, scratching the air down, grasping at the interior walls, as though to wrench them down, to make the building collapse in on itself with her in the centre, a screaming mass of fury in its raw form. She eventually composed herself, and instructed the guards around her with a series of gestures, quite transparent in their semantics. I was then escorted through a side door by a group of heavy guards, among them the one who had taken my gun.

As soon as the door shut behind them, that guard came over to me and pushed me back against the blood-stained wall. Another one locked the door, banishing three quarters of the light, and then stood aside with the others to watch. The gun from my vision was rising in front of me, and I recognised the perspective. The laughter. The insults. The shots. Not once, not twice, but three times. Each bullet struck a path through the labyrinth of the airstream, each one penetrating my skull in its own chosen position, each one tracing out a unique path through my brain, a path through my thoughts, all the way to the other side. Each one had its own adventure, racing along the chasms of an alien landscape, slicing through this or that fold of my mental tissue. And the redness of the world descended on me, and I was floating on the surface of the lava in my mind. Shooting stars were exploding above me in the endless darkness. I was deposited into a crater, a hollow volcano. Lightning rattled into the crevices of the rock that surrounded me, then fell down and rolled around beside me, sparking and shimmering. Each spark was a star, a sphere of nuclear energy, and I was falling into each one of them, shattering into a billion pieces which would circle the star and then crash into it, burning up in the centre and not affecting it at all. I was falling down the tunnel, that tunnel that I knew so well, whose end was now finally in reach. At the end of the tunnel, a figure was waiting for me. And as the last grains of my existence floated through the exit, I was caught in the figure's gaze, suspended, arrested.

"Hello," said the figure. "Thank you for choosing Mustaqbil, the world's number one source of pain relief."