

CHAPTER 1

Anonymous

localhost:3132



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~ Is anyone there?
  → A savior.
~ Are you God?
  → God? A game designer who doesn't play his own
    game? No, I am not.
~ What do you need?
  → Wrong question, wrong answer.
~ What is the right question then?
  → What do you do?
~ Makes sense, so what do you do?
  → I play a game with you.
~ Game!? What game?
  → ACE
~ What does it mean?
  → Agency, Connection, Exchange.
~ Explain more...
  → Which part?
~ Start from Agency!
  → It is about how to make proper decisions
~ Which decisions?
  → All your decisions
~ Like what?
  → Like the one you made in the museum.
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CHAPTER 2

Unveiling the Mysteries

I am not lying. Believe my words. I wish I were a writer. I'd write a book about every crack and crevice of this strange museum we're trapped in—a madhouse that's even hidden the way out from us.

Of course, not one of those Dozari¹ writers—the ones who churn out flimsy stories with half-baked characters, all propped up with conflict, suspense, formalism, and other storytelling tricks designed to toy with the reader's mind and trap them in the story.

I wish I could be one of those writers—the kind who, once they step into their story, lose control of where it goes. It's no longer the story that serves them, but the characters inside it who take over, dragging the writer along by their whims and their disobedience.

Maybe I shouldn't have called them Dozari writers. I'm ashamed. After all, everyone finds something they care about—and they should pursue it regardless of what comes of it.

¹Dozari (pronounced *doh-zah-REE*): A Persian term suggesting something cheap, trivial, or of little worth—roughly akin to “two-bit” or “dime-a-dozen” in English. The word originally referred to a low-value two-rial coin once used in Iran.

Not everyone is meant to be first-rate.
If there were no second-rate people,
whose shoulders would the first-rate people stand on?
Who would be there to cheer them on?

Still, I don't want to take back what I said about Dozari writers. Maybe it's better to let the shame crawl inside me—perhaps something will come of it, something to help me grow. Isn't pain always part of growing, after all? I'd rather suffer than hide behind silence, waiting for the shame to erupt later, somewhere else, in another way.

Dozari people aren't the ones who, for whatever reason, couldn't become first-rate at what they loved. Even those who still don't know what they want aren't necessarily Dozari.

The Dozari people are those who constantly make decisions that, sooner or later, bring shame upon themselves and the generations that follow. Decisions that, sooner or later, drown them in a wave of guilt. To tell you the truth, only Dozari people wish they weren't Dozari—like me!

Well, that was too much for a start. Anyway!

- So quick!
 - Just had to pee.
- Which way now?
 - Hmm... I dunno. Why the hell is there nobody else in this damn museum? Where's the exit? I'm losing my mind.
- No idea. Let's try this way.
 - Okay, let's go. So, what was «Mr. Writer» writing?
- Nothing worthwhile—forget it.
 - Were you writing prose, or poetry?

- A mix of both.
 - Say a line from the poem.
- I'm a Dozari person.
 - Hahaha! But that's literally true!
- Ugh!?
 - Hedayat, don't scowl—I'm joking! If you're Dozari, then I must be too, since I became your girlfriend.
- Yeah, true! In that case, I'll add another line to the poem.
 - What's that?
- Ava wishes she weren't Dozari either.
 - Nice! Now that's what I call a brilliant poem.

“For Madmen Only—Not for Everybody.”² That was the sentence engraved above the arch of an old door that didn't seem connected to the strange museum at all. All along that long, winding corridor, we hadn't seen another door—nor a single other person. When we saw that line, glowing faintly under dim bulbs, Ava and I looked at each other—and burst out laughing.

It was three years ago. A girl with Western-colored eyes and the hair and face of an Easterner had written, “For Madmen Only—Not for Everybody.”

And I—I hadn't let my heart, pounding wildly ever since seeing her profile pictures, calm down even for a second. Without wasting a moment, I messaged her, “Hi. I'm a Steppenwolf.” Ava, without missing a beat, replied in English, “I was searching for you in the deserts—and here you are, on dating apps?”

²In Hermann Hesse's *Steppenwolf*, this line appears above the entrance to the Magic Theater entered by the novel's protagonist, Harry Haller.

She was not willing to go into that theater. “This isn’t Harry Haller’s theater, is it?” she asked, gesturing toward the writing on the theater wall, urging me to read it. I said excitedly, “Don’t even say that. I’m not missing a chance this exciting!” The argument got a little heated. In the end, she scrunched her face and said in a sulky tone, “I’m not coming then. You’ll have to go in alone.” I dropped my gaze—just in case those languid eyes and her piercing, irresistible stare tried, once again, to change my mind. I’d only taken a few steps inside when she shouted, “Damn you, Hedayat! You pig-headed, stubborn adventurer. Wait!” And she came after me.

As far as the eye could see, there was no wall, no ceiling, nothing to catch the light or reflect it, nothing to offer our eyes even the faintest reassurance. A navy-blue glow spread an eerie, uniform haze over everything—and yet, it had no discernible source. Ava was clutching my arm tightly, murmuring under her breath. I glanced behind me. The door we’d just passed through was gone. Neither of us cast a shadow on the ground.

If you take the sun out of the sky, and the waves out of the ocean—then splash gray across the heavens—then slowly, fearfully, walk the surface of that ocean, you might get some vague sense of the ambiguity we stood in.

I could clearly hear Ava’s breathing. And my own. Every motion, every step felt futile—utterly meaningless. So we stood still and waited. Without the two of us, that place would have been the very definition of nothingness. All of a sudden, a deafening explosion erupted around us. The horrifying noise swallowed even our screams—we couldn’t even hear ourselves. Clinging tightly to each other, we trembled. The

blast, baseless and wild, didn't just tear through flesh and bone—it sent shivers down to our very souls. We stayed like that—screaming—until the deafening force slowly began to fade. We took our hands away from our faces, lifted our heads, and looked around. It took a while for the high-pitched ringing in my ears to finally let go.

A sound like radio static replaced that harrowing explosion. It wasn't soft enough to go unheard, nor loud enough to disturb. Ava was the first to come to her senses and suddenly shouted, "Did you get that? That was the Big Bang! We're inside a universe simulator! Oh wow, look how beautiful everything's getting! Look, the galaxies are forming! Look over there! Those colors!" She let go of my arm and ran a few meters ahead, lost in delight. I said, "See? See, I told you we should try it. See? I was right, wasn't I?" She replied, "Yes, darling. You're always right." She said it in German, without thinking. I replied in Persian:

- You gotta be scared shitless for it to be fun.
 - No, that's not true at all.
- Yes it is!
 - No it's not.
- Yes it is!
 - Okay, whatever you say.

With every movement we made, the celestial bodies around us twisted and swirled. The mesmerizing shades of violet, green, turquoise, and crimson—blending into one another—were beyond words. They could have stolen anyone's senses. Ava's loud voice snapped me out of it, "Look over there!" My eyes followed her outstretched arm. I shouted,

“Holyge-Boom-Boom! What’s that doing here?”

A massive butterfly—with golden-yellow wings speckled with blue, and violet antennae—flew right above our heads. With each flap of its wings, the celestial bodies twisted, collided, and fused—giving birth to something new. I was still staring when Ava’s scream broke the moment, “Hedayat, look over there.”

- Holyge-Boom-Boom.

And then, without thinking, I shouted:

- Don’t go any closer.
 - Why?
- It’s dangerous.
 - How do you know?
- I don’t know. I just feel like it’s dangerous.
 - Let go of my hand; you’re hurting me. Why shouldn’t I go?
- Ava, no! Wait!
 - We have to jump inside these things to figure out the secret of existence, right? Wasn’t that the whole point of coming here? Unveiling the Mysteries!

She didn’t give me a chance to utter a single word to convince or dissuade her. She stepped closer to the black hole in front of her—and dove straight in. The very instant Ava jumped, the mouth of the black hole collapsed in, and everything vanished before my eyes. Screaming, I rushed toward where she’d been—but there was no black hole. I ran back and forth, frantic and lost, shouting, “Avaaaaaaa! Avaaaaaaaaaaaaa, where are you?”

One weekend, in the central market of a bustling city,

take a small child from their mother and leave them in the crowd—my fear and disorientation were worse than that child’s, with the same helplessness, the same sobs, the same wailing.

No matter how full the theater’s sky was—with galaxies and stars and planets and meteors and wormholes—there wasn’t another black hole in sight—none I could throw myself into, hoping it might take me wherever it had taken Ava. Out of desperation, I began hurling myself recklessly into the wormholes. Each time I leapt into one, I emerged in a new, strange, uncanny world—each terrifying in its own way.

Worlds that either sprouted horns from your head or twisted your mind into wild hallucinations. Fruitlessly, I passed from this world into another, and another, until—exhausted, aching, and desperate—I collapsed on my knees. And then, suddenly, I saw her. She was standing on an asteroid that was slowly drifting closer and closer. I jumped with joy and cried out, “Ava! I’m here! I’m here! Where did you go?” Her asteroid stopped just short of me. A pale blue scarf was wrapped around her neck.

I had to run. I had to reach Ava—fast. But that damned, familiar state had found me again, as if an elephant, a dinosaur, and a whale had all dug in behind each of my legs. The harder I tried, the slower I moved. My legs felt paralyzed—locked! As always—right at the crucial moment. Ava stood there calmly, without the slightest movement. She rested a hand on her hip, leaned into one leg, raised her other hand, and held up a small piece of paper for me to see.

I shouted, “Thank God you’re okay, Ava! Come closer. Let’s

find a way to get out of this damn place.” She pointed to the crumpled paper between her fingers and cried, “I’ve read your story. Black holes unveil the mysteries, Hedayat. You know that. All the secrets of the universe are poured into black holes—and eventually, one day, are revealed. Every last one of them. I will never forgive you.”

And the howl of her voice echoed in my ears, beyond the galaxies: “Traitooor! Traitooor!” Her asteroid drifted back with each oarlike stroke of her arms. Sobbing, I cried out, “Wait! Don’t go! Let me explain! Avaaaaaaa, don’t go!”

Falling to my knees, I howled at the sky, crying, “Damn these black holes. Damn the story. Damn me for entering this museum.”

I woke up, gasping through my tears. I dragged «Mr. Writer» over to his desk, forced him into the chair, shoved a pen into his hand, and made him write down the number I had seen in the dream—before he could forget it or disobey me. 3132

CHAPTER 3

Disobedience

I don't have much time. I have to leave quickly. Hedayat must not find out that I'm talking to you! I know the amount of detail he puts into writing about the world around him might start to wear you down—to the point where you might want to put the book aside. Please, grit your teeth and bear it. That's just his way. He finds the philosophy of everything in the ordinary and the simple. And these simple things, in the not-so-distant future, will weave together so tightly that the result will become something beautifully complex. I have to go now. It's getting late. The rest of my teammates are already in position, and soon it'll be my turn to shoot. If I miss, all our effort will be wasted. It might even cost us our lives.

CHAPTER 4

Story's Hero

- Stop chewing that damned nail. What is wrong with you?
 - You don't listen to me.
- Okay. Okay. Stop. I'm listening. Go on.
 - Who's this Anonymous you're chatting with?
- No idea. I'm about to find out.
 - Close the chat console. Right now. You've been hacked.
- His tone doesn't really sound like a hacker. I'll make him introduce himself. Hold on.
 - No, no, no—don't talk to him anymore...
- Stop nagging!
 - Close the console window. Don't give him time to creep into your whole damn computer.
- Let me at least ask what ACE is about.
 - Damn your curiosity, Hedayat. Close the console before it's too late. You never listen—later you'll say, "Why didn't I..."
- Okay, okay, okay. I closed it.

I slammed the laptop shut so hard the sound echoed through my bedroom. The grogginess of a Sunday morning and the heaviness of last night's sleep crashed down on me all at once. With an unwashed face, puffy eyes from crying, a dry throat, and a full bladder, I sat down at the desk—next to my bed and right beside the window—to write down every detail of that cursed museum dream before it slipped away.

I've always been a dream-writer. Of course, not all my dreams are loaded with enough charm and detail to push me into this kind of morning trouble. If I had put off writing and remembering the dream for a few hours, I would probably have forgotten forever the reverse of 2313—the number 3132—that had appeared in the museum sky; I would never have opened the console window¹; I would never have sent a message on the reverse port², 3132; and no conversation with Anonymous would ever have taken shape.

Anonymous—whose presence and words shape a sweeping arc to the story I'm about to tell.

Anyway!

I had to get my lazy ass off the chair—fast. Any second now, that voice inside my head would be back. Like a parasite chewing through my brain, it wouldn't stop nagging until it was sure everything was under control. Too late—the voice spoke up, “Update your system. Right now.” Still half-lost in my haze, I replied:

- I need to pee.
 - Change all your passwords too—your OS, emails, and bank cards. Everything.
- It'll take time. I need to pee!
 - Don't you dare play your instrument!
- I'm not gonna play anything this early. I need to pee.
 - Block port 3132.
- I'll block it afterward. First, I need to pee.

¹Console—a plain text window through which programmers talk directly to a computer, or to whoever is on the other end.

²Port—a numbered doorway through which a computer sends and receives its messages; every conversation over a network passes through one.

- And block 2313 too.
- Don't even bring up blocking port 2313.
 - I said block it.
- No way. What if Adam or Eve messaged me on it?
 - Shhh. Don't say that out loud!
- What do you mean by "shhh"? There is no hacker in my head.
 - Port 2313 is compromised. That hacker messaged you through its reverse number.
- It was just a coincidence.
 - Impossible.
- It's not impossible. Now shut up—I need to pee.

I finally dragged my lazy ass away from the desk. To be honest, I only said it was a coincidence to shut his big mouth. Otherwise, yeah—I really should've taken that day's non-coincidence seriously.

Now, the fact that a significant number in someone's life shows up right in the middle of their dreams could be chalked up to the dark-room games of the mind—but the presence of Anonymous on a port with the reverse of that number was not something that could be glossed over so easily. Oh, and before I'd even stepped out of my bedroom, let me introduce you to the voice inside my head that you just heard. That voice belongs to one of the genies of the lamp.

The story of how I first realized there were all these genies of the lamp hiding out in the backrooms of my mind goes back a few years. It was when my then-girlfriend forced me to step into a therapist's office for the first time in my life. That's a story best saved for later.

My therapist was one of those Dozari types who, right after reading books, articles, theories, and the history of psychology, fed those ideas straight to his clients. He did this before doing any actual research—just to see what might happen. According to him, the idea that humans are guided by a handful of basic emotions—such as joy, anger, or sadness—was already outdated. There had to be something far more complicated at play.

He had such a flair for storytelling that he actually convinced me that deep inside my mind, there was a group of genies of the lamp—each with their own unique identities, shaped entirely by the social environment in which they appeared. According to him, these genies of the lamp might be very similar to one another in their emotions—or very different. Even the way they expressed sadness, anger, or any other feeling could differ from one to another.

He quickly gave me an assignment. I had to fill a notebook he'd given me with the names and traits of each of those genies of the lamp living inside me. It took two months and nine days for his words to stop sounding like a joke. It happened exactly when, for the first time, one of those identities—or rather, one of those genies of the lamp—emerged in complete silence from the dark room of my mind, poked its head out and waved. It was «Mr. Employee».

«Mr. Employee» was the one who hit snooze on his alarm every morning at exactly 7:30 and went right back to sleep. He'd drag himself out of bed with curses and struggles, get dressed, and head to work. He'd read books in traffic on the way. He had no sense of time and was always late. If he could get away with it without a guilty conscience, he'd shirk work

as much as possible. Still, whenever he did work, the rest of the team was pretty happy with the quality of his code. He was the loudmouth, the noisy one on the team. And if he didn't get enough attention—especially from the manager—he'd throw a damn tantrum.

Little by little, the rest of the genies of the lamp started showing up, one by one. «Mr. Youngest Child», «Mr. Friend», «Mr. Best Buddy», «Mr. Old Classmate», «Mr. Music Student», «Mr. Responsible Neighbor», «Mr. Intellectual Boyfriend», and many more. I spent so much time with my genies of the lamp—thanks to that clownish yet lovable therapist—that I eventually learned how to manage them and how to stop each of them from stuffing their emotions into one another's pockets.

In the evenings, when I got back home from work, I would leave all my work-related anger right there at the door. These results kept my girlfriend pretty happy—happy enough, in fact, that our relationship lasted about a year longer than it probably would have otherwise. To be honest, though, the real reason she had forced me to see a therapist in the first place had nothing to do with that.

It didn't take long before I reached a point where I could actually mess with the genies of the lamp that people recognized me by. For example, sometimes I'd drop a nasty curse word at a family gathering, and for the first time, smoke a cigarette right in front of them, without shame. Other times, I'd suddenly become polite around my friends, refusing to say a single word about pussies or asses, and getting embarrassed by

their dirty jokes. Now and then, I wouldn't practice my Setar³ exercises correctly, which really frustrated and confused my music teacher.

Some time went by like that until a brand-new identity showed up inside me—with strange behaviors I couldn't make sense of. It was unlike any of the other identities I'd uncovered so far. Unlike the others, this one actually spoke—and loudly; it still does, in fact, so loud you've heard it, too. When my therapist told me that this loud voice had always been there, and that I'd never noticed it, horns nearly sprouted from my head.

At first, I thought this newly emerged identity was one of my fantasy identities—the kind I could never find a social environment for in the real world, a place where I might coax them out of their shells and let them play. I wondered if it might be that beloved identity I sometimes dream about at night. I mean: «Mr. Writer»—the identity I've always longed to have.

One day, that newly emerged voice came right out, laying its cards on the table: “I know you'd love to see yourself as some kind of otherworldly writer—someone who can re-read his own words over and over, marveling at them and indulging in his own narcissism without hurting anyone. But I want you to know that I am not your «Mr. Writer» because he's sitting right in front of me—eyes locked on mine, mumbling something under his breath. Seems like he's complaining. Apparently, someone—with all their constant acts of disobedience—isn't letting «Mr. Writer» finish his novel. What I want you to

³Setar—a traditional Persian instrument.

understand is that I am not that «Mr. Writer» sitting here across from me. Let me be.”

That new voice wanted me to set him apart from the rest of the genies of the lamp—even from «Mr. Writer»—and just let it be. He tried to remain without a title, without a label, without a name. He wanted nothing to do with those forced identities, the ones stuffed down your throat by parents or school before you even knew yourself, nor did he want to be one of those self-made identities that people vainly believe they had built on their own. He wanted me to let him live free, unchained by any identities, names, titles, or labels. So that’s what I did. I let him stay adrift, nameless. If he ever found out I had secretly called him «Story’s Hero» behind his back, he’d skin me alive.

«Story’s Hero» is always right. Always! No matter where the story begins or ends, or whether he’s up against others or even me. Whenever there’s a fight, conflict, or problem in the stories of my life, he’s always right. Everyone else is always perceived as guilty and at fault. There are times when he, with a thousand twists of logic to appear fair, tries to concede that someone else is right instead. But he hunts so hard for a reason, hurls himself so hard against every wall, blames himself so relentlessly, sinks so deep into his own labyrinth of thoughts and thrashes about, that he drives me to madness right along with him. In the end, out of sheer frustration, I had to tack a new amendment on top of his decision and somehow—one way or another—swing the judgment back in favor of my «Story’s Hero».

Do you want to know how the «Story’s Hero» is always—always—right, or how I manage to reverse the judgment whenever he concedes that someone else is right?

From my childhood—
The days when I was pure,
I search for a memory
To justify my mistakes.
Or I go to my therapist, who says:
People should accept you as you are.
And if that doesn't work either,
I have good friends who listen gently,
And always take my side.
That is how «Story's Hero» is always right.

Since I didn't have proper access to the dark room inside my head—to really see how things were run among the genies of the lamp—I had no choice but to accept his claims: that all his talk—or, more precisely, his nagging—isn't just for himself; that most of the time he's playing the role of class monitor; that he is, in fact, the only voice for all the other genies of the lamp. To tell you the truth, I believe him. Instead of asking the other genies of the lamp to speak up and confirm whether «Story's Hero» represents them too, I'd rather not. Otherwise, my head will fill with all sorts of voices. You know what happens after that?

Hubbub begins when everyone speaks at once.
Everyone fears the hubbub.
Even the hoopoe on the mosque's minaret.
Let someone dare,
let a gathering rise,
to lay firewood beneath the sobs of lonely narrators,
beneath the ravings of mad prophets,
so that Abraham
may be freed
from the flames,
the flames of his own clumsy tale.

With all the grogginess weighing me down, it felt like a magnet of fear and temptation constantly pulling me in opposite directions. On the surface, everything screamed that Anonymous was a hacker, and I should get rid of them immediately. On the other hand, I was eager to discover what they actually meant by the ACE game.

I could easily guess where that temptation and curiosity were coming from. They rose from the grave of my «Mr. Writer». It all stemmed from my unfinished novel—a story that has remained incomplete for more than ten years, gathering dust because of the endless disobedience of the «Mr. Writer» within it. But...

It's better not to dwell any further on «Mr. Writer» for now. Anyway!

«Mr. Writer» had written somewhere in my story: a decent person should be able to rebel against himself.