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Self Tolerance

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Matt has developed a unique style and writing method. Removing all age, gender, ethnicity, physical appearance etc… only leaving words and actions to define a character.

This story, like all of Matt's stories, was written out of home, never at a desk, never stationary.(Matt's original rule was 'only while walking outside' but was revised into 'must be moving through earth based coordinate space' this allows occasional exceptions for trains, buses, etc..). Everything is written with pen and paper, then put into a document with voice-to-text, and finally edited and polished by Matt alone, no other human or AI is involved.

Matt is fascinated and enjoys using AI, but is a firm believer that we should label content.
Human only, AI generated, AI assisted, AI collaboration, etc…

Matt does play with AI in some writing content, like AI assisted poetry (great practice and learning tool to improve writing skills, vocab, cadence, etc..), or AI dialogues as artistic experimentation.
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With the enemy invasion successfully repelled I'm recalling the troops and lowering the threat level. Our citizens will be relieved to return to normalcy, hopefully the communities that were on the front lines will recover quickly, our nation deserves some peace and prosperity. The capital is still allocating extra resources, and now that we no longer need them for military efforts they can be diverted to infrastructure and social programs.

We are receiving some concerning reports from homeland security bureaus, there seems to be chatter indicative of an enemy infiltration, but there isn't anything substantial or actionable yet. Everyone is still reeling from the battle, so we've decided it's best not to raise any alarms or increase alert levels yet.

Our optimism is going to cost us dearly. We were wrong. The enemy infiltrated our nation, penetrating deep into our territory and society with spies and covert forces. We are finally aware of the problem, but the extent of the infiltration is profound. We have been compromised in ways that will necessitate drastic measures.

This time we are facing a whole new type of enemy, they are masters of disguise and adept mimics. Somehow these covert forces have learned a great deal about our inner workings and high society, they have a much more precise understanding of us than any invader we have faced in the past. We are forced to deploy aggressive domestic counter espionage operations.

The infiltration was extensive. The cowardly enemy insidiously hid among our citizens and disguised themselves as innocent civilians. Uprooting and dislodging their infiltration was a brutal and costly effort, many innocent bystanders were victims of friendly fire, and devastating collateral damage was widespread. We believe we have extricated the last of them, but our forces will remain on high alert for now.

There have been numerous domestic incidents and disruptions, they seem innocent enough, but there are concerns that they could be indicative of a fresh new wave of covert Invaders. We have decided to deploy one of our new teams specially trained in counter-infiltration. Hopefully what we're seeing is not a precursor to a repeat of last time, if we have been compromised again I pray we are not too late, last time was a devastating blow to national morale.

At first of all at first our teams were only reporting mild chatter, and investigations were not particularly eventful. But then our special-ops teams responded to some reports of suspicious activity. One altercation led to more, tensions mounted, and by the time the dust settled there was significant damage and harm. The after action review failed to determine if our teams were at fault or if their responses were justified. Officials say they are still investigating the events and determining how to improve procedure. The truth is that they are just sweeping it under the rug. We are all still operating under unaltered guidelines and procedures.

We had a repeat, and it was even worse this time. Isolated confrontations cascaded through a whole district into widespread altercations. I don't know if this will be a repairable situation, the

incident has inflamed tensions, it's doubtful that public trust and goodwill is recoverable. Postmortem reports once again fail to assign any fault. Everyone is promising to fix the problem, but I don't see any action to promote change.

Domestic incidents have eroded faith in the military, the atmosphere is deteriorating quickly in the district's hit by altercations. Civilians have been harmed and they are naturally becoming evasive and defensive. Tensions flare up easily, our investigating agents are obviously confusing evasive attitudes for signs of betrayal. Defensive behaviors by civilians quickly lead our teams to assume the community has been compromised. The division is recruiting more agents and troops. The whole situation is snowballing out of control.

The unimaginable has happened. A cascade of altercations spread through the administrative block. Before anyone could assess the full scope of the situation our troops were already engaged with administration and government officials. Now our investigation teams are aggressively targeting the government. I fear our nation has reached a tipping point.

The military is actively targeting and attacking the government. I have lost hope. It's hard to imagine a way back. Are we past the point of no return?

…

“Come in Tash. Have a seat.” Dr. Wist gestures towards the couch, closing the door behind as Tash walks in. They sit, Tash on the couch and Dr. Wist in the chair.

“So what's the verdict doc? Please don't tell me that you called me in just to say that they didn't find anything again.” Tash glares, but Dr. Wist looks more serious than usual, hesitating to speak. “Out with it. You know I have to come to these sessions regardless. You're the one always saying my headaches are probably stress related anyways.”

With arms and legs crossed Dr. Wist takes a calm yet serious tone. “The scan didn't find any obvious signs of any conditions that would cause the headaches you describe.” Tash smirks, as if gloating about the failure to find something, then Dr. Wist continues. “But if analyzed in context, with all of the previous scans, there is something concerning.” Both of them sit still in silence.

Tash's expression flashes concern, then is painted with an aggressive frustration. “Well, what are you waiting for, a formal request for information?”

“The scans varied in procedure and goals, but even with the variations in scan types, there are small visible lesions that appear to show signs of progression over time.” Tash is frozen and silent. Dr. Wist collects a new softer composure and leans forward ever so slightly. “The progression pattern is concerning, because in some cases this is a precursor sign to M.S.” A very short pause, just enough to notice an extremely distressed expression begin to surface.

“But this is not a diagnosis, it is only a red flag that we need to follow up on. It's very possible that it's something else, or nothing significant at all. It's too early to say anything for sure.”

Tash sits in shock for a while, emotions run wild at first, then objective reasoning starts to resurface. “What are my odds?”

Sitting back Dr. Wist takes a firmer tone. “We need to do follow-up tests. Normally I would try to avoid giving any such details until we know more.” Tash leans forward aggressively. “But I have been seeing you long enough to know that your police instincts will take over, and you will interrogate me until you get your answers.”

Tash leans back and softens that aggressive posture, then, while crossing arms and legs says. “Good… So?”

“The sequence of MRI scans was not ideal, because of the varying types and conditions. These types of lesions and their progression are not as clear as they could be, it would be much better if all the scans were identical and designed to diagnose this.” Dr. West takes a breath, with the caveats out of the way now continues. “These indicators are often associated with a roughly 30% chance of developing into M.S.”

Tash's expression and jaw drop “30%!?!?” The odds are scary and yet quite hopeful. But this is perhaps worse than harsher odds, because it is a dominantly hopeful outcome that is overshadowed by a daunting dreadful fear. The odds are in Tash's favor, so giving up isn't an option, but there is still a very strong possibility of an unfathomably terrible fate, a horrible limbo of predictive anticipation and fear.

“Well, like I said, the tests are far from ideal. So I would venture to say those odds only apply to clear results, we are possibly looking at less certainty with these scans… But you have had Epstein-Barr virus, and that does correlate with M.S., generally indicating increased odds of progression.” Dr West tries to maintain a calm but strong demeanor, knowing that Tash’s fears and insecurities quickly turn combative at the first sign of weakness.

“What!” Tash bursts with an offended tone. “I never heard of this Epstein-Barr thing. Where did you get that from?”

“It's in your records. Perhaps the Doctor referred to it as mono.” Dr West looks at some notes.

Sitting back with tall shoulders and crossed arms Tash takes a posture best described as angry pouting. “Oh… Yeah… Well what's that got to do with this?”

“There is a correlation – and suspected causal role – having had the virus statistically increases the odds of an M.S. diagnosis.” It feels like the hardest parts are out of the way now, so Dr. Wist takes a more gentle tone. “But all of this is preliminary, the last thing we want to do is overreact. If further tests warrant treatment, then there are many options that you can consider with a

specialist. But as your therapist, I will work with you to focus on healthy behavior, lifestyle changes, and preventative measures that can improve your odds."

With intentionally raised eyebrows to display suspicion and disbelief Tash asks."What are you talking about? I thought M.S. is one of those crazy bad diseases without a cure. How is a head shrink like you going to help with this?"

"M.S. is an autoimmune disease. Stress and inflammation are key factors involved in the progression or regression of the disease and its symptoms." Dr. Wist sees the suspicious expression of disbelief has not yet receded. "We need to continue working through your issues, specifically any stress related triggers and behaviors."

Tash slumps into the couch, eyes darting around in thought. "So… This is all because of that time I got mono… So… Whoever gave me mono is the reason that…"

"No Tash. Stop!" Dr Wist employs an uncharacteristically demanding tone. "You need to stop finding culprits. We always come back to this. Life isn't clear-cut, and bad things aren't always someone's fault."

Tash bursts out in accusation. "Easy for you to say, sitting in a nice little office, only seeing your patients. I spent my life in the thick of it, trudging through the mud of society, trying to keep peace, punish the criminals, and righting the wrongs."

"That's not your job and you know it! And it's precisely that attitude that led to all of those incidents." Dr Wist says in an almost scornful manner.

"What do you want me to say Doc? That I regret it? That I'm sorry that I did those things? … Cuz I'm not! They had it coming." Tash started speaking with a fiery anger, but now a painful grief overtakes the rage. "You know what kind of villains I have to deal with, don't you?… Wouldn't you do the same in my shoes? Look me in the eyes and tell me that the vicious perpetrators deserve to be handled with kid gloves… Tell me you think it's fair to walk in and treat them with human dignity, after they commit those vile acts."

"Tash, we have had so many sessions, I've come to know you and your history. I think we can both agree that you have always had a strong sense of justice and equity. As far back as you can recall, even your childhood memories are dominated by themes of fairness, balance, and penalty." Dr. Wist locks eyes with Tash, but Tash breaks off and gazes downward. "Those are not bad things. But anger clearly paints your perception and leads to unacceptable behavior. You keep crossing lines and losing control."

"You don't understand. You've never been in my shoes." A mix of pain and anger in Tash's voice at first, but the pain sinks away, and the anger floods out over top. "You all love to sit in judgment from your sunny suburbs, but you need us. Do you think the punishments handed out

by the system are a real deterrent? The people committing those horrific acts are not scared. Heck, half of them walk free. Cops like me are the front line, without us…”

“What about last year?” Dr Wist's question cuts off the righteous tirade. Anger twists into disgust and Tash looks away to the side with arms crossed.

“How was I supposed to know?” Tash snorts. “With a record like that… In the middle of a situation like that…”

“All the witnesses say there was no weapon or aggressive behavior, quite the opposite, there was only clearly helpful and cooperative…” Dr. Wist is cut off once again, Tash always interrupts any narration of that incident review.

“With that history! A person with that kind of record doesn't deserve second chances unless they earned it.” Tash blurts out, but now Dr Wist interrupts Tash.

“You still won't even read any of the files or statements from groups, communities, and other other sources. I'd say a second chance had already been earned in this case, but you still refuse to read anything except that old criminal record in your system.” Dr Wist can sense Tash is shutting down, fleeing into a mental safe house to evade this confrontation.” Look, the purpose of these sessions isn't to rehash the incident. Our goal is to work on the underlying anger issues. Your sense of fairness is not a horrible thing, but you need to let go of the anger. If you let your rage turn into blind righteous wrath again, then I don't think there is any way to salvage the situation.”

“I'm doing fine doc.” Tash assures with a strong confident voice, but a timid expression
“You spoke with my partner, you should know I'm controlling my anger fine now. No outbursts.”

“Yes, that is good progress.” The praise from Dr. Wist has an uplifting effect which flashes visibly on Tash's face, but is then suppressed and hidden quickly. “No outbursts is an improvement. But I can read between the lines, the underlying anger is still there, isn't it?”

“What do you want from me doc?” Tash’s hands flip forward presenting both palms, speaking with helpless frustration. “I'm already doing all the things you tell me to do. Less sugar and caffeine, breathing exercises, drinking less…” Tash trails off, dropping those hands down onto the couch.

“Managing and repressing the anger is improving your outward presentation and behavior. You have made significant progress, you should be proud of yourself.” Dr. Wist pauses to let the praise set in. “But the context has changed, we need to shift our focus. M.S. is a very serious condition. Anger and stress lead to biological reactions like inflammation which actually increase the odds of developing the disease and aggravating symptoms.” Another pause to give Tash a moment to digest that. “Repressing and managing outward behavior won't improve your odds, we need to confront the underlying issues and address the root causes of your…”

>>> Across town

Drit is sitting in the dark, attention completely fixed on the screen, watching the illustrative animations and listening to the descriptive narrations.

*** … M.S. is an autoimmune disease, there are several identified and suspected compounding factors.

There are some genetic components which seem to predispose individuals, as well as environmental factors that correlate with the disease.

The immune system's T-cells are designed to attack foreign entities or infected host cells. T-cells normally do not attack healthy cells.

The mechanisms that allow T-cells to avoid attacking the body's own cells are called self-tolerance.

In M.S. there is a breakdown in self-tolerance. There are multiple suspected causes for this breakdown.

One such common factor among M.S. patients is a history of infection by mimic viruses.

Epstein-Barr virus – for example – is a strong candidate. It is hypothesized that a strong similarity between some of the virus proteins and myelin sheath proteins can trigger M.S.

Fighting off an infection of Epstein-Barr may provoke the T-cells to weaken self-tolerance in order to target the virus.

This diminished self-tolerance could lay dormant, until additional factors and conditions culminate in T-cells targeting and attacking the myelin sheath of nerve cells.

This autoimmune attack on the myelin sheath is the defining feature of M.S.

The damage to the sheath can cause inflammation, which can serve as a signal for a further increase in immune response, leading to cascading chain reactions.

When these types of diseases manifest the challenge is controlling and inhibiting – or preventing – the autoimmune response.

Research and study in prevention, recovery, therapy, and medication mostly focuses on addressing the aggressor T-cells.

There are some mechanisms centered on the myelin sheath. MHC presentations of antigens are like identifying labels that cells present to the immune system, they are key players in M.S.

There are cases, usually by infections or cancers, where antigens are suppressed or cells eject antigens. Sometimes the whole MHC molecule – which presents antigens on the outside of the cell – can even be shed.

The effectiveness of these evasive strategies – in the context of treatment – is considered questionable.

If the attacker T-cells are not addressed directly, then even if some cells present less antigens, the T-cells may just find other targets, or possibly worse– ejecting antigens or MHC could flood other regions with targets, only serving to trigger attacks and surrounding areas.

And if that's not bad enough, sometimes the immune system interprets suppressed antigen presentation as a sign of infection or disease.

So most focus is placed on addressing the T-cells and ways to reduce their aggression. Many treatments and preventative measures aim to reduce factors that activate or amplify immune responses…***

“…Hey…Are you still listening? Are you still there?” The voice on the phone penetrates Drit's focus.

“Yeah Rasp, I'm still here. Just watching a video about M.S.” Drit’s attention fumbles back onto the phone call with Rasp. “So how is Tash doing? Last time we spoke there was no mention of it”

“Oh, there isn't a diagnosis yet, as far as I know. I only heard about this second hand.” Rasp says. “You know I don't really talk to Tash anymore, it never goes well.”

“I know but…” Drit didn't think that through, now realizing that there wasn't anything ready to say. “…But… You should try, right?”

“Have the rage and paranoia gotten any better?” Rasp inquires.

“Well, You know…” Drit cant lie about this, but feels a need to encourage reconciliation. “I wouldn't say it's gone. I just deflect or avoid topics that get negative or trigger anger.”

“And how's that working out for you?” Randy takes a mocking tone. “Let me guess, there always needs to be a target. There's always someone in need of judgment and hellfire, right?”

“…I mean… I wouldn't put it like that…” Drit becomes timid and trails off without finishing the argument.

“You know when you deflect and evade Tash's spite and bile – when you refuse to join in on the judgment and condemnation – then you become the enemy. You know that right?” Rasp asks rhetorically and confrontationally. “Tash will turn around and condemn you behind your back. You become a dismissive coward according toTash. You are either together in the corner of rage, or you are the enemy, there is no room for middle ground. In Tash’s eyes there are only two sides : unconditional ally or enemy.”

Drit sighs, knowing that is all true, searching for a response “…So what? just give up? Don't even try to help?”

“You do what you think is best.” Rasp responds. “As for me, I can't help. There are things I could do or say that might make Tash feel better, but it would cost me too much, it's too toxic for me. I'm not going to drown myself in venom and bile just to be someone else's catharsis or punching bag.” Rasp lets some of that frustration vent out a bit, then says in a calmer tone. “If the day comes when Tash is not toxic, I'll be there… but I won't poison myself. There comes a point when you gotta take care of yourself, you know?”

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Tash and Dr. Wist are still in session

“So I'm going to refer you to a specialist. In the meantime we should continue our work on your issues with…” Dr. Wist is cut off.

“Forget all that. Who cares!” An agitated Tash erupts. “We've got to fight this! What kind of meds are there? I don't want to waste time dancing around, let's hit this hard and fast.”

“I can't prescribe any meds.” As soon as Dr. Wist says that Tash grunts and breaks eye contact. “And I don't want you to think that the specialist will either, not anytime soon. We really need to adjust your expectations. The doctor I'm referring you to is certainly going to start with a series of tests and exams.”

“Fine!” Tash snarls. “Give me the name and address, I'll go see them now.”

“Oh dear! No, you really need to calm down. Please. The specialist is quite busy, booking appointments needs to be done weeks in advance, plus scheduling scans and getting results can take even longer.” Dr. Wist waits for Tash to calm down a bit. It takes a long moment before the anger softens and leaks signs of sadness and desperation. “This is not something you can rush or force. You need to approach with a different attitude, you aren't walking into a room tasked with handling the immediate situation. This is a step-by-step long-haul process.”

Tash tenses up, fidgeting, eyes sporadically darting around, as if searching for a target or escape route. “I don't… How can I…” The tension persists a while, then fades into a helpless submissive plea. “Fine, tell me what should I do doc.”

“If this is M.S. then we've caught it early, and early diagnosis is always best. The doctor I'm referring you to has specialized tools and techniques.” Dr. Wist flashes a positive expression, not happy, just an’ almost smile’ to console Tash’s troubled state of mind. “But there are still lots of things we can work on now. Controlling your aggressive responses and reducing stress is very important.”

“Don't blow smoke doc, I've heard about M.S., I don't know much, but I know this is a serious disease.” Tash squints one eye and intentionally flashes an expression of disgust, conveying disbelief. “That hippy-dippy holistic stuff won't do anything here, this isn't an achy knee or runny nose.”

“These are very serious and effective treatments. M.S. is characterized by your T-cells attacking your own nerve cells. They normally shouldn't do that, but they can lose some of their self-tolerance. If you have diminished self-tolerance, then we need to avoid any unnecessary aggravation of your immune system and T-cells.” Dr Wist explains, slowly giving time to absorb the information.

“And what? My immune system gets angry when I get angry? Ha!” Tash mocks. “Get serious talk doc.”

“I'm absolutely serious! Stress is a cause of inflammation, and your immune system interprets inflammation as a red flag. Anger and stress raise levels of hormones like cortisol and adrenaline, T-cells respond to them by increasing aggression and sensitivity.” Dr Wist lectures Tash in a stern instructive way. “And there are many other documented pathways like these. Your immune system does – in a very real and literal way – sense your stress and anger, it responds to them as a sign that there is something wrong. Your anger affects your immune system's attitude, it's no joke.”

Tash gawks for a moment, raising an eyebrow in suspicion, but when Dr. Wist returns a scornful glare the suspicion dissolves, eye contact is broken. “Fine! So more breathing exercises and diet changes then? I'm not going back to those meditation classes or support groups though.”

“Your anger management skills have improved, and that's great. Previously, your behavioral patterns fanned to the flames of anger, and now –from what I hear – you are doing a great job at snuffing out aggression before it flares out of control. This is excellent progress.” Giving a smile and approval, Dr. Wist then gently reapproaches. “But the underlying triggers are still there. I have a feeling that it requires effort to rein in the anger, and then it smolders quietly beneath the surface, probably coming out later in more private situations.”

Tash looks soft and embarrassed, then stiffens up and rebukes. “All that horrible stuff out there! And these horrible people! Doing selfish, terrible things to others… Of course I'm angry. Everywhere I look people are just…” Tash trails off, silence hangs for a while. “...The world is getting worse and nobody seems to care… I don't belong here anymore.”

“Tash, do you really think that other people are – that the whole world is – getting worse?” Dr. Wist points a pen at Tash, emphasizing the question.

“Yes!” Tash erupts. “Do you even watch the news? Have you looked around outside? Are you blind!?!?”

“I think life is better – on average – by all objective measures. Which specific thing about people or society do you think is worse?” Dr. Wist knows this will provoke, but decides to take a gamble.

“You?!... Just use your eyes doc!” Rage takes over for a moment, Tash catches it and begins doing some breathing exercises to calm down. “You calling me crazy? You think it's all rainbows and sunshine out there?”

“Oh no. I think what you were seeing is very real.” This acknowledgment calms Tash. Dr Wist waits until that temper settles down thoroughly. “I just don't think it's new.”

Tash is surprised. “What do you mean?” Originally anticipating an argument, but now unsure where to aim.

“I mean the world was always filled with lots of people doing awful stuff.” Dr Wist says very matter-of-fact. Without the usual elaboration or explanation, simply adding. “Wouldn't you agree? Weren't there always lots of selfish, abusive, and just plain mean people.”

“Yeah, but… Why are you…?...?” Tash fumbles at first, then pieces together a response. “You are usually defending people, saying that they have reasons why they do things, you're always making excuses for them. What's going on?”

“I do advocate empathy, that's true. And I am a firm believer that the vast majority of people are not evil, even the ones who may seem to be. I think most people are just doing the best they can with the hand they were dealt.” Hearing this, Tash becomes visibly alert and primed to react. “But with all of that said, I do think you are right as well. Regardless of the reasons, there's definitely a lot of people doing hurtful and selfish things to other people. The world is filled with violence, deceit, and depravity… But it was always there… Wasn't it?”

Still confused, even though the words all fit and agree, Tash still feels backed into a corner for some reason. “Well sure… yeah.”

“Let me ask you, Tash. Has it changed at all in your lifetime?” Dr. Wist asks carefully. “Like have you noticed a shift since you were a kid? Do people do different bad things now compared to back then?”

Tash reflects on the question. “Um… Yeah. Back in the day it was more direct, like brutish or greedy, aggressively in your face, but at least people were honest. Nowadays the world is filling up with a new type– deceptive and manipulative degenerates.”

“Interesting.” Dr. Wist comments. “Do you think it's possible that there has been a shift in your attention and focus? Are you noticing these deceptive and manipulative behaviors more?”

“Oh yeah.” Tash blurts out. “Back in the day I didn't pay much attention, and even when I did notice them I didn't understand the significance. I didn't see the insidious intentions or comprehend the harm they would cause.”

“But now you understand?” Dr. Wist inquires, speaking as if to a child – a child who has learned an obvious fact, like that an active stovetop is too hot to touch. “Now you get it. That seems like a pivotal realization, a turning point.” Pausing to seek a response. Tash nods and grunts. “Were there any further lessons of such significance? Or was that the last one that stands out?”

“Yes. I remember when I realized that the world chooses to turn a blind eye.” Tash emphasizes that with great frustration. “Everyone else seems to be pretending that life is sunshine and rainbows. They are so scared to confront the ugly truth, they live in intentional ignorance and blissful delusion, they just let the darkness spread in the shadows.”

“I see. That realization must have been frustrating, a frustration beyond measure.” Dr. Wist consoles Tash. “So you have no choice but to sit back and watch this evil spread? Helpless to do anything about it. That must be infuriating.”

“At first that's how I felt, yeah.” Tash confirms, almost grinning happily. For the first time the doctor seems to understand and be listening. “Believe it or not, it actually got worse. I tried to do what I could, work within the lines. Everyone said you can't change the system but you can work inside of it to make it better. So that's what I did.” Tash explains enthusiastically, but now anger bubbles up. “And you know what? It's all a scam! The world needs people like me to work inside the system, to bend the rules and get results, but then, the instant something goes wrong we are thrown under the bus.”

“It sounds like you feel betrayed and cast aside.” Dr. Wist comments with a hint of inquiry.

“Of course I do. That's exactly what happened.” Tash asserts. “And it's intentional, like a setup. The broken system depends on us acting outside the rules, then uses us as scapegoats to appease the ignorant public and media.”

“That's awful.” Dr. Wist quietly inhales and discreetly braces, preparing for an expected outburst. “Even if you did make a mistake, all of your contributions should entitle you to some leniency. They should have swept the indiscretions under the rug instead of letting your reputation be dragged through the mud like that.”

Tash was still positive and resonating agreement as Dr. Wist started, but about halfway through the true meaning became obvious and rage quickly dominated. “You… You were just setting me up to attack me. Forget this! Forget you!”

“So you want to die?” Dr. Wist takes a very confrontational tone.

Tash had started standing up, but now hesitates, this is a completely new side of the doctor “… What? … No, of course not… But I don't have to sit here while you slander and mock me!”

Tash starts standing up again, and once more is interrupted. “Stop running away. Are you a coward?”

Tash’s face is throbbing red. “I ain't no coward! I'm not afraid to face reality. I stare evil in the eyes and I don't flinch… You! … You soft spoiled doctor. You dare call me a coward?”

“Yes, it's true, you have worked in a role taking on responsibilities and facing situations that others won't or can't handle.” Dr. Wist lays that out as a concession, and it seems to work,Tash is still furious but now sits back down with arms crossed. “But what about when you cross the line? What about when you hurt innocents? What about all the horrible things you have done yourself?”

“I… What?...” Tash stutters, fumbling with words. “How was I supposed to know?... You can't expect me to… There's no way to have known…”

“Your record is clear as day, a story I have seen many times. You start flying off the handle more and more, and eventually people start getting hurt. At first you were able to just say ‘they were bad guys, they deserved it’, and everyone let it slide at first. Am I wrong?” Dr. Wist glares, Tash breaks eye contact sheepishly and grunts angrily. “But then your anger hurt someone. You went too far, and someone who didn't deserve it ended up getting hurt. And that's when everything escalated and started getting out of control right?”

Both sit in awkward silence, Dr. Wist glares and waits for Tash to concede “... More or less, yeah. What do you expect though? Everyone got all riled up after that incident. They all came down on me without any context. Internal Affairs didn't care about my side of the story…”

“That's not what I'm talking about.” Dr. Wist cuts Tash off. “There were several incidents before that one. Your aggression clearly escalated dramatically after that earlier incident, several years ago. Do you remember that one? Your supervisors only gave you a reprimand. Considering the severity of your actions you basically walked away with just a slap on the wrist.”

Tash’s eyes widen, surprised, like a deer frozen in the headlights “... In the heat of the moment… What was I supposed to think…” Shame fills both Tash's words and face.

“You made a mistake. You did a bad thing.” Dr. Wist says those words gently and waits for them to sink in. “We all do, we're all human. There is good and bad in all of us.” Tash looks up, eyes turning red and watery. Dr Wist sees an opening and seizes it. “From the stories you tell about your childhood it is clear you have always been obsessed with justice and fairness. That's the lens you have used all your life. But… Do you think that using that lens somehow makes you more fair and just than other people? Are your judgments more correct and righteous?”

Those teary red eyes firm up and Tash inhales, taking a moment to think before speaking. “Yes, that's why I became a cop. Yes, of course I can see injustice more clearly, and of course I understand it better, because I've been studying it all my life.”

“Studying it? Really?” Dr. Wist flips through some pages of notes. “I didn't know you studied justice. Did you take classes in historical punishment and rehabilitation methodologies? Or maybe modern criminal justice systems? Or perhaps something more practical, like correctional therapy?”

Tash's nose contorts in disgust. “Don't be ridiculous, I know right from wrong, I don't need books to tell me. I prefer to read stuff about philosophy or history.”

“Ah, so you are a cop and an armchair philosopher, and that qualifies you to judge others.” Dr. Wist can see Tash getting upset, it's clearly time to get to the point. “You were never appointed judge, jury, or executioner. You are entitled to your opinions, but you are not better at seeing injustice or determining what is right. Somewhere along the line you chose to see life through this lens, probably because of some experiences in childhood which felt profoundly unfair, we will likely never know exactly why. But it sent you down this path that eventually led you here, and now you claim that you know right from wrong better than everyone else.”

Tash was silent and pensive when Dr. Wist spoke about childhood experiences and unfair treatment, that resonated with something. But now snaps back to the present moment after hearing that last bit about being judgemental and righteous. “You don't know what you are talking about! I see wrong all the time, I know it better than you!”

“I see… So… Those things you did, were they wrong?” Dr. Wist intentionally leaks some mild sarcasm in that question.

“... “ Tash is speechless at first “… You know that is not the same, I wasn't trying to… I meant to…” Tash turns sheepish again.

“You judge everything black or white, you don't allow room for grey areas. Judgement is so swift and decisive for everyone else, why do you hesitate with yourself? An unforgiving judge for

everyone, except you, are you the only exception because only your life has context, complexity, and nuance? ” Dr. Wist asks that rhetorical question with sarcastic condemnation, but then quickly switches to a soft supportive voice. “Life isn't black and white Tash. You've been obsessed with judgment and justice for so long, you have learned to twist them into weapons. You can rationalize anything and justify any action using distorted lenses of fairness and justice.” Tash slouches and looks at the ground fidgeting, trying not to let these words penetrate or take root. “But do you know what I think pushed you over the edge? Can you guess what I think sent you spiraling out of control?” Dr. Wist asks those questions with a demanding emphasis, and then waits for a response.

Tash is silent and evasive, but the silence lingers unbroken, and then looking up makes eye contact. It takes a few more seconds before Dr. Wist gets an answer. “My anger?” Tash utters that without any strength or confidence.

“No.” Dr. Wist disagrees very plainly, pausing before adding. “Guilt. Your guilt.”

Tash's brow furrows in confusion “Huh?”

“You perceive everything that's happening to you as a grand injustice. But that's because you can't admit that you made a mistake, you won't admit that you did something bad.” Dr. Wist shifts into a more assertive posture now. “You did lots of bad stuff. You embodied anger and hate, rage and violence, you were the villain.” Emphasizing that hard, and then stopping abruptly to make that statement impactful. “But that's okay… We are all the villain sometimes. It happens to all of us, we often don't even notice that we were the villain in someone else's story.” This time finishing that idea gently, then pausing before continuing. “You need to accept that, and most importantly, you need to forgive yourself. We are all acting the part of villains in other people's stories, everyone does it all the time, It's inevitable. The real question is… are you a villain with – or without – a redemption arc?”

Those teary red eyes have returned. “I'm not a vill… I don't want to be a vi… What do I do doc?”

“You start by forgiving yourself. Accept that your anger is a problem, admit that you are just a human like everyone else.” Dr. Wist consoles the patient who is now in tears.

“It's too much I can't… I shouldn't be… Everything's changed… I don't belong anywhere anymore…” Tash fails to find words for the pain.

“No Tash, it's your anger and judgment that don't belong here, not you.” Dr. Wist leans forward. “You need to tolerate other people, even when they don't fit into your worldview, even when they make mistakes, and even when they do bad things… But most importantly, Tash, when you make a mistake, when you are someone else's villain… You deserve forgiveness and acceptance from yourself… You need to tolerate yourself.”