THE BLUE PLAN

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On the Brink of Collapse

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A World War Scenario, 2027–2030

A Novel

ABU YOUSSEF IBRAHIM AL-SHAFI'I AL-HAMIDANI

Translated from the Arabic

THE BLUE PLAN

A World War Scenario, 2027–2030

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To those who ask for proof
before they believe...

and to those who believed in fear
because fear alone came to them with proof.

"Believe nothing until you have searched for its opposite."

— FROM THE NOTEBOOK OF KHALED IBRAHIM AL-SHAFI'I AL-HAMIDANI, FIRST PAGE

Hmida plays, Hmida keeps the score, and the war belongs to Hmida's sons — and whoever takes on Hmida's sons has already lost!

— ALGERIAN FOLK SAYING

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PROLOGUE

The Last Grains of Sand

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December 30, 2029
Time remaining: 00:00:00:03

IT WAS A QUIET night. The sky was heavy with cloud, and snow was falling.

It was not quite snow. It was lighter than snow and slower, and when it touched the skin it did not melt but stayed there like old dust. For weeks now people had stopped asking what was falling from the sky. They had stopped asking almost anything at all.

The man walked down the middle of the street, because the pavements were no longer pavements.

Abandoned cars with their doors hanging open. Shopfronts without glass. A pharmacy sign dangling by one corner, swinging in the wind with a dull, steady creak, as if it were the only thing in the city still working. No light in any window. No sound of an engine. No barking.

Under his coat he carried a notebook.

A small notebook, its corners worn away, its pages swollen with damp. On the inside of the cover was a line — Notebook of the man who will be charged with the unveiling — written in a pen whose colour he no longer remembered.

At the far end of the street there was another man, in his room, in his own private world, living his ordinary life.

Sitting at his computer in his small study, that man saw an old sheikh seated on the threshold of a mosque. The sheikh's robe was so white that

the ash seemed to avoid it; his beard was red with henna; and between his palms he held a small hourglass.

The man in the street stopped a few steps away.

The sheikh raised the hourglass to the level of his eyes. In its upper bulb there were three grains of sand. Only three.

The sheikh said:

"You were told: nineteen years."

"I was told."

"I found it. I did not finish reading it, and I still cannot believe what is in it."

"I did not ask you to believe, my son," said the sheikh. "I asked you to look."

A grain fell.

The sheikh was looking at something beyond the man's shoulder.

The second grain fell.

Deep down the street, on the third floor of a building not far away, a screen lit up like the window of a dream.

Blue.

A blue so deep it inspired awe, as though someone had opened a window onto the floor of an ocean.

Then a single word appeared on it, in large white letters the man could read from where he stood:

"Soon."

When the man turned back to the threshold, it was empty. Nothing remained of the sheikh but a faint perfume: musk, ambergris and oud.

And on the stone, where the hourglass had been, lay a single grain of sand.

The last one.

• • •

Nineteen years earlier in the life of the world, and only a few weeks earlier in his own, this same man had sat on a night of real, white snow in front of a computer screen, believing that the worst thing that could happen to him that night was to be late for the dawn prayer.

PART ONE

The Discovery

CHAPTER ONE

Blue Beneath the Dust of the Screen

• • •

December 14, 2010 — a city in eastern Algeria
Time remaining until the Year of Silence: 16 years and 18 days

SNOW RARELY VISITED THE city.

And on the night it did, Khaled Ibrahim al-Shafi'i al-Hamidani did not sleep.

He had switched off the ceiling light an hour earlier and kept only the desk lamp on, and with it the gas heater in the corner, whispering its blue flame behind the glass. On the desk, between the work files he had brought home and a book on the history of money that he had borrowed two months ago and never returned, lay a small notebook with a black cover.

From the next room came his mother's voice:

"Khaled... the light. You have work tomorrow."

"In a minute, Mother. Ten minutes."

She knew that his ten minutes meant two hours, and he knew that she knew. The silent agreement between them was years old.

He got up, went to the window and drew the curtain aside a little.

Under the only streetlamp in the alley, the ground had put on white. A light snow had come down without a sound and covered the roof of the neighbour's car, the edge of the pavement and the power lines, and it had drawn on the glass a thin film like the dust on old screens.

Khaled smiled. He loved the city when it fell silent.

Then he went back to his chair.

• • •

The message had arrived three days earlier, and he had not opened it.

It had no sender. The sender field was empty — something he had never seen in his inbox before. The subject line was a single number:

2010

He deleted it twice. Both times it was back in his inbox the next morning, unread, as though someone kept slipping the same letter under the door.

The third time, he did not delete it. He opened it.

There was no text. Only a single link.

He clicked it.

The screen turned blue.

Not the blue everyone who has ever used a computer knows, the blue of a crashing operating system, nor the pale blue that apologizes for a memory error. This was a deep blue with something solemn in it, as if you were looking through the porthole of a submarine at an ocean wall no one had ever seen.

He moved the mouse. The cursor trembled slightly, then went still, like a weak pulse.

Then lines began to appear. Not all at once, but line by line, as if invisible ink were being poured from above:

"Those who make history have no time to read it, and those who write it have no courage to live it."

Khaled read the sentence three times.

It was not something from a forum. Not one of those blogs crowding the web in those years, written under pen names and signed off with three exclamation marks. It was cold. Deliberate. As if its author were not trying to convince anyone.

Beneath it a table appeared.

A column of dates, beginning decades in the past and running into years that had not yet come. A column of names of financial institutions, some of which he knew from his work and some he had never heard of. A column of

abbreviations and serial numbers. And in the last column, beside each date, a small symbol in brackets:

[Card]

He ran his eyes down the rows with the speed of a man used to reading financial statements. Numbers. Numbers. Numbers. Nothing.

Then he stopped at one line.

September 15, 2008 — [Card] — "The house that is left to fall."

He knew that date. Anyone who followed financial news knew it. The day one of the largest investment banks in the world declared bankruptcy, after which the markets began to tumble like dominoes.

There was nothing strange about the line in itself. Anyone could write down a date that had already passed and put a cryptic phrase beside it.

But Khaled did what he always did. He opened a second window and searched for an archived copy of the page.

He found one archived version. Just one.

Dated the spring of 2003.

He sat up straight.

He did not believe it. He was not one of those who believed. Dates can be forged, archives can be hacked, and anyone with enough time can manufacture an event after the fact. He wrote exactly that in his notebook, and drew a star beside it.

Then he searched another way. And a third.

He found nothing to prove the page had been written in 2003. And nothing to disprove it.

And that, to him, was worse than either.

• • •

Khaled was not a historian, nor a politician, nor an expert in intelligence affairs.

He was a twenty-seven-year-old veterinarian who spent his days at work, his evenings hunting for the one number that did not fit with the rest, and his nights searching for everything else: history, economics, astronomy, old books of medicine, dictionaries. He was afraid of missing a door.

His friends used to say that he would not lose his calm even if the earth tilted under his feet. They did not know that his calm was a craft, learned the way a child learns to swim: because he had once been afraid of drowning.

And he kept a system with his notebook from which he never departed.

On the right-hand page he wrote what he knew.

On the left-hand page he wrote what he could not explain.

That night, the left-hand page was full before he had written a single line on the right.

The blue screen — who sent it?

2003? → forged archive?

Why me?

He stared at the last question for a long time, then crossed it out. It struck him as a vain question.

• • •

Days passed.

But the blue page did not leave his head.

His search led him from an archive to a forum, from the forum to an old scanned book, and from the book to a set of photographs of playing cards.

Cards from an American card game printed in the mid-1990s, which enthusiasts online called the "Jackson cards" and traded pictures of the way people trade pictures of saints. Each card bore a drawing, a symbol and a short phrase. Some showed towers on fire, some a stock market crash, some an epidemic.

He read everything he could find about them. And on the right-hand page he wrote, in a firm hand:

A game. Designed to mock conspiracy theories. Whoever draws hundreds of disasters will hit a few. That is called probability, not prophecy.

And he was convinced of what he had written.

Until he opened the next image.

It was not one of the game cards. It was smaller, on older paper, its edges cut by hand. No drawing. Only a small symbol in the centre: a blue circle with a thin vertical line inside it, like an eye without a lid.

And at the bottom, a number:

2017

He opened the second. The same symbol, and another number: 2026.

The third: 2027.

Then there were no more images.

He wrote on the left-hand page, then stopped writing, because he noticed that his hand was pressing harder on the pen than it should.

• • •

On the fourth night the wind grew stronger.

It struck the windowpane with pellets of frozen snow and whistled through the power lines in a long, sharp whine. In the alley, the streetlamp went out, came back, and went out again.

Khaled opened a map of the world on the screen and began to mark it with small signs. The cities named in the table. The ports. The straits. The banking capitals.

He was not drawing up a plan. He was trying to see the whole picture, the way he did when he laid every figure of a budget out on a single sheet to find the one that did not belong.

But the fuller the map became, the less random it looked. The lines crossed. And the crossings kept recurring at particular points: a waterway here, an ancient city there — and right in the middle, a spot on which he had placed nothing at all.

He closed the map. He opened a new notebook.

On the first page he wrote in large letters:

THE BLUE

And beneath it, like a man tying himself to a rope before climbing down a well:

"Believe nothing until you have searched for its opposite."

He closed the notebook.

A little after midnight, a corner of the screen lit up.

No name. No picture. A chat window he had not opened, with a single line in it:

"If everything is coincidence… why do the numbers keep repeating?"

He did not move.

He could have closed the window. Switched off the machine. Gone to sleep the way people sleep on a snowy night.

He typed:

Who are you?

The three dots appeared that mean someone is typing. Then disappeared. Then appeared. Then disappeared.

He waited a minute. Five.

He shut the laptop.

And as he reached for the lamp, the screen lit up beneath the closed lid. A faint blue light was seeping from the thin gap between the screen and the keyboard.

He lifted the lid slowly.

"You are looking in the wrong place."

Then:

"Do not look for what has happened."

The cursor paused. Pulsed. Pulsed.

"Look for what will happen."

Khaled glanced at the clock in the corner of the screen.

03:17

At that very moment, the window went dark.

The computer did not shut down. The desktop appeared with its usual icons and the wallpaper photo he had taken of the Tababqa mountains the spring before.

Then, the way ink spreads through water, the blue came back and filled everything.

And in the middle of it, a single sentence:

"You have reached the Blue Plan."

• • •

KHALED FELT SOMETHING COLD move in his stomach.

He had never typed that word online. He had never searched for it. He had never mentioned it to anyone. It was written in only one place in the world: the first page of a black notebook, closed, on his desk, a hand's breadth from his fingers.

He looked at the notebook. It was closed, just as he had left it.

He got up quickly. Opened the browser history. The email. The recent files. The downloads folder. He checked the installed programs one by one, the way he would check the cash ledger at the end of the year.

Nothing.

He went back to the screen. The sentence was still there, and beneath it a small number that had not been there a minute before:

00:09:58

Then:

00:09:57

He did not understand what was being counted down.

He pressed Escape. Nothing. He tried every key combination he knew for closing a window. Nothing. He bent under the desk and pulled the network cable out of its socket.

The green connection light on the machine went out.

But the page stayed.

00:08:31

He sat back up and said to himself, in a low voice, in the tone of a man rechecking a wrong entry: "Malware. Remote access. Someone is playing games. Don't make it bigger than it is."

In the silent room his voice was louder than he had meant it to be.

A new line appeared beneath the counter:

"If you are ready to know the beginning, open the first file."

And in the middle of the screen appeared a single file, with no extension, named:

2010

He put his hand on the mouse.

He knew what a sensible man ought to do now: pull out the power cord, take the computer in the morning to his friend who repaired machines in the covered market, and forget.

He remembered the sentence he had written in his own hand. Believe nothing until you have searched for its opposite.

And you cannot search for the opposite of something you have not seen.

He clicked.

• • •

The counter vanished. The blue vanished.

In its place appeared a scanned image of a single sheet of paper.

A white sheet, yellowed at the edges, handwritten in black ink. No letterhead. No stamp. No name of any institution. Just four words in the middle of the page:

"The first phase begins."

And beneath them, a date:

October 2010

He brought his face closer to the screen. There was nothing frightening in the words. A dry sentence, the kind written in the minutes of a meeting, like the date of a session or a training course.

But his eyes slid down to the lower left corner of the sheet.

A signature.

And beneath the signature, a name, in the same hand:

Khaled Ibrahim al-Shafi'i al-Hamidani.

What frightened him was not that someone had written his name.

Anyone can write anyone's name.

What frightened him was that he recognized the handwriting.

He recognized the way the ḥā' broke downward and then came back up. He recognized the two dots over the shīn merged into a short stroke, the way he had written them since middle school whenever he was in a hurry. He recognized the long tail of the final nūn that his Arabic teacher used to scold him for.

It was his handwriting.

His own hand, on a sheet of paper he had never seen in his life, beneath a sentence he had never written, on a date when he had not yet known that anything called "the Blue" existed.

He closed the computer gently. Too gently, like someone setting down something that might explode.

And he stood in the dark.

He told himself: "Handwriting can be copied. It can be pieced together from old papers. From forms. From statements. From..."

He did not finish. Because he had never in his life signed a single sheet with that full name, with al-Shafi'i in the middle. He never wrote "al-Shafi'i" at all; he had always signed simply: Khaled Djeddi.

• • •

That was when he heard something in the hallway.

Not quite a sound. A shift in the air, the kind you feel when someone passes close to you in a dark room.

He turned to the door. It was closed.

And in the thin strip of light beneath it, he saw a shadow pass. Slowly. From right to left.

Then it stopped.

The shadow stood directly in front of his door.

Khaled did not breathe. For the first time in years he heard his heart beating in his ears.

He told himself: My parents. They've got up to make their ablutions and pray the night prayer, as they always do.

But when his father walked at night he coughed and murmured the Bismillah. And his mother never left her room except to knock on his door and tell him to make his ablutions for the night prayer — it was better for him, she always said, than sitting behind that computer until morning.

And the shadow did not move.

Khaled crossed the room in three strides and threw the door open.

The hallway was empty. His parents' door was closed; they had not yet risen. The kitchen door was closed. The hallway window was shut, its glass frosted over from outside.

No one.

And the hallway was cold, colder than the rest of the house, as though a door to the outside had been opened and then shut again.

• • •

He went back to his desk. This time he turned on the lamp and left the door open.

He opened the black notebook to write.

He wanted to write on the right-hand page, the page of what he knew, a sentence that would give him back his balance. Something that sounded like him. The sentence of a man who was not afraid.

He wrote:

They know me.

And the pen stopped.

He was not sure that sentence belonged on the right-hand page.

Then he added, in a hand less steady than he would have liked:

Then I will know them.

As he was about to close the notebook, he noticed that the facing left-hand page was no longer blank.

There was a single line on it, at the bottom, in the same black ink.

In his handwriting.

"At dawn a message will come to you. Do not answer it until you have seen him."

He had not written that line.

He was certain he had not written it.

And yet at the same time he knew every letter of it the way he knew his own face.

Outside, the snow had stopped.

And the room, suddenly, was filled with a fragrance that came from nowhere: musk, and ambergris, and oud.