


WILDCARD

BY GHADA ABDEL AAL

TRANSLATED FROM ARABIC BY UNICEF





MURAD DID NOT TAKE HIS EYES OFF THE OPERATION BED, EVEN THOUGH THEY WERE SEPARATED BY THICK GLASS. ON THIS BED, A TEST WILL BE CARRIED OUT; A TEST THAT WILL NOT ONLY DETERMINE HIS OWN LIFE, BUT EVERYONE ELSE'S.

Small drones were roaming quietly in the operation room to prepare all the necessary tools for the test. Each was moving in its own path; intersecting and parallel. They were frighteningly accurate, but Murad was hounded with other feelings of wobbly and shaken paths, shifting between the pinnacle of hope and the depth of despair.

After a while, the room was frozen in place. Murad was stuck in his place as he watched the room's door open for the patient's auto-moving bed to pass after bringing him from his room to the operation room. It stopped in the middle of the room. His professor, who taught him everything he knows about medicine, genetic engineering and pathology, was lying down. Dr. Selim rolled over in his bed to look at his student who held his life in his hands.

The disease has not fully defeated him yet. Despite his reddish eyes, pale face, and bluish lips indicating lack of oxygen in his blood, he still retained some semblance of awareness that enabled him to smile faintly at Murad.

Murad returned it with an encouraging, thankful smile of his own. Here is one of the world's most important scientists literally putting his trust and life in his student's hands, who is still under the age of twenty.

With a blend of anxiety and determination, Murad reached out to press the red button on the control panel before him. Right before his eyes, a swarm of bees rushed from both sides of the room behind the glass, whose buzzing filled the room and could be heard through loudspeakers. While the bees began to cover Dr. Selim's body, Murad went down memory lane to where it all started one year ago.



It was just another normal day, Murad and his colleagues were in their usual meeting place waiting for Dr. Selim. Four boys and three girls, all were present, even the head janitor Reda with his forty-year-old vacuum were also there. The vacuum he refused to part with for a new self-navigating model, as if he is repaying it for all these years spent by his side. Tuesday of every week was the day that Murad and his colleagues waited for; the day on which they felt like they belonged somewhere... A community... A family... A home.

It had been nearly fifteen years since the government had passed a resolution to separate some children from their parents on the basis of medical records proving their susceptibility to the mutated virus.

The world still remembers the "Covid" virus. Humanity thought it emerged victorious in the battle with the virus, which was considered to have been eradicated in 2024. However, it did not take long for it to return stronger, merely two years later. After a long series of discussions, recommendations, and opposition of recommendations, human intransigence caused its mutation, annihilating about two billion people.

Then, everyone became aware of what was happening and ran extensive tests to find out those most responsible for the virus spread. All fingers were pointed at children. They alone

carry the virus without any symptoms, moving all around the world like silent ticking bombs.

The citizens resisted and resisted, but the pictures of piled up corpses in the streets were still fresh in their minds. Some people began to feel that acceptance was inevitable after all world governments affirmed that the children separated from their parents would receive special governmental care, and even distinctive educational attention in terms of science, health and sports in their schools and walled residences called Hives. They threatened those who objected with the denial of any government services and deportation to confinement places in the desert.

Murad looked at his companions, those with no parents, who tried to be each other's family. This warm and supportive relationship would have never been achieved if it was not for Dr. Selim.

As soon as Murad reached this point, Dr. Selim entered. He was always late for his appointment because he could never predict the strict measures taken every time: An ultraviolet scan, a robotic fundoscopy, viral infection sensors that look like flies hovering everywhere in the Hive monitoring any change in children. They gather like a hurricane around each visitor, spinning in an unpredicted number of cycles until their red tiny lights, flashing red circles on the isolation room walls, turn green. Then and only then, after the brewing storm of electronic flies blows over, Dr. Selim can enter the Hive.

Dr. Selim was not like the others. Everyone working in the Hive was convinced that paying the minimum amount of attention to the children was all they had to do. As for him, he was always challenging their abilities, sharpening their minds, and not settling for anything but excellence.

At first, like him, there were many who volunteered in the first outburst of enthusiasm to teach and train children of the Hive.

But the enthusiasm subsided after a while, and most of them stopped coming, except him. He started by teaching them math, then language and history. When he taught them about his specialty: science and medicine, he managed to gain their attention, open their minds and expand their horizons to possibilities they have never imagined. He always promised to help them find their place in the world after leaving the Hive. However, no one knew when they would leave the Hive, or if they were even going to leave. After the decision to establish the Hive was taken in 2030, no one had the courage to ask when its inmates would come out to life again, even after it was understood that there was no longer any danger of children interacting with adults.

Murad and his colleagues had spent more than fifteen years inside the Hive walls. They had stopped wondering when they might leave. They were keen on enjoying every available joyous minute in Dr. Selim's class. They did not know that everything was going to change today.

Dr. Selim was in the middle of explaining when the sound of Janitor Reda's vacuum boomed.

Murad looked at him in surprise. He knew the significance of keeping quiet during the lessons. Sherief jumped a bit as he was at the brink of sleep; education was never his first priority. As for Tony, Tasniem, Omar, Remonda, Asser and Joudy, they ignored it at first. However, when the vacuum's deafening sound continued, they noticed Dr. Selim approaching Janitor Reda in concern.

Dr. Selim stood before the sixty-year-old man watching him in silence, which led Murad to join in.

Murad saw Dr. Selim's eyes going over Janitor Reda's face which was frozen in front of him. He then looked into Reda's eyes and saw something peculiar.

His eyes were reddish, his lips were tinted an unmistakable shade of light blue and his nostrils were rapidly expanding and contracting as if he was running a marathon.

Dr. Selim waved his hands in front of Janitor Reda's face. He jumped as if he had been deeply asleep. He apologized confusingly, turning his vacuum off and exiting the place at once.

Everyone went back to their place making jokes at the expense of Janitor Reda's age. The guy seems to have aged to the point of falling asleep standing up.

A glimpse of concern flashed over Dr. Selim's face. Murad was smart enough to realize the cause of concern; the minor symptoms on Janitor Reda's face implied he had contracted some virus. How did this happen with all the tight measures surrounding workers in the Hive?

How did the electronic flies miss that he contracted some disease? The micro-robots' database carry methods for identifying all viruses known to mankind.



IT DID NOT TAKE LONG FOR THE VIRUS TO SPREAD.

The disease stages puzzled many; it began as a minor change in appearance, before the person fell into a trance. Finally, the infected turned into what appeared to be marionettes. Brain signals lost connection with body organs.

Doctors did their best to return patients to the land of the living. Scientists exhausted all possible weapons in the modern medicine arsenal to no avail. The world watched as its population of aware humans plummeted day in and day out. Little was known about its point of origin, transition methods, or causes. There was no evidence on how the virus spread or which groups were the most vulnerable.

Nothing could contain the disease outbreak, nothing could stop it at any stage.

In the Hive, silence blanketed Murad and his colleagues. Some on the outside tried to blame them. Children are the number one enemy of the country after all when it comes to the virus. The one thing that protected them from the blame was that they were isolated here and none of them got infected. Even Janitor Reda, the first and last patient within the Hive walls, was confirmed to have contracted the virus from outside. For the first time, the Hive, which they always viewed as an institution of punishment, became a source of protection for its children.


Panic seized humans everywhere, but what really consumed Murad's mind was the mystery; the mystery of the disease and the mystery of the cure.

Dr. Selim built a camp as secure as a war camp with the swarm. His trust in the group was absolute. Throughout the last fifteen years, they learned together everything that qualified them to work in prestigious scientific research centers. They passed a multitude of tests and conducted an abundance of experiments, all of which qualified Dr. Selim to call them the best group of minds in the country even if none of them had reached the age of twenty yet.

They were all waiting for him with computers made of components so minute that they were almost invisible. Each had a suggestion for a cure.

All were just primary and theoretical suggestions. Murad, on the other hand, prepared a whole folder after extensive research, study and tests which Dr. Selim permitted him to conduct during the full year of diagnosis and patient treatment attempts inside and outside the Hive. All conclusions Murad reached are remarkably simple and reasonable to the point of almost being unbelievable. He merely needed to think inside instead of outside the box. He merely needed to contemplate his so-called home for the past fifteen years. He needed to think of the Hive itself.

Murad was jumping around from excitement waiting for his professor's opinion of his theory. But he never showed up. The Hive's guard came in his stead to inform them that Dr. Selim contracted the disease.



None of the hospital's officials allowed Murad or his colleagues to visit Dr. Selim. They did not want to listen to what Murad was certain was the effective treatment method.

Their young age, lack of a medical scientific degree and being residents of the Hive were adequate reasons for everyone to ignore their every suggestion.

Dr. Selim, however, asked to meet his students. His doctors could not refuse the request of their own professor in such conditions.

Dr. Selim leaned his head pondering Murad's theory which Murad stood up just to present, providing all supporting evidence. The virus simply could not have spread except because of a weakened immune system. Humanity's immune systems had become deficient because of every disease it erased from memory, because of all those uncontracted viruses and lack of antibodies. Everything had become sanitized. Every human interaction, microbe, bacteria and virus became rare. Consequently, a petty virus came, dealing humanity a fatal blow without much resistance.

MURAD'S SOLUTION IS SIMPLY: BEE VENOM.

An unexpected stimulant for immunity systems, white blood cells and nerve cells through transmission of sensory signals from where the bees stung to the sensory cells below the brain.



Dr. Selim looked at Murad astounded and ecstatic. Murad employed everything he taught him in reality: history, biology and medicine.

The theory seems plausible and applicable, but there is only one problem that can completely burn it to ashes.

Where will they find the bees? The last swarm of bees went extinct ten years ago.



The journey to the mountains was not easy.

It is the land of the outcasts, those who did not follow the rules and chose to live on the outskirts of the city.

After a number of confrontations with the authorities, it became abundantly clear that the best way to resolve the issue of their existence was for the authorities to turn a blind eye as if they never truly existed.

No one here carries a chip that enables the authorities to track their movement, preventing them from crossing over to the prohibited areas. No one can snatch a baby from its parents under the guise of genetic eligibility to transmit the virus one day. No one here is punished for exceeding the food portion determined according to a diet drawn up by the authorities in relation to factors unacceptable to the mountains' residents.

Here, they grow what they eat and eat what they want. They teach their students what they want, unbound by the authorities' curriculums and their recordings of history. They get sick and treated by old traditional methods prohibited by the authorities years ago.

Here lives Haja Merzouqa who insists on being called Haja even though it sounds bizarre to everyone after haj (pilgrimage) has been banned for years. It sounds bizarre especially after all world states closed their borders and refused to welcome anyone in from outside of their borders to avoid the risk of pandemics. Seventy-year-old Haja Merzouqa was one of the lucky last few to travel outside her country prior to the complete lockdown of all world borders.

There was a tight friendship between Dr. Selim and Haja Merzouqa despite their different opinions on authorities-imposed rules. Dr. Selim believed that technology is the solution while Haja Merzouqa saw it as peoples' plight and one of the causes behind the future annihilation of humanity as a whole.

Murad and his colleagues' journey to the mountains has been harsh, from the moment they attempted to flee the Hive till their interaction with the outside world that none of them has seen since they were five.

Their hardest mission, however, has been convincing Haja Merzouqa to lend them some of her bees.

Haja Merzouqa, this resilient mountain village chief, has been fighting daily to preserve a lifestyle that the authorities had determined obsolete. She has also been trying to preserve nature.

Here, in her small village, you will find lands planted with crops long extinct from the rest of the world when everyone decided that it is safer to eat food in the form of capsules.

The decrease of agricultural lands in the world contributed to the disappearance of bees which in turn contributed to the decrease of agricultural lands. The population turned from consuming various natural food sources to taking vitamin capsules.

That is why Haja Merzouqa is fighting a constant war to preserve her crops and bees. How can she agree today for someone to take away her dear bees to cure the same humans who destroyed those bees' grandmothers?

Does Murad not know that a bee sting can kill the bee itself?

If humans need to kill one bee to save one patient, doesn't that mean the extinction of all the mountains' bee hives and even then, not all humans will be cured?

That was the truth that tied Murad's hands who saw his theory die before his eyes because of a logical fallacy that no one took notice of except the mountains' chief.



Behind the glass panel, Murad stood watching Dr. Selim covered in electronic bees. That was after he and his colleagues combined their design, medical and technological expertise with the close study of Haja Merzouqa's bees. Modeled on the electronic flies working in the Hive, together, they invented: "electronic bees". They would swarm the patient and administer a number of imperceptible stings to provoke the patient's immune system and bring them back from the dead. That was the theory at least. The only thing left was to test it through practical application which Dr. Selim volunteered for.

Behind Murad stood his colleagues and the scientific team, all watching the electronic bees from behind the glass and monitoring the vital signs machines connected to Dr. Selim.

From the other side of the glass and under a blanket of bees whose buzzing filled the room, Dr. Selim turned to Murad and smiled a tired yet encouraging smile. Both exchanged a look that could mean one thing:

Let's hope this is the solution.

THE END

