

# The Player

*You have your way. I have my way. As for the right way, the correct way, and the only way, it does not exist.*

Friedrich Nietzsche

*August 5, 2007*

**Glasgow, Scotland  
The Corinthian Club**

The game's only rule was that there were no rules – only odds. Life began when you knew how to play them.

Alistair Blake placed his chips on the table and sipped from a glass of sherry. Outside red. The croupier called out “No more bets” and all eyes were on the wheel.

The ball span counterclockwise approximately nineteen times, the wheel itself moving in the opposite direction as twenty seconds passed over the course of a year. It bounced once, then settled into its chosen slot. Nine red.

Blake took another, longer drag from his glass. His cash was now double what it was before approaching the table.

There were seven other players plus the croupier. Most wore expressions somewhere between indifference and resignation. One or two were visibly jubilant. Another salvaged his remaining chips and left the game. All maintained a near-ghostly silence.

Chips clinked in place across a new combination of squares. Blake moved a stack of four from his own pile. Inside street – one, two, three.

*“No more bets!”*

There was even more attention on the ball than the previous round. An additional second passed in agonizing, relativistic slowness. Eight black.

Blake's lips tightened in an expression that didn't reach his eyes. He watched the croupier distribute fresh winnings across the table – his own absent among them.

His eyes met another pair across the table. The woman had fiery red hair that almost matched her partially-existent dress. She stood at the shoulder of another player – an older, balding businessman – but was clearly considering more virile fare. She smiled at him coyly.

Blake met the stare but returned no expression. His right hand deliberately moved the entirety of his chips. Inside fifteen – single.

*“No more bets!”*

This time the spin was quicker. Fifteen red.

Blake kept his eyes on the woman as his chips multiplied by a factor of thirty-five. One more play. Perhaps two. It would help to end things on a win. They would have a drink together – he would buy it, of course. He had an extra ingredient for it, but that might not be necessary, this time. Then a few minutes for rapport – they'd talk, get to know each other a bit. His room was on the third floor, which meant the elevator. Some extra time to make things *particularly* interesting...

Someone sat down at his right. A short South Asian with the leanness of a much taller man. Blake spared a glance just long enough to see him place his chips. Inside seventeen – single. Not just an amateur – a poseur. Pathetic.

Blake set down his glass and placed his own chips. Inside nineteen – single.

*“No more bets!”*

The wheel completed another revolution. Nineteen red.

The stranger watched with apparent interest as Blake's chips increased by another factor of thirty-five. "Your luck seems to be holding tonight."

He'd been watching him. Why? "Luck doesn't exist." Blake selected a stack of four and placed them. Outside black.

"No more bets!"

The stranger's eyes focused in a squint. "You have a system, then?"

Blake removed his eyes from the wheel. "Of course not. Roulette is pure chance – 'skill' doesn't exist either."

The ball stopped. Twenty-three red. A loss for them both.

"You have to go outside the game," Blake continued. "Playing within the boundaries gets you nowhere."

"Cheating?"

"Too hard and too stupid."

"What, then?"

"For starters, never starting your play with seventeen. James Bond is rubbish." He glanced at the stranger's face. The other man seemed oblivious to the barb. Blake sipped his glass and continued.

"What I do is expand the equation – add in factors the game designers never thought about. You see the croupier?" He watched the stranger's eyes flick towards the man in question and back again. "He's nearing his fifties if he's not there already. Been doing this for years. He's a veteran – but a tired one. He's been at this table for hours today. You can guess what starts to happen when you do the exact same thing over and over again."

The stranger leaned forward in what seemed genuine interest. "Meaning?"

"Put all your chips on the outside – even numbers."

The stranger complied. Blake placed the entirety of his own on sixteen black.

"No more bets!"

They both watched as the wheel completed yet another spin. It seemed slower than all the previous ones combined. The ball finally clattered to a stop. Sixteen black.

The stranger had the look of a man who realized he had been assisted and cheated at the same time. He silently watched the croupier rake over both their winnings – one set conspicuously larger than the other – and turned back to his benefactor.

"How?"

"Being complacent means being predictable. He's releasing the ball at the exact same angle and velocity every time. Watch the numbers that are passing at that exact moment, and you can predict where the ball will land. You have to have the eyes for it. Not all people do – you can't teach it to them."

The stranger looked at him for several seconds then nodded slowly. "Indeed. You're Alistair Blake, is that not correct?"

Ah. Now the reason came out. Blake finished the last of his glass and set it aside. "Yes, actually. To whom do I have the pleasure...?"

The stranger extended his right hand. "Ahmad Sengar. I'm Vice Chair with the Richard J. Locke Foundation. Perhaps you've heard of it?"

"I believe I have at that." Blake grasped the offered hand. "You're here on business, then?"

"One particular item of it. I've actually been hoping I would make your acquaintance today, Mr. Blake. We have a proposal to make – a very significant one for your own firm."

Blake raised an eyebrow. "I'm merely Director of Operations. Our CEO might be a better –"

"I believe you will find this very interesting a personal level, Mr. Blake." Sengar unexpectedly cut him off. "I'm here with our Chairperson today. There's a room on the third floor. I would be very pleased to have you accompany me."

At many other times, this would have been pushy – even off-putting. He thought about rejecting the offer outright. But something...

"Very well then. You may lead the way, Mr. Sengar."

Blake caught a last glimpse of the woman as they retrieved their winnings and exited the game. She seemed visibly disappointed.

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Their destination turned out not be a bedroom but one of the Club's smaller lounge areas. The room seemed empty at first, but one other occupant looked up from a laptop as they entered.

Blake had not been expecting a woman. He now vaguely remembered the Locke Foundation was headed by someone named "Celine." She looked surprisingly young – as if barely into her mid-thirties; blond and slight with eyes colored an almost unnatural shade of green. A pair of reading glasses gave the impression of an elementary teacher on her first day in the classroom. She removed them and stood.

"Alistair Blake, I presume?" She smiled and extended a hand. Blake grasped it. Her skin was cool, with the texture of soft marble. "The same."

"A pleasure. I'm Celine Locke, Chairperson of the Richard J. Locke Foundation for Developmental Ecology." There was an almost imperceptible emphasis on the gender-neutral "*person*". She indicated the opposite chair. "Please sit down."

Blake did so. Locke did the same, but he saw that Sengar remained standing at her shoulder.

"I'm sure you're a very busy man, Mr. Blake, and I hope you'll accept my apologies for the short notice of all this. I understand you're Director of Operations for the AlbaGreen Energy Corporation?"

The question was obviously rhetorical. Blake shot a glance toward Sengar, who remained silent and motionless. "Yes. Mr. Sengar mentioned you had a proposal of some kind to discuss with me?"

She smiled at him again. "We've been looking to expand our Foundation's portfolio in the renewable energy sector. I understand your company has plans for a wind power network in the Hebrides Islands."

Ah. This could be worthwhile after all. He kept his face neutral, cocking his head at a slight angle. "Yes, that is correct. If you're interesting in purchasing stock, I can certainly provide some relevant documents –"

She raised a hand and stopped him. "In good time, Mr. Blake. I've had a chance to study your company's most recent financial filings. What I've seen so far has been most impressive. There are just one or two items I thought would merit a more personal discussion, hence this meeting."

"I will be more than happy to answer any additional questions you might have –"

"I believe those have already been answered." The second interruption was different. He couldn't tell how or why. "The reason for this meeting, Mr. Blake, has been for us to *provide* information – to you, in particular."

"I'm sorry?"

Locke had been making only cursory eye contact since they began speaking. She closed her laptop and looked him square in the face, shoulders spread and heightened. There was an intensity in her expression now that unnerved him.

"Given your position on AlbaGreen's Board of Directors, I'm sure you will be interested to know that the entirety of its membership will find themselves behind bars within three weeks on charges of embezzlement and fraud."

The air suddenly turned to ice. Blake didn't move.

"We are, of course, fully aware that the Hebrides network is non-existent and will never be built, as are the relevant authorities now concluding their investigation." Locke altered neither her tone or her expression. "I'm sure your investors will be very interested to know where their money has really been going. Don't you think so, Mr. Blake?"

He looked at Sengar. Unreadable. Turned back to Locke – forced himself to breathe normally. "What are you –"

"You tipped your hand when you applied for that government loan." Locke's stare was unrelenting. "The courts are going to be considerably less forgiving with taxpayer's money involved."

Denial instantly became irrelevant. He let out a breath, released his grip on the chair arms. "What is it you want from me?"

"Let it be known that I consider your existence an abomination." Open, naked contempt flashed in her eyes for the first time. "You are a liar, a charlatan and a larcener. More than that – a simonist."

He blinked. "A what?"



“You’ve stolen from the most sacred cause imaginable while daring to call yourself its apostle – a fornicator with gold and silver. There’s a place for you in the Eight Circle of Hell.”

Blake stared at her. Was this woman - ? No, she couldn’t be. Yet there was no trace of either jest or irony in her voice.

“You don’t deserve it, but I’ve brought you here with a promise of redemption, Mr. Blake.” She leaned back and folded her hands over her waist. “Your talents, misused as they’ve been, can still do much good.”

Something stiffened inside him at that word. He eyed her suspiciously.

“We’ve recently acquired a pharmaceutical firm called Vanguard BioDynamics – we want you to accept a position with them. Nominally, you would report to their VP of Operations. In actuality, you will be managing a very particular project on *our* behalf. Would you like to know more?”

There was a purpose here after all. Good. That made things easier. Calculable. “Very well.”

She told him. It took nearly twenty minutes without a single interruption. He was speechless at the end.

“Do not think we have in any way compromised ourselves by revealing this to you, Mr. Blake.” She sipped from a glass of water he hadn’t noticed before. “Virtually no one will believe you should you repeat it. The authorities, in particular, will find your own malfeasance far more plausible a story.”

He inclined his head, acknowledging the threat.

“You will, in fact, be allowed to do what you originally intended – leave the country with a sizeable payoff of embezzled funds to spend as you see fit. The salary you draw from Vanguard will also be considerable. You will have complete freedom in both planning and constructing the facility – when finished it will be placed under your direct management subject to our own oversight. Your abilities will be amply exercised for the next ten years, at least.

“Now then, Mr. Blake, do we have an agreement?”

They were all of them quite mad. That much was obvious. But they had tools other madmen lacked - their dreams were no illusion.

Half of him screamed withdrawal. Surrender. To run as far and as fast as possible, even acceptance of an inevitably jail term rather than any part of this insanity.

But the other half was intrigued. The game wasn’t finished. These were odds he could still play.

Sumatra... It would be interesting to try Asian women for a change.

“We have an agreement.”

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Three days later, a sealed envelope arrived at an address on Great Ancoats Street in Manchester, England. Another arrived the next day at Carlisle Street in Cardiff, Wales. Both recipients were female. Neither knew of the other’s existence. Each received a gold ring (matching their own) along with a letter to the following effect:

*What we have shared together has been both pleasurable and natural. But you must know it has never been my intention for us to age together. You will of course understand that a man has certain needs. Please accept the return of this item with my regards. You are released from our engagement.*

Though both letters were in the same handwriting, they were signed with different names. Upon sending them, Alistair Blake had taken care to delete two contacts from his mobile phone and block any further calls from the same numbers.

The next day, he sent a series of six tersely-worded telexes to six other recipients. Each immediately understood his meaning and acted accordingly.

Two weeks later, British authorities raided the Glasgow office of the AlbaGreen Corporation. The premise was empty, along with all hard drives and filing cabinets. Waste management had collected the last of the paper shreadings the night before. In the end, the criminal case was dead on arrival, though not all of AlbaGreen’s leadership escaped their creditors. The firm ended its short life in a bankruptcy court.

By that time, Blake's flight had already landed in Indonesia. Several million in transferred funds awaited him at a bank in Padang. His only cares were his plans – none of which involved the past and all of which concerned the future. The game had only just begun...

## To Be Continued...

*"For when success a lover's toil attends, few ask, if fraud or force attain'd his ends."*

Alexander Pope