

*So, I guess I'd best start at the beginning. Everyone knows the Samaritan, right? World's biggest boy scout. Most powerful person on the planet who spends his spare time getting cats out of trees and helping little old ladies across the road. Well, it all started for me when I met his other identity.*

Some years ago, the offices of a metropolitan psychiatrist, as mild-mannered reporter Kent Clarkson opens the door for his interview/appointment. As usual his baggy shirt hangs off his sloped shoulders, his collar open. He runs a hand through his black hair, sweeping it even further back, a folder stuffed under his other arm, takeaway coffee cup in his hand. He pushes his thick glasses up his nose.

Across the heavy desk, the therapist looks up from his notes. His stylishly cut black jacket hangs over the back of his chair. His shirt is freshly pressed, his heavy watch glinting in the light. Short sandy hair curls over his ears, although he's foregone the tight beard that characterises his profession. "Mr Clarkson."

"Dr Pranger." He reaches out his hand, trying to balance everything as he sits down. The man across the desk takes it with a firm, confident shake.

"What can I do for you?"

"I'm doing an interview..."

"Ah, yes, an article about my practice and techniques, wasn't it? Won't that be a little dull for your readers?"

"You just let me worry about that, Dr Pranger."

"As you like. So, I thought we'd start with a light session. Put you into a trance, say ten, fifteen minutes, and then we can conduct the interview, but that would answer some of your questions without you needing to ask them."

"That's...that sounds swell, Doctor. Do you mind if I record the session while you put me under? I don't want you making me cluck like a chicken." He laughs nervously.

"Go ahead. I promise no chicken noises." He pauses, "How do you feel about dogs?"

"Man's best friend, but I don't think I want to sound like one." He puts his coffee cup and folder down, digging in jacket pocket. "Where do I..."

"On the couch is traditional. That's just so you can be comfortable and don't accidentally fall off the chair."

"Has that happened to any other patients?"

"Only once. Early in my practice. I learned from that unfortunate experience. Take your jacket off if it'll make you more comfortable. You need to be able to relax to have this work properly."

"I'm not really..." He hangs his jacket up, starting to lay down.

"You don't need to do that. Sit, if it makes you feel more comfortable."

He sits perched on the middle of the couch, hands resting on his thighs.

“Ok, Mr Clarkson. Let’s begin. Close your eyes and take deep slow breaths. Just relax. Let your mind drift for now. Get comfortable. And when you’re ready, I want you to start counting down from one hundred, imagining each time you count that you’re taking a step down a long staircase and when you reach zero you’ll be in a trance.”

There are a series of breaths, getting longer and slower until he begins to mouth “one hundred...ninety-nine...ninety-eight...”

“That’s good, Mr Clarkson, just keep counting down, getting more relaxed, deeper into the trance, with each step down

At fifty, Clarkson’s shoulders slump forward, his deep voice getting quieter.

By the time it reaches ten, he’s silent, almost slurring the words.

As he reaches zero, his head is slumped almost to his knees.

“So, Mr Clarkson, are you deep in your trance?”

“Ysssss.”

“And you’re just here to interview me?”

“Nnnnnnn.”

“Why are you here?”

“Mmmmm hrrrrr...”

“You can speak clearly in the trance.”

“I’m here to interview you about your practice. And to see if you’re up to no good.”

“Why would you think I’m up to no good?”

“Rich clients. Making large charitable payments or other uncharacteristic generosity after coming here.”

“I see. And if I am up to no good, what were you planning on doing about it?”

“Expose you. Stop you.”

“You think a story would stop me?”

“No. I’d stop you.”

“How were you planning on that?”

“...Samaritan would stop you.”

“Why would he?”

“Iiiiiii am the Samaritan.”

Dr Pranger blinks. “You’re the Samaritan? You?”

“Yes.”

“Well...fuck.”

“Language.”

“Really? Ok, you know what, we’re not doing this. Mr Clarkson, I want you to start climbing the stairs that took you into your trance, counting them up, getting more and more awake and alert as you do so. And when you’re back, you’ll be relaxed and remember everything you said while you were under. Do you understand?”

“Yes. I understand. Zero...one...two...”

“Good, great, wonderful, this is just fucking peachy.”

He sits back into the chair, and waits, the sound of counting filling the room.

Clarkson blinks as he reaches one hundred, sitting up straight, the slouch gone, his demeanour serious, seeming to fill the room as he floats a foot off the floor, his arms folded across his chest. “You’re still here?”

“Not many places I could get to in the time it would take you to get to one hundred.”

“And you know.”

“Yes, yes, I now know one of the most closely-guarded secrets on the Earth. Something some very vicious people will be very happy to torture me for in incredibly inventive and painful ways. Lucky me. Whoop-de-do.”

“So what now?”

“Now? Well, first, I intend to open a bottle of very expensive scotch and drink until I forget what I just learned.”

“That’s not a good way to deal with...”

“Probably not, but the most powerful man in the world is in my office and I know his secret, so I don’t think there is a good way to deal with that. Do you want to continue your interview? Or is it really redundant now?”

“Really?”

“Why not? I mean, what’s the worst that you can do to me? Still recording? Then let’s go.” He walks to the cabinet, pulling out a bottle of amber liquid and a pair of glasses. “So, first off, yes, I am a real Doctor of Psychiatry. And this practice is fully legal and registered.”

“I know. I checked.”

“Of course you did. Additionally, and very helpfully, I am a telepath. Not on an impressive scale. I doubt I could read your mind if you didn’t let me, but I can get impressions, ease people into a trance and make suggestions.”

“Which explains...”

“Which explains why I’m a *very* good psychiatrist, yes. Now, as for what you’re investigating, it’s...a grey area.” He drains a glass and pours another, “I’m not controlling people. They come here to make them better people. I’m helping them along in that.”

“Really?”

“Well, that’s how they think of it. Or it’s a tax dodge. Or they’re buying popularity or perceived innocence so no one suspects their criminal schemes. I don’t know how they justify things, that’s not how my talent works. I don’t make them puppets. I just put them into a trance and suggest they might like to contribute to a charitable project or something and then they do all the hard work reasoning themselves into why it’s their idea in the first place.”

“You’re still manipulating them.”

“I am, indeed. I am making the world a better place by making some of the richest people around trade a fraction of a percent of their wealth for life-changing services. I’m basically Robin Hood.”

“You steal...”

“Ah, ah, no, I won’t have that. I can’t make them do something totally opposed to their nature. I just guide their natural tendencies towards socially positive ends.”

“And make a tidy sum for yourself in the process.”

“Don’t blame me, blame capitalism. Everyone’s got to eat.”

“I’ve seen how much you charge.”

“And they willingly pay me that much. I don’t even try to ‘fluence them for it. They’re rich. If something isn’t outrageously expensive, it’s of no worth to them. My services cost a fortune so, to them, they must be better than the run of the mill stuff the little people get.”

“That sounds like an attempt at justifying it to yourself.”

“I’m sure it does, because it is. One of the annoyances of being a psychiatrist is that you get to spot most of the tricks people use to convince themselves they’re not horrible people when you do them. Sure you won’t join me?”

“I don’t...”

“Of course you don’t.” he throws back another. “So, what do you plan to do with the knowledge you have?”

“Aren’t I supposed to ask you that?”

“Oh, I know what I’m doing with the unwanted new knowledge I have. I’m going to lock it in the deepest, darkest part of my mind and give you the key.”

“What?”

Dr Pranger closes his eyes, breathing slowly, “Here is the key. A trigger word that only functions when you say it. Krakatoan. It’s not something you’ll say regularly. But, when you say it, my memory will come back and I’ll know you need a favour.”

“A...favour?”

“You can’t say you don’t understand. You know what I can do. You know you need to keep secrets. At some point, you might need me. And if you don’t, I get to live the rest of my life in peace. There are worse things.”

“I can’t let...”

“Yes, actually, you can. You can’t prove anything without giving up your secret and, frankly, I’m not worth that. On top of that, you’ll have to convince all the rich, arrogant pricks that come to me that they’ve been conned. They won’t thank you for that. They probably won’t even believe you, especially as they already have all the reasons why they chose to make their own choices.”

“I...”

“And what will you get? Fewer foundations. Fewer projects that benefit people. All so multibillionaires get to keep a little bit more of their money.”

“I’ll be watching you.”

“You do that. You’re sure I can’t tempt you?”

“Yes. I mean, no, I mean, no thank you on the drink.” He lowers to the floor, folding himself into Kent Clarkson as he pulls on his jacket.