

# **Mahdi 2200**

**A short story**

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Mahdi sighed at the text on the holo-vid before him, which was floating like a disembodied mirror in the air:

Read through the following historical summaries and then answer the multiple-choice questions below:

*In 2022, the third world war began, after US strikes on Russia over the invasion of Ukraine, initiating the five decade long, second dark ages.*

*In 2072, the second dark ages ended with a depleted world population, and African, US/European, and Asiatic nations unified under one ruling body: The United Citizenry of the World.*

*In 2080, the United Citizenry funded trials for, and successfully implemented, bi-gender birthing in artificial wombs.*

*In 2085, the United Citizenry re-formulated their constitution and laws for the members of the bi-gender, artificial birth community.*

*In 2090, after successful prototype trials, the United Citizenry heralded the widespread adoption of Artificial-Intelligence workers, carers, and resourcers into human societies.*

*In 2100, the invention of hyperspatial travel was developed by Dr Habib Dajjalla*

*In 2150, the United Citizenry recorded the number of bi-gender human beings, born from birthing labs and raised in AI-assisted Nurture centres, was now reaching 3 billion.*

*In the 2195 world survey, the United Citizenry reported that 100% of respondents now considered their personal faith and identity to be secular, bi-gender, androgynous free-agents. 100% considered natural birthing as unnecessary and the traditional family system a remnant of the past.*

*Now read the following questions and choose an answer...*

Mahdi had fifty minutes to complete this UC world view survey. Monotony was smothering him like an affectionate AI and he felt his eyes lids waning. But unless he completed it, he would never qualify for a discretionary hyper-trip to Madinah Palace.

Visiting Madinah Palace was the latest craze, since the United Citizenry had authorised tourism to all ancient religious sites, since the recent virus outbreak had come under control. United Citizenry free-agents were flocking to old centres like the Vatican and observing worship in churches; viewing the rocking men at the Wailing Wall and worshippers at the Dome of the Rock and Al Aqsa. There were very few bona-fide Muslims left, and most were now concentrated in the old cities of Makkah, Madinah and Jerusalem. Mahdi had read that these cities contained the last remaining worshippers, who prayed like they did in previous centuries, wore those strange clothes, followed old gender constructs, lived as families from natural births and other anachronisms. The United Citizenry allowed for limited adherence to ancient behaviours in designated cities, whose populations were

strictly regulated through enforced birth control and limited contact with the outside world.

Mahdi's friends had all completed the survey and had their hyper-trips booked first to Madinah Palace and then onwards to the Love and Science festival in Singapore. It was going to be a blast! Sightseeing these primitives from a bygone age, then a week of viewing the latest inventions and pure pleasure in Singapore, now the centre of science and thrill-seeking in the world!

After some tiresome reading and box-ticking, Mahdi flicked the red button, another box appeared with SURVEY COMPLETE and revealed his hyper-travel numbers. "Yes!" He punched the air.

The next day at noon, Mahdi rushed to his international hyper-journey appointment in his hometown, Aylesbury town centre. The attendant took his number and ushered him into the travel room. Mahdi sat in the hyper chair, the attendant shut the door, and, as per usual, he fell unconscious. Ten minutes later, and three hours ahead, he awoke, thousands of miles away in an Arabian receiving room, from which he emerged and joined the queues streaming through the security gate for Madinah Palace.

The first thing to hit Mahdi was the heat. The immense pressure flowed through him like a warm fan. Above, the sun shone powerfully in the blue heavens, impelling Mahdi to don his sunglasses for a while.

Then he saw the green dome of Madinah Palace ahead of the queuing tourists. It was unlike the state-of-the-art architecture which ruled his world of sleek, shining chrome-like buildings. The rich green sheen seemed to glow majestically, and the sumptuous minarets and towers reminded him of sparkling crystals. The beauty of the dome caught his breath momentarily, but then the dusty, sulphurous, sweltering air consumed him, and he noticed local guards speaking animatedly in Arabic, which was now an endangered language. Around the magnificent dome, the grandeur of Madinah palace's vast walls ornamented the scene: royal white, glittering and lustrous, like the tales of old princes and princesses. In the background, signage for the ancient *Baqi* graveyard and the new city pointed in opposite directions, and Arab officials floated around the arrivals area, in their quaint long white tunics and Bedouin shawls with rings on top. Mahdi had seen this before and now smirked at this dress, whilst gazing at his and the queue's skimpy attire. How stupid these natives were to be suffocating themselves in this heat! The ancient Muslims now lived within the confines of the palace and frequented the land beyond, within a certain mileage. The rest of Madinah was identical to everywhere else in the United Citizenry-modern buildings and free-agent lifestyles.

“Hey citizen! I’m Franz, glad to meet you!”

Mahdi now looked at the citizen before him; a tall, rangy human, with shapely waist and chest, but strong, chiselled facial features.

“Many thanks citizen, I am Mahdi.” They shook hands vigorously and kissed as per tradition.

“Oh, I like your name Mahdi! Isn’t that the name of one of those fanatics from the second dark ages? You’ll fit right in here!” Franz laughed.

“Yeah, can you believe it! I liked the sound of it from the naming lists, kinda had a nice feel, Mahdi! But by the time I had completed my documents, I realised it was one of those ancient Muslim names! Felt like a right twit! Too much bother to change it now I’m afraid, Franz is kinda cooler.”

“I was only kidding, Mahdi is cool. How was the hyper travel?”

“Well, for a second I thought it was going to break the ten-minute-rule because it just seemed a really long time!” complained Mahdi

Franz laughed: “You know, I thought it was going over ten as well, and I’ll tell you, I was writing my litigation letter as I slept! Woah... Hang on, I think I’m getting a bit wound up here, give me a sec.” Franz held out his index finger and pressed it together with this thumb. Suddenly, his rising tension disappeared, and he gave a sigh of relief. “Sorry, I always get angry when I think of

hyper-travel these days. Always have to trigger my drugs to settle myself. But hey ho! I feel cool now.”

“I am always using my tension drugs these days for inner calm- they are a real blessing let me tell you.”

“I refreshed all of mine just before coming,” explained Franz, showing his fingers. “In this one is contentment,” he raised his middle finger, “In this one is the...” Franz suddenly whispered, “Orgasm levels...”. They both laughed momentarily. “And in this one is physical strength,” he finished by showing his right pinkie.

“Why did you choose this place for your tour?” asked Mahdi.

“Well, I’ve already visited the Vatican and Jerusalem, all fascinating and really sad actually- but I heard that, for the highest level of just wacko backwardness and hilarity- this is the place to see. They literally are frozen in the dark ages!”

“Yeah, I heard about that too- wanted to see it with my own eyes, I guess. I read about these places growing up but seeing them with your own eyes is something different.”

“You know, a side of me feels that these people really shouldn’t carry on because time and human beings have moved on so much. I guess seeing these people shows how much we have progressed...”

“Indeed,” agreed Mahdi. “Disconnecting from fairy tales for life’s big questions, disposing of backward concepts like sex and gender and the tyranny of family and generational conflict. Now we are truly free-agents.”

“We are blessed for the work of Dr Dajjalla and the arrival of hyper-travel.”

“And the drugs- you know, for the last decades, finally we have reached a level of equilibrium with our environment- all by shredding and evolving from the backwardness of the past.”

“Which is why watching these Muslim-types will be so fascinating and frustrating! But be careful- remember- they are single-gendered and live the ancient ways. We must follow the guide and stay on the route...”

The two citizens now stood before the official by the table, who scanned their right fingers, and in his strong, Arabic accent, which piqued Mahdi and Franz’s interest, he spoke: “Welcome to Madinah Palace. The last authentic home of the Muslim faithful. You are fully booked for all tours, and luxury accommodation. Please follow the guides at all time and stay within the tourist zones. Ahlan Wa Sahlan! Welcome to Madinah Palace!”

Mahdi grinned and followed Franz, with the streams of tourists, like pilgrims, heading for the vast, dome-shaped gates, through which Madinah palace was accessible. Robed men, all in white, came forward, smiling, and guiding the newcomers along. Mahdi and Franz breathed



in the exhilaration of the crowds and majestic architecture. The old world certainly knew how to construct and ornament structures and temples. Mahdi's eyes fixed upon the exquisite carvings, patterns and handwork on the great white pillars he walked past; and the epic, dome structures which crested the roof, like a row of golden bulbs, exuding riches and spiritual beauty. What a contrast, he thought, to the barbaric customs and beliefs that these people held. What a crying shame! Suddenly both men stopped as a strong, Arabian voice held their attentions:

“Mr Mahdi and Mr Franz?”

Both citizens looked upon a magnificent Arab. The first thing to strike them was the great, whirling, white turban that crowned his head, and then his height. He stood at some six foot four, was covered in white robes, with a ceremonial sword hanging around a belt on his right side. His eyes were dark but glittered powerfully, and the rock like face brought all to a stand-still.

“I am Mohammed; your guide for your hyper-trip to Madinah Palace. So, as per our custom, I bid you, as salaamu alaykum! May peace be upon you and welcome to our realm!”

“We are honoured,” remarked Mahdi and Franz, awestruck but amused by this Arab hulk.

“I will guide you through the main gate here, which we call, Bab Al Huda, the Gate of Guidance, and then show

you around the mosque. Please keep to the pathway so that we do not disturb the worshippers and users of the mosque.”

Mohammed, the guide, strode forward through the crowd, which seemed to miraculously split before him and reveal a clear pathway. Mahdi and Franz exchanged intrigued glances as they followed the enigmatic Arab, who intermittently looked back and smiled at his guests. To Mahdi, Muhammad seemed to glide ahead, as if moving downhill, and his gait revealed strong purpose and vitality. Mahdi and Franz were not exactly weak; as bi-gender humans, they possessed the strength of a fully-grown man, which the chemicals could enhance when required, but also some of the hormonal features of a female from the old world. They retained the best of both genders, while this strapping, tall man seemed to be limited in his movements and perception, Mahdi thought. That look in his eye, his frame and mannerisms, all spoke of just one reality; a male reality. Instead, thought Mahdi, bi-gender humans were like the ancient Tiresias, accommodating the mind and body of both genders, and feeling the sensations and impulses of the male and the female, which made them stronger, wiser, and more empathetic. This Arab's strength was illusory and limited. Each instance in his company seemed to highlight the futility of the single gender reality. No wonder it was barely in existence today.

Muhammad turned squarely at the visitors and pointed to the exquisite calligraphy above his head, etched into the pearl white plaque in the opening. “This says: ‘welcome to Bab Al Huda- the door of guidance.’ We will now be entering the mosque and walking through the areas of worship and living spaces of the Muslims. Please ensure that you stay on the path, designated for visitors and refrain for taking too many photos, as it will cause congestion. Many thanks and enjoy your visit!”

Suddenly, an immense expanse of majestic, lavish carpets; embossed and engraved gilded pillars; exquisitely carved book cabinets; and finally, a sea of Muslim worshippers stood, bowed, prostrated and sat reading their holy books. They stood, in an assortment of turbans and head-coverings, some bareheaded, some clasping their hands before them humbly, facing the south. It became manifest to the visitors that in some sections only males congregated, with their varying beards, facial hair and body structures. In other sections, they noticed the women; in varying shades of loose cloth and shawls, their heads covered, their faces, curves and movements, obviously females of old. Mahdi and Franz smiled sympathetically.

“Such barbarity,” sighed Mahdi.

“The women are draped over, head to toe. The men seem less restricted. They warned us about this injustice.” remarked Franz.

Muhammad, the guide, seemed to hear their critical tones, and peered back at them, rather ironically. They moved on, pausing momentarily for photographs and watching the worshippers in their pious displays.

“So, this is their prayer to their Gods...” Mahdi began.

“Yes, indeed, Mr Mahdi. We Muslims pray five prayers in a day and read our holy book, the Quran. I am sure you are aware of this... Especially as your name is Mahdi.” replied Muhammad.

“Oh, no!” laughed Mahdi. “I chose this name as I liked the sound of it. I am of course a free-agent. I have no interest in ancient religions and cults. However, we are both fascinated to see these curious cultures of the past.”

“And we are glad of your visitations!” smiled Muhammad, regarding both his guests and their subtle derisions carefully. “The mind and heart always expand with travel- and travel has become so effortless now, hasn’t it?”

“Indeed, indeed,” said Franz. “And tell us,” he said as they continued to move on, “Have you taken a hyper trip?”

“No, I have not.”

“Oh, I see. Because you are forbidden to?” enquired Franz.

“No, because I would prefer not to. My body does not agree with it. The only travel I do now is on horseback.

Especially as the automobile and mechanical travel are no longer viable. I love to see the world as I pass through...”

“True, but surely it is better for a journey to be brief. Less wasteful, you can take a stroll for your leisure. But a journey should not be longer than ten minutes. This is the expectation in the rest of the world now.” explained Mahdi.

Suddenly, they encountered a walled section, intricately decorated, golden gates and grills, punctuated with marble pillars, crested with wide tablets of Arabic verses.

“And here, dear guests, is the resting place of our Prophet, his companions, Abu Bakr, Umar, and Isa, peace be upon them all.

Muhammad, the guide, stood perfectly still, closed his eyes and lowered his head, facing the golden gates before him. Franz and Mahdi stood back and observed. There was a silence which seemed to settle on the scene, soft breezes blew across them, an Arabian golden sparrow perched on the still man’s shoulder, listening then flew off. Time seemed to pause. Mahdi grew restless. He pressed his thumb and middle finger, feeling the calmness infuse him and his heartbeat stabilising. The singular man remained in his speechless communion. What was he doing? It seemed to Mahdi that he was whispering some incantations intermittently and his eyes squinted and rested.

“Savages.... He is having a fanatical fit!” sniggered Franz in Mahdi’s ear.

Then the tall man wiped his face with both hands, and it was as if all sound and time resumed as he beamed at both free-agents:

“Please follow me as we continue on the route.”

They ambled along the causeway, between the respective prayer expanses, Mahdi and Franz pausing to take pictures on their cell-mirrors, capturing details which immediately downloaded onto their cloud stores.

“Could I ask you a rather personal question sir?”

Muhammad stopped and faced Franz, as the faithful around him stood, sat, bowed and prostrated in worship.

“What happened to you back at those graves?” enquired Franz. “Why did you go all quiet?”

Muhammad smiled and looked at both levelly. “I was just praying, meditating, and sending my salutations to those who rest there.”

“And do you now feel at peace?” asked Mahdi

Muhammad smiled more, like the sun was rising in his eyes: “Yes, for sure.”

Unimpressed, Franz showed his thumb and index finger. “Well, sir, Let me introduce how we do this where we are from. All I have to do is press my forefinger and thumb together, and I feel tranquillity whenever I need

to.” He held them together; the rush of calmness making him smile. “No prayers needed. Just a more intelligent way of accessing the chemicals up here...” And he tapped his forehead.

“Peace and tranquillity literally at your finger-tips,” commented Muhammad.

Franz and Mahdi laughed. “Yes, yes, indeed, tranquillity at the finger-tips!”

Franz seemed to go into teacher-mode. It seemed this was now an opportunity to school this savage Arab.

“And you see my body...” Franz presented his frame, which combined the male and female physicalities. “I am both- I combine-I unify- I am a bridge between two realities... Have you heard of the myth of Tiresias?”

“I have,” replied Muhammad. “We were taught it in school.”

“Well, we are Tiresian in a way. We experience both worlds and therefore perceive the universe in a far superior way. You know, there are simple operations available now that could give you Tiresian perception. Why be satisfied with such a one-eyed reality?”

Just then, Franz’s body began shuddering violently. Confused, he pressed his thumb and finger together, feeling the calmness, but it only reigned momentarily, as the shuddering continued.

“Are you ok sir?” Muhammad took Franz by the shoulders. Suddenly Franz shoved Muhammad sending him flying many metres back upon the floor. Mahdi braced as the same shuddering shook him. And, as he and Franz looked around, all the free-agent visitors in unison were arrested in these violent fits, hurling their guides across the hall, onto the prayer mats.

While pandemonium erupted around the mosque and outside, Franz and Mahdi desperately looked at their cell-mirrors which were buzzing with a news update. One echoed: “Emergency announcement. There is an outbreak of the 99’ virus. All free-agents are instructed to attend the nearest well-being facility immediately.” Mahdi then saw a map, showing the nearest well-being centre to the mosque. Within walking distance...

“It’s happening again... People infected... Hormones and chemicals causing psychosis...” gasped Franz. “An outbreak... I didn’t get infected last time...”

“Same here... We better move now...” But before Mahdi could continue, he was suddenly set upon by a free-agent whose eyes were red like fire, who screamed and flailed at him with furious blows to the head. Mahdi covered his face, pressing his fingers, boosting his strength hormones, pushing back. The infected free-agent toppled over a nearby cabinet, lashing out at the retreating worshippers.



Muhammad approached Mahdi and Franz, who were now coughing blood, and trying to steady themselves before the next chemical surge from within. The rest of the worshippers were streaming out of the mosque, pursued by rabid, crazed, bloodthirsty free-agents, whose internal hormone and chemical regulation systems had collapsed. All that was left was rage. And the hormones gave them formidable strength.

“I remember the last outbreak in 2199. And I know that unless you get to the well-being centre, you will lose your senses any minute now...”

Mahdi gasped again, desperately pressing his fingers, trying to restore balance. But he could feel the shudder returning and the anger rising. It was like anger was flooding his central nervous system and would overflow any minute now. Could he get there in time?

Muhammad studied Mahdi and Franz carefully, regarding their throbbing veins throughout their faces, the eyes reddening, teeth beginning to clench, nails digging into their fingers. All signs that the virus was spreading from the chemicals within.

“Your name, Mahdi, means the guided one. The one who helped our leader, Isa... He was a guided one and left my elders in the light.... But we knew that the dajjals will reappear...” He announced to the pair, who stood convulsing and shivering.

With that, Muhammad unsheathed the sword, revealing, not some heirloom, but a mighty Saracen sword, with a razor-sharp tip. And at that moment, the other guides dotted around the mosques were rallying and had also unsheathed their own swords, standing ready for an enraged free-agent to attack.

Mahdi and Franz had lost all sense; rage pumped through them and they charged at Muhammad.

He remembered the vision he had previously had of the Prophet, who came and said to him outside the tomb: “If the end of the world should come to you and you are planting a seed, continue planting it...” Then Muhammad smiled and waved his sword high...