

## Deviance

“How long have we been holding him?” Detective Sangrave asked, walking towards the interrogation room. They walked through the office, pulling their jacket around their shoulders and smoothing out the lapels. The senior detector shaved their hair close to their scalp and they were wearing the big iron ring they’d gotten from their mentor the day of their promotion to a senior detector. The younger deviance officer led the senior detector into the observation room. It was late on a Thursday and the Department of Deviance had the exact number of people needed for the shift.

“Four hours,” the deviance officer said. “These people always creep me out.”

“Why?” Detective Sangrave said. The person on the other side of the glass looked normal enough: grey shirt, jeans, no offensive jewelry or tattoos, and none of the twitchiness that was characteristic of a lot of deviants.

“They just--you never know what they’re gonna do.”

“There’s always a reason,” Detective Sangrave rubbed their chin. “But this one seems pretty harmless. When you get to my level of experience, even deviants have patterns.”

“That’s the whole problem, isn’t though?” The deviance officer squirmed. “We have human behavior down to a science. The Deviance Detection System can predict human behavior up to five days in advance. Social media, GPS, mood detectors, internet history tracking...hell, without reading minds? It’s safe to say we got people down to a science. But then, every so often one of these people makes a decision and...it shakes my faith in the whole system.”

“That sounds like it has less to do with the deviants and more with your faith,” Detective Sangrave frowned. “The longer you do this, the less you lose faith in some computerized system and the more you lose faith in people being predictable. What’s he in for?”

“Level Four Deviance...”

“Great,” Detective Sangrave frowned. “I’m gonna see what I can do. I’m sure this is a big misunderstanding.”

“Those people are one big misunderstanding...” the younger deviance officer frowned. Detective Sangrave didn’t have time to deal with the younger officer’s prejudice. Stepping into the room, Detective Sangrave was very aware of the younger officer watching them. While they weren’t anyone’s mentor, Sangrave knew that a lot of younger officers liked watching detectors work. Detectors made a lot more money, but it was a lot harder to teach how to detect true deviance from a glitch in the system.

“Mr...Greene?”

“Call me Brian,” the man sitting at the table said. “I didn’t realize this would be such a big issue.”

“Don’t let the badges and handcuffs put you off,” Detective Sangrave sat at the table and dropped the case folder between them. “A lot of this has to do with the Deviance Detection System. It’s not a flawless system, but they get all up in arms when something challenges it.”

“Do they think I’m a deviant?”

“Well, that’s what I’m here to help determine,” Detective Sangrave said. “I wouldn’t worry too much. Nine times out of ten, these ‘Deviant’ cases turn out to be variations. People are too complex to boil down to a few factors. Still, the department likes monitoring any major

changes from typical behavior. Think of this less as an interrogation and more of a dialogue to help improve the detection software.”

“Should I get a lawyer?” Brian asked.

“I wouldn’t bother,” Detector Sangrave shook their head. “You’re not accused of anything, don’t worry. Even if we find out you’re a deviant, we won’t charge you with anything. It’s a...monitoring thing if we do act on anything. Odds are good we’ll have to tweak the formula a little bit.”

“Alright,” Brian exhaled. “I’ve never been here before so...”

“Don’t worry, this isn’t the principles office,” Detector Sangrave said. “Let’s start with some basics: your name is Brian Greene, twenty-eight years old, employed by Key Software?”

“I hope so,” Brian said. “I know they can’t fire me for deviance, but I did blow off work...I don’t even know why I—“

“Don’t worry about why, that’s my job,” Detector Sangrave smiled. “Let’s talk a little about the incident if you feel comfortable...”

“I wanted to try something new.”

“Again, this isn’t a trial,” Detector Sangrave said. “What happened? Don’t worry about why, just tell me the events.”

“Well, I woke up today,” Brian started. “Had my breakfast, got dressed, and started collecting my stuff for work. And halfway through grabbing my lunch, I went ‘Wow, this is something I’ve done every day for the last eight years’. I froze halfway through taking my lunch out of the fridge. It was almost like...I had to get as far away from the routine as I could. It was almost like an allergic reaction to the normal.”

“Alright,” Sangrave nodded. “And then?”

“I got in my car and just...started driving. Ended up at the farm about an hour later while I was looking for gas. I stepped out to talk to the guy taking care of the horses and it just felt... better. I decided to see if the guy needed a hand.”

“And he agreed?”

“He was like...90-years-old,” Brian shrugged. “He told me he was glad to save his back.”

“Edgar Williams,” Detector Sangrave said, checking their notes. “Ninety-six years old, dairy farmer...our system predicted an 85% chance that he was going to bring on a new farmhand in the next five months.”

“Is he in trouble?”

“No, the probabilities match up with his behavior, so no one thinks he’s a deviant. How did you feel doing the work?”

“I mean...it’s not what I trained to do—not by a long shot, but it felt good. Doing something with my hands and just...helping the guy? It wasn’t bad, but it’s only been a day.”

“Do you think you’ll go back?”

“I...I don’t know. Maybe? I kinda liked it more than sitting at my desk all day. I know it’s not a full-time job, but—“

“Don’t worry about that,” Detector Sangrave smiled. “I analyze your personality and determine if this was true deviance or something else.”

“I guess What’s the alternative to deviance?” Brian asked. “It kinda freaks me out that I did this in the first place. I mean, deviants are like...murderers and stuff right?”

“Deviance just means that a person is unpredictable,” Sangrave said. “It’s kind of like... establishing a profile before a person becomes a criminal. Not all deviants are murderers, exactly. A lot of who we deal with are potential criminals in a lot of white-collar ways: embezzling, tax evasion, and things like that. The most popular examples are detecting people with murderous potential. However, the odds of them acting on those impulses are very rare.”

“Sure,” Brian nodded. “This is a lot to try and digest.”

“I’ll tell you what,” Detector Sangrave said. “I’m gonna run a few numbers with the system algorithm and see if I can make heads or tails of this. If I can find the discrepancy in the formula, it might be enough to say they need to tweak the formula.”

“So, I’m not a deviant?”

“You stopped at a farm to see if you could help out an old man,” Detector Sangrave shrugged. “I’ve seen people do a lot worse without being marked deviants. Let me do some work and figure this out.”

“Can I call someone?” Brian asked. “Not a lawyer, but to let someone know where I am?”

“I’ll make that arrangement,” Detector Sangrave said. “Sit tight.”

Leaving the room, Detector Sangrave nearly scoffed out loud. The last time they'd been called in for some deviants who looked ready to break their habit of ‘Not-Killing-People’ if Sangrave said the wrong thing. Brian seemed like the kind of person who would apologize for bleeding on someone’s shoes after being shot. Sangrave was so certain this would be an open and shut case that they were almost annoyed they were brought in. The young deviance officer was waiting for them outside of the interview room.

“He didn’t seem feral...”

“Of course he didn’t,” Detector Sangrave smirked. “It’s the people who write the algorithm overreacting to a breach of the algorithm. Do me a favor, set the guy up with a phone call? It’ll be easier to get through this process if he feels like he’s not here as a prisoner. I’m gonna do some algorithm tweaking...”

“Are you sure that’s—“

“Anything I do will be a draft that someone higher up than me will decide if it’s true or not,” Sangrave shrugged. “I wanna see if I can tweak it enough to let the poor guy go. It seems like he had a bad day and wanted to change things. Like I said...fairly harmless. Get him his phone call and I’m gonna tweak the algorithm.”

The younger officer stared off after Sangrave like they were some kind of champion with access to the all-powerful equation that determined people’s likelihood to commit atrocities. When they first started at the other officer’s level, Sangrave used to think anyone who could interact with the formula was a powerful deity as well. Now, Sangrave knew it was part of their job.

Sangrave found an open terminal, logged in with their thumbprint, and started tinkering with the algorithm. They hoped that they could find enough minor tweaks to prove that Brian was harmless, or at the very least, not a deviant. The general rule was “Less than 5 Degrees” was safe. More than five changes meant the person was too deviant to have the formula apply to them, and that was when problems started coming up. Rolling their shoulders, Sangrave started adjusting factors. All Sangrave had to do was prove that the factors weren’t far off. Detectors

detected things the formula couldn't. Until a machine could think like a human, Sangrave could always disprove deviance.

Generosity, in Sangrave's opinion, was hardly a call for deviance. The fact the formula didn't count on people being charitable for the sake of humanity made Sangrave think the formula was flawed. The alternative made them uneasy. Brian's factors to the Deviance Detection System highlighted the various factors. Starting with Brian's recent internet history, Sangrave started digging through to find what the formula hadn't picked up.

After an hour, the closest that Sangrave could find was seven degrees and they weren't minor tweaks either. It made no sense. There was no history of deviance potential, no signs of uncertainty, and no evidence of deterioration. Brian Greene had been happily functional in his position for years and was robotic in his routine. GPS tracked him going to the same places for food, for work, for fun. Sangrave worried he was too close to the algorithm for comfort. Maybe Brian Greene's overcorrection had just startled the system into thinking he was a deviant, but Sangrave couldn't find anything that proved the man who was still being held was non-deviant.

Drumming their fingers on their desk, Sangrave took a deep breath and sighed. Maybe Brian was a deviant, but a harmless one. Getting marked as a deviant wasn't bad—Sangrave knew that—and Brian hardly fit the criminal profile that a lot of people associated the brand with. Regardless, if Brian was marked as deviant, then he would be associated with the criminals and maniacs for the rest of his life.

Checking the software again, Sangrave tried another adjustment with Brian's personality traits that might line up with his sudden altruism but was interrupted by a young, blonde woman walking over to their workstation.

“Hi,” the young woman said. “The receptionist told me to ask you about Brian?”

“Of course, have a seat,” Sangrave said, “are you his wife?”

“No, it’s...weird, we started talking not long ago.”

“Coworker? Former Classmate?”

“Just...dumb luck, actually,” the woman said. “I’m Claire Reed, I’m—“

“You’re his friend from...” Sangrave started looking through Brian’s history. “I actually, don’t know how you met.”

“Must be a rare feeling for an inspector,” Claire said. “Brian and I met at a friend’s birthday party about...four days ago.”

“Ah, that helps,” Sangrave said, looking over Brian’s algorithm. “Have you been talking long?”

“Honestly, we talk about simple things. His work, my work, my cats, his dog...benign stuff. I never thought of him as a deviant...”

“I, uh...I don’t think he’s a deviant. Not fully. I’m looking into possible reasons why he might have just...dropped everything.”

“Does the algorithm factor in our conversations?” Claire asked.

“Do you think something about it might have contributed?”

“I...I quit my job earlier last month. Been hard and Brian has been really comforting to talk to.”

“You think he did this because you quit your job before you met?”

“I mean...I told him that I had just gotten tired of dealing with people at my office and how I just wanted to pack everything up and—“



“Go live on a farm?”

“Or something like that,” Claire shrugged. “Do you see a lot of people like that?”

“Rarely computer programmers,” Sangrave said. “He doesn’t strike me as the woodsman type...”

“Brian?” Claire laughed. “No, I think he wouldn’t last a day without his phone. But I told him a few nights ago that sometimes people just need to do something different or they’ll suffocate.”

“Interesting,” Sangrave smiled. “Well, that does explain a fair bit...”

“I didn’t get him in trouble did I?” Claire asked. “I mean, we just met, so—“

“It might have helped,” Sangrave said. “Sometimes people just need a push. External factors aren’t always added to the algorithm properly.”

“So...is he deviant or?”

“It might be enough for me to spare him that particular sentence,” Sangrave grinned.

“But, deviant or not? I think he’d thank you for the push. Let me see if I can factor that in and get what I need. You might have spared him a few hours of logistics and red tape.”

Sangrave watched the young woman walk over to Brian’s holding cell with the younger officer. After she was out of earshot, they started manipulating the formula again. Not every aspect of the human experience could be monitored and inspiration was invisible. Four degrees later, Sangrave had satisfied the formula enough to clear Brian of any deviance for the time being. Giving him more time might develop a pattern that would satisfy the equation. That was good enough for Sangrave.