

The Place Up the Hill

It was day four hundred and sixty-three, as marked by the habitants here. He had long ago adopted their measurements of time, distance, and everything else. This way-station was now nearly as familiar to him as his home.

Yet it also seemed as far from that second place as he could be, and still maintain the will to keep trying to leave. Time, in whatever continuum, accumulates distance.

And distance steals everything.

He sat in the chair, watching the late afternoon sun flow across the blank white wall in front of him like an expanding yellow stain. It was comfortable enough, and even had an ottoman if he wanted to put his feet up.

It never occurred to him to, though. This was just the wait between work and the place on the corner, one block up the hill. So, he sat with his hands on his knees, and waited for the chime from his Attendant to signal it was time. He'd told it on day three to look like an iPhone, and it had complied.

He knew he never needed it to actually chime anymore, and it did also. It spoke in his old language as it always did when they were alone. It was still several minutes before the notification was due, but it could not just ignore protocol.

"No note?"

Getting to his feet, he knew he didn't need to answer. They were both familiar with this dance, but he did, for the same reason.

"No. Day check?"

It told him the correct number, as always.

He continued as he grabbed his wallet and keys off of the side table, and slid the Attendant into his pocket. The single yellow sun was nearly set, just the top sliver visible through the bay window overlooking the street below. He was so tired of this blue sky, and the one weak star that lit it.

"Normal sweeps tonight, full data logs. One tight-beam burst through the portal, though."

The Attendant responded via the implant, and the words were in his head, yet again in a language that only it perpetuated. He'd thought about this for a while now, and he wondered if it wasn't a form of psychological reinforcement on the part of the device. Just a bit of grounding in the past, maybe?

"That's optimistic, isn't it? We barely cleared thirty-five percent accuracy last evening."

He shrugged. It was a response based in this place, but he seemed to be caring less and less about that. The words now came easier in this bird-like tongue he'd assimilated, because this place demanded it. That deeper, wider language he'd used all through the...before this, the words of care for his mate and the young, ideas that formed and made him were all translated now. He was worried, because that was all going gray in memory.

"We've seen spikes before. Just be ready. Same might be same, but we don't have to be."

It was a stupid statement on the surface. The Attendant was always ready, and it did not respond as if to confirm this fact.

He exited his apartment, locking the door behind him, then descended the dirty carpet-clad stairs to the lobby. The post-boxes along the wall were now in shadow, and the glass double-doors were dimming as he stepped up to them, the dust on the outside becoming more translucent as the light behind them faded. Streetlights outside lit, and the artificial illumination began to grow as the arc-sodium bulbs warmed to full strength.

The walk up the hill was easy enough, past the empty lot with the incongruously tall pine tree in the center behind corroded chain-link. The building at the top of the block was three stories high, with apartments above the restaurant on the ground floor. As he drew closer for the four hundred and sixty-third evening in a row, it was clear that the sign was correct tonight, anyway.

An iron stanchion held aloft a wooden sign, illuminated by a hanging lantern at the outside edge. It declared simply, "The Gate, Bar and Grill". The script was calligraphic tonight, instead of block letters or sans serif.

He didn't need input from the Attendant to start adding, and it knew that too.

The door was a single extra-wide wooden monstrosity, with triangular glass sections through the upper half and an over-sized round door-knob. To the right of it, there was a glass-faced case set into the brick wall, with the menu and the wine list lit by a small bulb at the top.

Sixteen menu items, including the seared ahi. Eight wines, with the Sonoma Riesling listed fourth. Papyrus font on both. All correct.

The Attendant's statement was perfunctory, and quiet in his mind.

"External parameters met."

He turned the door-knob, and pushed his way into the foyer. The man that awaited him at the maitre d' podium looked up. Poor lighting could not hide the tiny moue visible just for a second before his face came to life, and he swept out from behind it to clasp this visitor's hand, as he always did.

"Mr. Rudy! I can set my watch by you! Welcome, welcome. Normal table?"

Monte, as the man knew him, was dressed in a dark suit as always, with a silver tie clasp for the black tie, and silver cuff links glinting at the end of the dark blue sleeves. These did not matter. Only the flag pin on the lapel did.

It was there, the red, white, and blue sections easily visible.

But it was upside-down.

He felt himself deflate a bit, even as he replied,

"Yes, Monte. Please."

"Long day? You seem tired."

"Mostly just hungry."

"Then we'll fix you up, my friend. Follow me, as though I need to guide *you*, of all people."

A false laugh followed, and he wondered if he could take too many more of that same thing every night. He knew Monte wasn't really a man. As if to confirm this, the Attendant murmured,

"Algorithm sensitivity at seventy-one percent. It is alert tonight."

Out of habit, the man did an inventory of the dining room anyway, even though the flag pin had already punctured the possibility bubble.

Tables were lit with real candles, instead of battery-operated versions. There were eleven tables, and the configuration was correct, with the one set near the back wall doubled up for a larger party.

The louvers on the saloon-style doors into the kitchen were angled up and toward the back, and it was made of aluminum, not wood. The interior walls were stuccoed brick instead of typical brick face, with gaps missing to simulate an Italian flair. The carpet was red, and the pile near the entrance as well as the kitchen was trampled flat and stained.

Other diners occupied maybe half the other tables, but despite the fact that they were real people, they were ornamentation, as usual.

As he logged the rest of the shift points, he saw that they were all correct. The Attendant confirmed.

"Interior parameters at ninety-nine point six eight percent. Suggest no tight-beam burst. Algorithm sensitivity is spiking."

He heard Monte speaking to him as he sat down at his table. Normally, he could navigate the interaction in his sleep, but he heard something in the tone that brought him back to the conversation.

"Mr. Rudy. You seem very distracted this evening. Is everything alright?"

He looked up into Monte's face, and saw the absence of care or humanity in a way that maybe had always been there, but was more apparent now. Then he looked beyond Monte's shoulder, and saw the sign above the entrance to the kitchen. It might have been white once, but the lighting and time had yellowed it considerably. The text was still ebony black, though. It never changed, was never fluid like

so much in this place that had diverted him from his life, and trapped him here. It sat above the portal each night, and seemed to mock him.

“The Gate, staff only.”

Ninety-nine point six eight percent.

It was down to the pin, his will, and the rules here.

As he reached up and twisted the pin around one hundred and eighty degrees, he mentally whispered to the Attendant.

“Disrupt.”

The energy burst from his companion blew through the restaurant, and it became a manic slideshow of modifications, most of which he’d seen versions of. But that was not his objective.

He was up and sprinting for the portal.

Monte became a cascade of numbers flashing in ascension and declination in vaguely human form, losing solidity but growing in illumination, and the man could sense its attempt to re-coalesce and block his exit.

Then he was through the aluminum saloon doors, and the Attendant broadcast a single word into his mind even as he registered the kitchen, humming with activity and full of the smell of barely palatable food.

“Syncing...”

An eternity and no time at all passed, feeling much the same.

He felt himself...extracted. The restaurant kitchen was gone.

The purple sky stretched away, seen through the temple window, and the first of the three red stars was peeking over the horizon.

The Attendant whispered a word in the old language, and he repeated it out loud.

“Home.”