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The
Arrangement

It had rained for days, and tonight was the worst of it. A vindictive storm pounded on the roof of the restaurant without reprieve. Sheets of rain ricocheted off the café, collecting in channels of water that were once streets.

A dark figure sat in the back of the restaurant alone, wearing a dark trench coat and a hat. The small candle on his table danced and flickered as he scanned the room. The hour was late, a few minutes to midnight by St. Louis time, and the restaurant was empty save for a few folks finishing their coffee near the front. The patrons seemed too absorbed in their own story-telling, drunkenness, or both to notice him. Even so, he had arranged to be let in through the service door in the back to avoid any attention.

Across the dining room, a slender, dark-haired busboy lugged a large plastic container as he cleared all the tables. The half-empty glasses, plates, and silverware chinked and chimed with every step. He set the tub down and started flipping the wooden seats upside down onto all of the unoccupied tables. After a few minutes, the room was a forest of inverted chairs with branches pointing to the low ceiling. The worker dutifully reclaimed his black container of dishes and retreated back through the aluminum doors. For an instant, the cold fluorescent light of the kitchen escaped as the doors swung like pendulums.

Not much longer, thought the man in the corner.

Italian music seeped softly in through a small house speaker above his head. He didn't mind it. During the year and a half that had passed since his arrival, he had been exposed to various genres of the planet's music. As far as he was concerned, music was the only thing he had encountered of the culture that actually obeyed a set of rules. He found

himself listening to it, even enjoying figuring it out on some level. He was fascinated by the mathematics of the sounds' harmonic structure, creating atonal tension and resolving the dissonance continually like waves lapping the shoreline, a delectable panorama of rhythmic equations.

He caught himself staring at the plastic red-and-white checkered tablecloth and realized he was daydreaming. He chastened himself for letting his guard down. *I have to be more careful.*

“Good evening, Mr. Smith. Sorry to have kept you waiting. We are so glad you’re here tonight,” said a stocky man who was approaching the table while offering a smile that was too big to be sincere.

The visitor always went by *Smith* or *Jones* or *Johnson* at these things.

“Mr. Smith,” the man went on, “my name is Philippe. If you are ready, we may begin.”

Smith nodded, attempting to mask his contempt for this man.

Philippe proffered a thin computer tablet.

Smith did not receive the device, leaving Philippe to suspend it awkwardly in the air.

Is this a trap? They assured me this place had been checked out.

“Is... everything all right, Mr. Smith?” said the man as he tilted his head slightly and brandished an even larger smile.

“No paper? You don’t use paper files here?” Smith scoffed. “I hate those tablet things.”

“I see... I see. Is it because of leaving fingerprints? Because I could wipe-”

“No, it has nothing to do with that.” Smith leaned in and spoke softly. “In this present condition -- in *my* present condition, in this shell I’m occupying -- I sometimes emit subtle

electrical discharges that can short out devices like that.”

Philippe withdrew the device and softly put it on the table between them. He took the seat across from Smith and scooted the chair in closer. The wooden chair legs made a short high-pitched bark as they scraped across the floor to their destination.

Philippe's round abdomen docked itself at the edge of the table as he said, “Mr. Smith, I apologize. The reason we don’t print this type of information out is strictly that of discretion. Your associates have determined that paper can be reconstructed even after the most thorough shredding, but the files on this device are encrypted in such a way that over a million combinations have to be reconstituted to restore a single line of text.” The crooked smile reappeared. “So you see, once we are done, the subject will dissolve away as if it was never here.”

Hmmph... In more ways than one, Smith thought. In more ways than one, you opportunistic little man.

He studied the human for a moment. Smith wondered if Philippe, assuming that was *his* real name, thought that he would somehow be exempt when everything started up a few months from now. Did he really believe that clandestine meetings such as this would garner him favor when his species was being processed for elimination? *Selling out his own kind -- how despicable. Are all humans like this greedy creature? If so, there is a certain justice to what is about to befall them.*

Philippe continued, “The... *others* used this without any problem; in fact, it is on loan to me from your... eh... *friends*.”

“What are you saying?”

“The others, your...” Philippe struggled for an appropriate term. “Your colleagues, it did

not present a problem for them.” The man raised his palms and his eyebrows. “Not to worry, Mr. Smith. No worry. I will read the... uh... ‘candidates’ to you. I will read for you to decide, yes?”

Smith nodded again and crossed his arms.

Philippe reclaimed the pad and flicked it on. It chirped out an eager series of blips, the screen illuminating the operator’s face. The man mumbled a pass code as his bloated fingers mashed the glass display.

Smith loathed coming to places like this, but this was about the only perk of being on an advance team. Certainly there were risks of doing it this way, but he liked having the control. By not going through some type of liaison, he’d be able to decide for himself what he wanted.

”Ah... there we go,” said Philippe, angling the tablet’s screen for Smith to view. “First, there is Donna G. Cunningham: Caucasian, age 38; a housewife and mother of one from Ferguson.” The light from the screen cast long shadows across Philippe’s face, making him look like a grotesque caricature.

After a moment, Philippe asked, “No, *signor*? This is all right. I have many to choose from. Many more. Do not worry.” His plump index finger tapped and scrolled the screen forward. “I just need to better understand the range of what you are looking for.”

“No homeless, no children, elderly, or feeble... and no mentally unstable or physically ill. Understood?”

“Oh, of course not. Wouldn’t dream of it, would not even begin to dream of it.”

Smith remained unimpressed. He watched the man’s over-enthusiastic manner each time a different profile appeared on the screen. Philippe reacted to every summary and picture as

if it were some new discovery, forgotten until now. “Now here’s an interesting one: a 22-year-old aircraft mechanic; a Korean male from Manchester, Missouri named Daniel Yu.”

“No, keep going,” answered Smith. This was beginning to become tedious to him. As Philippe rattled through an assortment of races, ages, and vocations including a female SCUBA instructor, a city councilman accused of having an affair, a beverage distributor, a satellite TV installer, some joggers, and a meter reader, Smith began to wonder if he had made a mistake in coming here. This was going nowhere.

His mind drifted. He made a mental note to revisit this location in a few months, after the first offensive, of course, to see what had become of this place. *Maybe the Echelon will turn this place into a processing area, or just level the entire block to rubble. Either way, this self-serving parasite won't be here to see it.* This realization made him smile.

Philippe picked up on the smile but misunderstood its meaning. “So you like this one? This Michael Ackerman? It is a very good choice.”

“Ackerman? Oh... tell me again, where is he from?” asked Smith, attempting to rejoin the conversation.

“Like I said, he is originally from Greendale but has recently returned from fighting in Uganda. Do you know where that is, Mr. Smith?”

Smith shot back sourly, “Yes, Philippe, I know all about Uganda. I *am* a *surveyor*, of sorts.”

Philippe shrank in his chair. “I am sorry, Mr. Smith. I didn't mean to-”

“I know of places that you have never even heard of,” interrupted Smith.

“I understand. I apologize again; truly sorry.” Philippe avoided looking at Smith, choosing instead to stare at the tablet. “Ackerman, Michael... Serviceman Ackerman, recently returned from... Ugan- from combat. Two confirmed kills; age 31.”

“Yes,” Smith replied.

“Because of the extra difficulty in obtaining a specimen like...” Philippe stammered before taking a second pass at what he wanted to say. “You see, it costs more for someone like-”

“I said ‘Yes.’ I will take him.”

Philippe peered up again. “Such a selection is well worth the extra amount of-”

Smith plopped a thick wad of cash upon the table so hard that the impact made the silverware bounce and clink against the bread dish. The excited flame of the candle flickered sporadically, leaping around in the small glass holder.

“Does that cover it?” asked Smith in a low, steady voice.

Philippe nodded and quickly shoved the bundled bills into his vest pocket. It didn’t hide the bulge of bills, so he removed the vest and folded it into a ball in his arms. For the first time during the exchange, Philippe smiled an authentic smile. Smith noted that the man’s true expression was even viler than the used-car-salesman smirk he had been offering up until now.

Smith grumbled, “Anything else?”

“Uh, no, *signor*.” Philippe pushed back from the table and stood. He offered a slight bow. “Right away, Mr. Smith. Right away.”

He backed away, turning around just a few paces before he reached the swinging doors of the kitchen.

Only seconds later, Philippe returned to the table, this time with an expression of embarrassment instead of a grin.

“The soldier, Philippe. I want the soldier!” snarled Smith.

Philippe nodded eagerly. “Ah... yes, very good, very good. I know you want the soldier. A splendid choice, but will you also be wanting an appetizer with the meal you’ve selected?”

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