

Home

I woke up on the floor. The light above me stung my eyes as I looked around, wondering where I was. The place was lit with yellow lightbulbs, but the wood around me seemed more yellow than it should have been, even with the color of the lights. I climbed to my feet, my body aching from having been on the hard wooden floor for so long. There were cabinets, tables, and boxes all around me. I was in a wood-panelled hallway, and I could hear a strange droning coming from everywhere at once. The sound added to my panic as I wondered where I was. The place was utterly unfamiliar to me, I thought. But as I examined my surroundings in bewilderment, I realized that wasn't true. I had been there before. So many times. And yet, I didn't know where I was, or where to go. My eyes landed on a door. It had a number on it, -30. Above that, there was a timer, ticking down to zero. Apparently, there were only thirty five seconds left. Till what? I turned around, expecting to see something that might tell me what the countdown was for, and there it was.

A tall figure, colored a sickening dark red, almost featureless, except for its eyes. Its eyes pierced me, and I could feel his gaze as if it was stabbing through my skull. It felt so wrong looking at it, as if it should have stopped immediately, but then it spoke. "Miles. Come to me. You've always known where I am. You can't play dumb. That was never an option. You are long overdue. Come to me, meet me through the back door. You've never forgotten how to get to me." It kept speaking, holding me with its gaze, and there was nothing I could do. I couldn't even bring myself to respond. I could only listen to its voice as the timer behind me ticked down, and a constant tapping began on the walls. The experience stretched on for what felt like eternity, and then it all stopped, for just a split second. The timer had reached zero. I heard agonizing wailing that was rapidly approaching, and past the red figure, in my periphery, I saw a skull emerging out of the distance. It was farther away than all the walls, and yet I could still see it past everything. As it got closer, the figure torturing me spoke for the last time, its calm voice somehow elevating itself above the roar. "Soon, your time really *will* be out. You want her to be cured, don't you?" Before I had a chance to process what it said, the skull reached me, and everything went black.

I woke up, this time in my bed, where I belonged, breathing raggedly and drenched in sweat. I looked around frantically for a moment before rubbing my head, trying to ease the pain that hadn't disappeared with that experience. Another nightmare, and the same one that I had been having. I could never remember the nature of what was happening in those dreams, and it never got any more pleasant. I thought about calling Grace about it again, but I had already bothered her about it twice this week, and what could she even do about it? Nothing. I knew that. It was still dark outside. I checked the time, and it was 5:00. That wasn't enough time to get back to sleep with how I had been sleeping, so I rubbed the sleep out of my eyes, took some painkillers, and thought about what to do. I was running out of sick days to call into work

I had to do something to mitigate these dreams that were tormenting me, but no amount of medication stopped the dreams for longer than a few days. I wanted nothing more than to never think of that place ever again, but these nightmares kept it front and center in my mind. The Hotel. I kept reliving that day in my mind. I had been on a simple road trip, and that place had presented itself to me. If only I had known what was in there. I could understand that the government wanted to throw away all the eldritch horrors they had found, but the special prison they had constructed had chosen me and so many other innocent people to feed its residents. It could have been worse, I always told myself. I had received near immortality from the anomalous plant they kept there; I even met Grace there. But that didn't change how traumatic my time was there, and I had to witness so many others who hadn't even lived to be traumatized.

The regeneration from the plant they kept there, the herb of Viridis, was able to heal me from fatal wounds, and yet the headaches I got from these dreams took nearly the entire day to go away if I didn't help myself with painkillers. I couldn't imagine how much agony I would have been in if I didn't have what I did. I might have been dead already, for all I knew.

I sat there on the edge of my bed, thinking. I usually just showered and tried to distract myself with videogames afterwards whenever the nightmares came, but despair was setting in. There was only one way I knew to stop all this: give in. But not even that was guaranteed to work, there was so much risk involved. What if it was lying? Even if I came and did whatever it wanted me to do, would it really stop tormenting me if it always had the power to do so? I wanted so desperately for it to stop, though, so much so that I began to get ready to go drive out and find the Hotel again before I caught myself. I had made my decision, but going out without telling anybody was suicide, if the act of going wasn't already suicidal. I had to at least let Grace know first, and, as much as I dreaded doing so, finally contact the U.S.P.C.D. and tell them what was happening to me because of them.

It hit me then that I didn't even know how to find them.

"Awesome," I muttered to myself. I had finally locked into my decision, at least as far as I could be willing, and I couldn't even follow through on it. Well, at any rate, I thought, I did need to tell Grace. Sighing, I got my phone out and dialed her number, staring at the digits for a moment before hitting the call button. It ringed a few times, meaning I was definitely waking her up again. I didn't feel good about bothering her so much, but this would hopefully be the last time.

"Miles? Are you okay?"

"Yes. Well, no, I had another dream, but I have something to tell you."

"Oh, wh-what happened? Are you hurt more than usual?"

She was groggy but still immediately concerned for me. I almost wished she didn't care so much, it would be easier for her.

"No, umm... I've decided."

"Miles..."

"I can't take it any more, I gotta do it."

"Miles, no! You can't listen to it! It's just going to kill you!"

"It's going to kill me anyways, Grace. It hurts for so long, I can't sit and wait any longer. And you know what it's promising."

"You can't trust it! Miles, I... I don't know what you can do, but listening to it isn't an option. Please don't... you know, we could try to talk with the government guys."

"Yeah, I've been thinking about that too. I don't know how to contact them, though."

"Oh, right... look, don't do anything right now, okay? I'll come over and try and help you figure out how to call them."

"No, you don't have to come over, you've bothered enough with me."

"A little bit of sleep isn't more important than helping you, I'm gonna come over."

"Grace, come on, shouldn't you wait till dawn?"

"Ugh, shush! I'm gonna hang up now, see you in a bit."

"See you..."

I appreciated her a lot, but I wasn't in the mood to act very appreciative. I laid back down on my bed and tried to think of nothing. I thought of showering again, but I wouldn't be done before she got there. I'd just have to stink and gross her out while she helped me with my issues. I waited the minutes out, though it felt like hours as my head pulsed with pain, staring up at the ceiling. I had started dozing when I heard the knock. I got up and slowly walked down to the front door, flipping the living room light on. I opened up and let her in, but to my surprise, she embraced me before she walked in. She gave me a squeeze and then let go, asking me, "How are you feeling?" I shrugged and said, "Not any worse than usual." She nodded quietly and went to sit on my couch.

"Hey," she said, looking at me with pity, "is it saying anything different?" I shook my head. "No. It still says it'll... cure you." Her expression soured. "Well, I guess we better start figuring out how to contact them." I nodded silently, and sat down on the couch. It was still dark outside, and everything felt surreal. I glanced around imagining I saw those eyes again more than once. "I never told you, but the email I got from them deleted itself, I don't think we can just message that address. Is yours gone too?" I checked, and sure enough, there was no trace of it.

We spent some time researching together on our phones about the U.S.P.C.D. to see if we could find any information about it. The only things of note I could find were posts about the Hotel. They disgusted me, honestly. At the time I was there, there was only one single post about it on the internet, but, because the government wanted more people to potentially explore the Hotel and they allowed these posts, more unassuming people were being lured in. It was difficult to concentrate on this for that long, and I said so to Grace. She was understanding, and she said I could just watch TV while she kept searching. I didn't really feel like TV at the moment, so I just thanked her and tried to doze off again.

My “peace,” if you could call it that, was disturbed when she asked if I wanted to talk to Adam. “Who?” I asked, staring at her for a moment before I remembered. I hadn’t talked to him at all since we left the Hotel together, and he hadn’t been in my mind at all, even recently. “Oh. Him. What for? Do you think he knows anything we don’t?” I asked. “That’s what I’m going to ask him, if you don’t want to do it. I’m fine either way, but I figured you might not want me to talk about your condition for you.” I thought for a moment, and then said, “No, thank you, I don’t feel up to it.”

“That’s alright. I think I have his number here, I’m gonna call in a second once I make sure.” Another thirty seconds passed, and then her phone rang. I listened up, waiting for the conversation to take place, but then I realized that she was the one being called. I looked at her in confusion, but she was eying the number on the screen. “What? Who just happened to call you at this moment? Is it Adam?” I asked. She showed me the screen, which said “unknown number.” She hesitated, and then declined the call. We looked at each other, and then I shrugged. She cleared her throat and was about to speak, but then she got a text. Her reaction was not positive. “What?? What are they texting you?” I asked, as bewildered as her.

She paused for a moment, and then said to me, “Umm, a few minutes ago I posted online asking if anybody knew about the U.S.P.C.D., and I think I wasn’t supposed to do that.”

“I could have told you that. What happened though?” I asked. She showed me what the message said then.

“Grace Rawlings, you have violated the non-disclosure agreement you signed on 02/01/2022. Your post has been taken down, and U.S.P.C.D. agents are en route to your location. Any further attempts to expose the U.S.P.C.D. or movements from your current location will result in remote wiping of your device, and harsher treatment from U.S.P.C.D. operatives.”

My heart sank. It wasn’t likely I’d get in trouble with her, but that didn’t make me feel much better. What was going to happen to her now? She came here just because of me, because she felt obligated to help me, and now she was going to be imprisoned, or worse. I saw the dread in her eyes. “I’m so dumb, why would I do that?! Gosh, I’ve... what am I gonna do?” she said. “It’s not your fault, you were trying to help me, I never should have...” I trailed off. Anger started to grow in me as I thought about how I had told her not to come, and she decided to come anyways, and now all this was happening. “No,” I thought. That wasn’t right, I had only asked her to not come so early. It was my decision to give in to the thing from my dreams that started all this.

Grace texted the number back, writing, “I’m sorry, I was trying to figure out how to contact you, we need help, one of the PBs is haunting Miles’ dreams! We weren’t trying to expose you, we just wanted help.” I looked between her and the text a few times, and said “Let’s hope that gets them off our backs.” We sat in tense nervous silence for nearly two minutes, and there was no response. She was distraught, her eyes welling up with tears. I cleared my throat and offered her the food I had in my fridge since she probably hadn’t eaten anything before she left. She nodded, got up, hugged me quickly,

and went and heated up a hot pocket. I should have been hungry as well, what with my equal lack of breakfast and unhealthy state, but I couldn't stomach anything at the moment. Suddenly, Grace's phone rang.

She scrambled to pick it up, and she put it on speaker as soon as the call started.

"Hello?" she said shakily.

"What do you mean he's being haunted?"

I didn't recognize the voice, but the tone and mannerisms didn't strike hope in me.

"He, um... he always has the same nightmare most days, where something is telling him to come to it, through 'the backdoor,' and the dreams give him awful headaches. The... the herb of Viridis doesn't even heal them quickly."

"*Careful* with that name, *miss*. Anyway, I think you know more than what's good for you, this is certainly something. We'll find out what's happening real soon, expect us in an hour. Remember, you're always being watched, don't try anything."

The person on the other end hung up before she could respond, and she stared at the phone in fear before glancing around the room, as if expecting to find hidden cameras. Then she let out a sob. I looked away, unsure of what to do.

The next minutes were agonizingly slow. If it had felt like hours waiting for Grace, it was days waiting for these guys to show up. I decided to shower and get out of my pajamas, just because I didn't want Grace to have to endure my body odor the entire time, but we didn't do much else. The sun was beginning to rise when I saw their car pull up outside. It wasn't a notable vehicle at all, easy to look over. The two people who got out were dressed normally enough, but knowing that they were just trying to look inconspicuous, they appeared almost too normal; none of the imperfections that usual people out and about would have. They walked up to the door, and Grace inched away from the windows. Three heavy and aggressive knocks came, and I opened the door quickly. They entered, shoving past me without a word. "Lock the door," one of them said. He had short yellow hair with a fade, and the other had a buzz cut, their hair brown. They were otherwise quite similar. I reluctantly complied with his command, and once they were satisfied that I had fully engaged every lock, they analyzed each of us. After a moment more of silence, the blonde one spoke to Grace. "You're lucky you have that explanation of yours, we would just come and take you away, simple as that. Really, it's still within the NDAs parameters for us to do so, but what you said is truly noteworthy. You can call me Mr. Hill, and him Mr. Price."

Neither of us knew how to respond to that.

"Tell us, Miles, about these dreams you have. Be as detailed as possible." said Mr. Hill.

It was easy enough to do, I had such vivid memories of this dream; but they asked so many follow up questions. They were particularly interested in the two beings there were, as well as the environment. I was able to answer everything, though, and their surprise grew almost obvious. Mr.

Hill pulled something up on his phone, showed it to his associate, who nodded thoughtfully, and then they had a conversation with someone on their earpiece. They were mostly answering yes or no questions, I couldn't gather anything from it. After they finished, they looked at each of us for a moment. I met Grace's eyes, and neither of us knew what to think.

Mr. Hill spoke again. "Good news: Grace, you're off the hook. Bad news, you're both coming with us to see somebody about your dreams."

"Oh... but we're not in trouble, right?" Grace asked. "No." Mr. Hill replied. I wasn't entirely happy with this outcome though. "Wait, how long is this going to take? I have-" but Mr. Price interrupted me. "Another sick day to spend? No, you have nothing to do. No more questions, come with us." He turned and began unlocking the front door, but Grace interjected. "But *I* do!" she said. "*No more questions!*" Mr. Price repeated. Grace looked at me nervously and sighed quietly. We followed them out and got into their car. The only thing that was said as we got on our way was, "Is the AP device still working?" Mr. Price answered in the affirmative, and then the drive began.

I supposed this was what we wanted. There was really nothing to be scared of since Grace wasn't in trouble any more. I decided to look on the bright side; I was going into whatever the U.S.P.C.D. had in store for me with Grace by my side, instead of alone like I had been ready to do. Despite her claims that I wasn't bothering her, she was clearly a little sleep deprived. She started nodding off part way through the trip despite how tense things were and her efforts to keep awake. Eventually she fell asleep on my shoulder, which I didn't mind, but I was a little embarrassed it was happening in front of the agents. That quickly passed however, they clearly didn't care at all.

After about a forty minute ride away from the town, down a long road I had never explored before, they stopped the car. Grace woke up, realized she had been sleeping on me, and apologized. "It's alright, it's cute." I said. She smiled and looked away. All four of us got out of the car, and there was a helicopter not far from the road. I wondered how the car got here, but then, as Mr. Price fiddled with a device attached to the car in the space between the chassis and one of the wheels, the car suddenly shrunk into itself in a strange way that I couldn't describe. It bent and contorted in ways that metal couldn't, not to mention the shrinking. When the process was done after a few seconds, there was nothing left there. I looked between the two and the empty air, dumbfounded. "Wuh?!?" Grace exclaimed. They told us not to worry about it, and then we walked towards the helicopter.

I tried to put it from my mind and hoped I didn't have to deal with much more. The helicopter ride lasted for about twenty-five minutes, and no words were exchanged then either. Grace didn't fall asleep that time, and we got out on the roof of some building in the middle of nowhere. I didn't know how much ground a helicopter could cover in half an hour, so I had no clue where we were. There was nondescript forestry around us. We went down into the building, whose style was uncomfortably similar to the exit of the place I had escaped all those years ago.

Complex

The two agents now seemed out of place like us, contrasting with the very formally dressed employees in this place. There weren't many people out in the halls, but most of them eyed us cynically. We reached our destination, which was a locked door. Mr. Hill asked through his earpiece to be let in, and after a moment's delay, I heard the latch click. We walked in, with Mr. Price closing the door behind us. I was very conscious of the latch clicking again, and my nervousness grew.

We proceeded down another hallway, and then entered a room labeled "Overseer's Office." The agents escorted us in, and then left us alone with the overseer, closing the door behind them.

"Welcome. You may be seated." The overseer said. He wasn't physically remarkable, and his suit didn't seem very different from that of the supervisors I had interacted with all that time ago. The only way I could tell him apart from a regular supervisor was what I thought was the logo of the U.S.P.C.D. on the left side of his chest, a minimalist bedsheet-ghost shape. "Remarkable," he said as we sat down in front of his desk. "You don't look a day older than when you escaped. I've never had the pleasure of seeing a subject affected by PI #4 in person. Enjoy the immortality while you can."

"Wait, *immortality*?" Grace asked. "I thought we would just live a few years longer, I don't want to live *forever*!"

"Right. We may have something in store for you two that will fix that issue, but I'm getting ahead of myself. Miles, your dreams are, in one way, unprecedented, but in another, just what we knew we needed. I have a proposition for your, but before I can expect you to make an educated decision, there are things you need to know."

His expression was disconcerting. From what I could read of it, he seemed happy about something, but not with mirth, and he was eager. His gaze was intense.

"Miles, the thing that speaks to you in your dreams matches the description of PB-030 to a tee. Its codename is Lookman. Other things in your dreams include PB-032, and PZ -1, codenamed, 'The Backdoor.'"

That name sent shivers up my spine. That was what "Lookman" had called the place too.

"We are aware, actually, that PB-030 is often out and about in our world. Why it, and no others, have infiltrated this side of reality, we don't know. But we have reacted accordingly. All of our activity is concealed with specialized AP devices, such that it has no idea where we are or what we're doing. We've found that it can't *see* per se what's happening here like it can inside PZs, but it perceives things in some way. It's been watching you for a long time, we think."

"Wait, what are PZs?" I asked.

"Paranormal Zones. There were only three when you escaped, but there are *many* more now. Things have changed, including what we name these zones. Regardless, in our few expeditions into the Backdoor, PB-030 has been present, and he has hinted at knowing about some impending event that

will, needless to say, be catastrophic for humanity, though it of course describes it as a good thing. However, it is unwilling to give us any more info than that. This is where you two come in. It bears a kind of grudge against you for some developments in our technology; you see, we tested what you said about cross shapes being deadly to the PBs, and at first the results were *marginally* in favor of you telling the truth, just barely. It really could have been coincidence, but that changed with one particular subject using the AP cannon. He had some kind of faith in a higher power, and that time the difference was notable, large. We've... taken advantage of this, and our ability to combat the PBs is greater than ever. All because of *you*. So, you can understand, PB-030 wants revenge on you.

What we want, however, is information. You might have a chance of getting it to talk, so here is our proposition: you enter the backdoor, don't let it know we sent you, and get answers. In exchange, we extract the Viridis from your system, set you up with plenty of money, and keep you defended while you fill out your side of the bargain. Sound good?"

I thought for a moment, trying to take in everything he had just said. I looked at Grace, but she was looking at the overseer. "Defended? Will he really be safe?" she asked. "Decently. Either way, the backdoor only consists of about a sixth of the amount of doors he got through last time, if he dies, it's his fault," he responded. I wasn't a big fan of this guy. "*Hey!* You're- you're the ones trying to get him killed!" she said. She crossed her arms like she always did when she was angry. Before anything could get heated, I gave my consent to the deal. "Miles..." she said. She didn't make any attempt to talk me out of it, knowing what I was going through.

"Good choice," the overseer said. "We'll wait a few days, and then we can—" the overseer started, but the idea of waiting was not acceptable to me. "No, I need to go as soon as possible. I can't bear any more days filled with pain. My head is throbbing as we speak, and it's gonna stay like that for a few more hours." I said.

The overseer took a deep breath, and leaned back in his chair. He grabbed a pen off his desk and began tossing it repeatedly. He flipped it 180 degrees each time, until he was done thinking and he flipped it all the way around that time. "Right. Right. If you want to risk it finding out because of how long it's been unable to see you, that's your prerogative," he said. His expression was neutral, but I could hear the disdain in his voice. "Wh- how was I supposed to know that would happen?!" I asked, indignant. "Think about it, why don't you? What is it thinking when it's suddenly not able to monitor you anymore?" he responded. He was just riling me up at this point because I didn't immediately submit to him. I already had my suspicions, but now I knew this guy was a piece of crap. "You tell me! It's apparently safe enough that you can bring me here in the first place!"

"Fine, suit yourself. Say goodbye to your friend then, unless you want her to come with you to the backdoor."

I looked at Grace, shaking my head. She was sympathetic, but I knew she wasn't going to put her life on the line. We both got up, and she hugged me tight. "Miles, be safe. As much as you can,

alright?” she said. “I will, don’t worry about me, okay? I’ll make it, I’ve faced worse.” I assured her. She nodded into my shoulder, and then she let go. The overseer had her escorted out as I bid her farewell, and then I reluctantly sat back down, as he seemed to be waiting for me to do so.

“Now, since you’ve decided to start right away, you don’t need to sign the new NDA yet, but I hope you know almost everything I’ve just told you is *highly* classified. And the rest of it is still classified.”

I nodded.

“Great. Now we can begin the briefing.”

Backdoor

As I drove, my dread grew and grew. The memories were in full force, and each death I had witnessed there played over and over in my mind. All those corpses. And the bodies I never even saw. I began to consider turning back, scary soldiers be damned. It was the only way out though. Either it gets to torture me to death, or I go down fighting... or I make it through. That hadn't even occurred to me as a real possibility while I was dealing with my internal conflict. Realistically, I had good reason to expect to survive, but it could go wrong permanently so easily. I thought of Grace and how devastated she would be if I died here. That was an even stronger motivator for me to turn back. Was I really going to risk ruining her just so I could be free from migraines? It was almost like I was bringing her with me anyways.

I kept having to remind myself what's at stake. I returned my focus back to finding the Hotel, and then there it was. It had appeared just as it had before; it hadn't been there one second, and then I looked back, and there it was. I gawked at it for a second, and then I hit the brakes. I pulled over and got out, staring at the place. It was just as I remembered. Two floors, brick exterior, three windows on each side of the entrance... and, I remembered it, but it drew my eye then, the fence off to my left. My dread of the place did not abate as I approached. My headache grew worse, and my stomach twisted. I swallowed with difficulty, and I made the mistake of looking through the front door. There was the lobby.

All this was starting to overwhelm me. I was beginning to have some sort of panic attack, my breath was coming short. I started backing away, and then I turned all the way around and ran back to my car. I scrambled in and locked the door, as if something was already pursuing me. I put my head down on the dashboard and tried to compose myself. There was zero positive motivation for me to do this other than the money the government had promised me, and that was hardly enough. Thinking of the stakes only made me more panicked. I tried to just think of nothing, just zone out enough to be able to ignore all the concerns.

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I finally felt well enough to try again. I looked up, and the Hotel was still there. Leaving my car, I was resolved not to think about it. "I'm just walking into a building," I thought. I walked across the grass,