

“Center of The Universe”

Kellin looked around. Everything was blurry. It was hard to move. He didn't know where he was. And then the water started rising. He couldn't make it. He never could. Every time, it ended the same. But still, he clung to some frail, vain hope that this time it would be different. He wouldn't fall. He'd make it out and everything would be fine. The water was above his waist now. Then it was above his neck. He kept paddling, gasping for air, trying fruitlessly to cling on to ledges, but it was no use. The water was above his mouth. Now it was above his nose. Then his eyes. Then his—

12 hours earlier...

10:16 PM, somewhere in the Swiss Alps.

“That'll be all I need, right?” Kel said to no one in particular. “Yeah.”, he answered to himself. His suitcase was still 2/3 empty, but he had everything he needed. Not like he had much he *didn't* need. He had just been promoted, allegedly. Apparently, the previous person at his new position had quit, and he was taking their place. He didn't really know what to expect, but he assumed there would be a briefing of some sort when he actually *got* there. And he had to get a move on.

12:00 AM, Dunkeltaler National Park.

This was the place. His new home for – actually, he didn't know how long he'd be here for. A couple months, if he had to guess. The first thing he noticed was that the door to the security office had been pried open. Or rather, someone had tried – and failed – to do so. Nope, still wouldn't budge. That made him feel a bit better. Ena said to expect a bit of disrepair, since the place had been abandoned for a while. This must've been the sort of thing she was talking about. Kel ducked under the gate, and set out along the gravel path with his suitcase. Almost immediately, he jumped out of his skin. Just a pinecone, he reassured himself. Just a pinecone.

12:39 AM.

His coworkers back at HQ must be having a laugh right now, with all the stories they told him about this place. But at this point, he was unsure they were just stories. They all seemed so vivid, and so— He tried to take his mind off the topic, but something about this place just felt *wrong*. Like it was somewhere no one was supposed to see. Maybe it was haunted. Maybe the moment he set foot in the building he'd be gunned down by aliens. Maybe the previous guy went mad and was going to murder him with a chainsaw. Maybe—

His train of thought was mercifully interrupted by a sign telling him where to go. “Base”, it read, and pointed in the exact opposite direction he was going. He'd seen a few other signs already, but was too busy thinking about highly improbable ways he could meet his demise to read them. That was probably a mistake, he now realized. He kept walking, in the right direction this time.

3:07 AM.

Those weren't floating eyes. They couldn't be. His mind was playing tricks on him again. Unless it was a ghost. Or an invisible alien. Or—

But before his mind could make up even more things to be afraid of, he was there. It was a huge concrete structure, looming over everything in the vicinity. It dwarfed the radio dishes, and yet was somehow dwarfed by them as well. He figured there would be someone to greet him, but then again, it *was* the middle of the night. At least the doors were unlocked— not like “1111” was going to prevent anything from getting in. Especially when it was on a sheet of paper right next to the keypad.

He opened the door, and nearly jumped out of his skin before rattling off just about every curse word in his lexicon. Two wooden mannequins, almost life-size, were standing in the entryway before him. If this was a prank, it wasn't a fun one. He continued, past the dilapidated lounge chairs with equally roughed-up tables to match, past the cracked murals and peeling paint, and past the piles and piles of trash and scrap. It looked like a landfill in here. Surely they had a custodian? Maybe his coworkers were just slobs. He stepped into the large signal room. If he was going to be an "array operator", this looked like where he'd be doing it. The place was a mess, with trash strewn about, dirt all over the walls, even a cubicle that had collapsed with its contents still inside. In the center of the room was the Stolas Astro-Processor. He'd been trained on something like this back at HQ, but he had never seen one *this* old. And it smelled awful, too. Despite all this, it appeared to be working fine, letting out a gentle hum as he stood before it. He sat down at the chair in front of the main computer and waited for it to boot up. When he did, he was greeted by two emails, one from Bao and another from Lea. He had already been informed of his duties back at HQ, but these went into a little more detail. He'd skim them later. He was getting tired, so he looked for the bedroom. He eventually made it upstairs, noting the coffee machine (maybe later, he was too tired even for coffee), and finally finding the door for the bedroom. As he'd now come to expect, it was utterly trashed. What he *didn't* expect, however, was the lack of employees. All the beds were empty, and indeed only one even had mattresses. His coworkers were probably off doing something else, he reassured himself. He flopped down on the bottom bunk, not bothering even to take off his coat, and cozied up to his Keljoy plush before drifting off to his usual restless sleep.

10:16 AM.

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Kel awoke with a start, nearly falling out of his bed. First day, and he was already having nightmares. Not a good look, he thought to himself. He picked up Keljoy, stumbled downstairs, still groggy, and found the vending machine. Thank god, they had Xeta. Although, he didn't have any change. Fuck. He'd find the ATM later, there *had* to be one somewhere.

1:03 PM.

The day had been mostly uneventful. Aside from discovering more mannequins in places they definitely should not be, nothing much had happened. He didn't even have a task for today. Now would probably be a good time to find his coworkers. He made his way over to the garage and got on the ATV. He had never driven before, but he could probably figure it out, he thought. After a lot of trial and error, he eventually got the ATV to go forward. Straight into a wall. "I'll let them find *me*", he muttered quietly.

4:58 PM.

He saw it. It was back. Just standing in a corner, looking at him. *It's not real*, he assured himself. *It can't hurt me*. But try as he might, he couldn't stop his vision from drifting towards it. And then it grabbed him.

12:40 AM.

He was awoken by the shrill alarm of the drone arriving. He couldn't remember any of his dreams, but they were all nightmares. He stumbled over to the garage, unloaded the bag, and then set everything down in the signal room. He'd deal with it later, he thought, as he went upstairs, Keljoy in tow, and slowly, restlessly, fell asleep.