

Hubert couldn't take his eyes off of that seat. There wasn't a clock, but he knew it was almost time. It would come very soon. He just had to keep waiting. There was no point in trying to run. It never worked. Not for anyone. Not when you were dealing with these people. They would always find you in the end and they punished those who inconvenienced them.

In the background the fire crackled, its light shining off the shadowy walls of his living room. He hadn't moved a muscle. You would have thought that by now he'd have run out of sweat, yet still his pores dripped in his state of mortal terror.

It wasn't a sudden change. It started as part of the woodwork of the chair, an arrangement of the visible knots and lines. In the following minute or so the lines became more prominent, a clearer outline, until finally there was a blatant image of someone sitting in the seat, made up of the natural patterns in the wood. Following its transfiguration the outline looked Hubert up and down, inspecting the timid man. Her fingers drummed on the arms of the seat. Eventually she spoke, which was in some ways a relief to Hubert. He had never been good at handling tension or suspense. Yet the lines that were her mouth did not move. It was in fact the crackling of the gentle fire behind the chair that seemed to form the words.

"These chairs were provided for the select only. They won't want others sitting in them."

"Yes, I noticed that with Gideon," Hubert managed to say.

Her voice filled the room. He should have been used to it by now, it had been happening for long enough, but nobody could keep calm in the presence of this associate. Slowly the figure rose from her chair with a symphony of creaks, the body tearing itself from its template. Her face remained immobile and emotionless, swivelling upon her timber neck. The lifeless carvings of eyes took in his shabby abode.

"It only just occurs to me that we will need to obtain you better accommodation for your efforts. You have done well over the course of your work with us," the fire crackled in the grate.

Hubert bowed his head, "You are most kind."

"Your approval is unnecessary and, as always, unwanted."

"If I may be so bold," Hubert's voice trembled as he looked up at his superior, "the boy has his task, as you wished, so is not my part complete, can I not go back to my normal life?"

The fire flared, the sound of burning reverberated loudly, like cackling laughter.

The figure cocked her head and began to circle Hubert's own seat, "You think that was your only duty to our cause? That my coming here now to congratulate you on your straightforward success is a sign of our parting?"

She stood behind the quivering man and ran her wooden fingers through his thinning hair.

“No, quite the opposite. We have plenty more planned for your piteous group. But think yourself lucky. I’m not known for my benevolence. Then again, I’m not really known at all, am I?”

The feel of her fingers lingered on his scalp for a short time after she had disappeared, merging with the patchy wallpaper where her pattern dispersed. It was a long time before Hubert Sneak got himself up from his chair and moved around once more. He wouldn’t contact Gideon, or anyone else for that matter. This was his other life, outside of the pristine workplace and ordered systems. This was his secret life, the private one, which no-one else could share, the one that kept him within the grip of fear.

Gideon had proved that no-one else could understand. Hubert might have been a coward but he could not permit himself to put anyone else at risk. He was alone, all alone.

The front door wouldn’t move over the coming weeks. He had enough supplies to sustain him through this self-induced confinement. They might say he had done well, had won, been victorious in his mission, but it didn’t feel like it. This was wrong, it all was. Real, well deserved winning...it was different. He had the courage to lock himself up in this decaying prison, but not enough to confess his crimes to any judge and jury.