

Hill-and-back

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"You'll die. There's always a chance... but in all honesty, you'll die."

"I am a scholar of the fort."

"Melodrama?"

"Self-realisation."

"Melodrama."

They walked another loop through the wide, shallow bowl near the overlap with normalcy, through the little spikes of ice-in-the-nethers clarity brought on by the inversion of it all: the once slow-

rise into the hill-that-was, now a scarred, shallow indentation. Flaps of excess skin sewn up after excising the cyst. It seemed exactly as overgrown, exactly as furrowed and ploughed-through as on the day of the event, the day of the *absence* of event.

"Typical Wednesday."

Their refrain. *I did not see this coming.*

"Typical Wednesday," she confirmed. Wednesday 22nd July, eighteen-months-and-change ago. *Today* she would meet with the anchoress. The third attempt overall, this one long past due.

"It doesn't have to be *you*."

"No. And yet," she gestured at the absence of volunteers.

They had been two of the first to arrive, a bond that lingered. Two of only a half dozen to have lived within close visual range of the hill before its abrupt *absence*. They had shared the same mix of incredulity and embarrassment of self-doubt. There were no startled cries, no pontifications. They began instead with:

This cannot have been a singular phenomenon of nature.

Not solely. Around the central shaft downwards—towards one of ten successive, partially-fortified platforms—they had discovered the first set of apparently abandoned apparatus: torches, lamps, simple rigging. No excavation tools. Nothing exotic. It wasn't clean enough for some spontaneous

outburst of new physics, yet too strangely and quickly done for a manned event.

It has the appearance of antiquity.

Each level showed obvious degradation, whether under layers of mosses or the thick accretion of dust.

The revealed structure may be unrelated to the disappearance.

Perhaps there had always been an entrance down into whatever-this-was, the hill always some temporary capstone, no matter how many generations had known and walked it.

Can this really have occurred.

Was there any possibility that they were, if not collectively insane, then simply *mistaken*? Caught up in some narrow-beam psychological confusion, a hyper-local *Mandela Effect*? It was wildly easy to

doubt what had been cast-iron certainty when all evidence of the certainty was removed. None of them had anything as trivialising as a photograph. Not even showing as a background feature in an unrelated shot. On their phones, satellite images showed only a low resolution static of trees, too far from any mapping-friendly roads for a side-elevation view.

The platforms were a series of sections through stone, as though a mountainside had been cut away *downwards* to show uncannily uniform strata, each layer apparently self-contained, each at slightly different angles, depths and prominences out into a central funnel of clear space, wider as they descended. Each seemed snapped or broken off, but not artificially so, without any obvious marks of tooling.

The whole edifice had the feel of a *nook*, of a place set-aside. It had the sense and shape of a shelter. As though a weak seam in the world had been forced open and co-opted as a hiding place.

“Somewhere to sit out the end of all things.”

“And yet you choose not to.”

The bottom. Wide and flat and damp. Clearly concrete underfoot. They turned towards her rooms, towards the woman who claimed to have been living there for notional-years before any of them had arrived that first day. The woman who claimed the underfort had always been exposed to sky.