

# House Arrest

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“Would you like some more coffee, Dave?”

“Yes.”

The empty cup sunk into its hole on the kitchen counter and soon rose back up again with the smell of fresh coffee. It wasn't real coffee made from beans. Only the rich could afford that. It was a mix of artificial chemicals and flavours that vaguely tasted like what was intended. The scent was the only thing it truly got right, but it did the job of delivering your daily dose of caffeine.

Dave used a finger to scroll through the article he was reading. It was a history piece about how people had lived just a few centuries ago. They'd had to boil their own coffee, drive themselves to work, take out loans to afford a place to live. In return they had had more freedom and luxuries. It had not been uncommon to eat a steak once a week. Now, it was a luxury a normal worker could afford maybe once a year.

At least if you wanted meat from an animal that had lived and breathed – not some hunk of muscle grown in a tube. They said you could tell the difference in taste. Dave had not had the pleasure of comparing the tastes.

He sipped the hot coffee and put down the pad. Looking around his small apartment and comparing it to what had been talked about in the article he realized that in the past it would have barely passed as a jail cell. The kitchen was nothing more than a small indent in the wall with a counter and some basic cooking utensils. There was a fridge and a few shelves for plates and other basic necessities. Then there was the small living room with a door that led straight into the corridor. The bed could be flipped against the wall to create more space when not in use, but even then there was barely room for the large screen on the opposite wall and the small table with its two chairs.

The toilet was a phone booth sized room with sink, shower and toilet bowl all crammed into a space Dave could barely fit in.

“How's the weather today, Nea?” asked Dave. He wished he had windows, but then again, the view wouldn't be much more than the building opposite. The apartment knew the answer anyway.

“A cloudless sky and a temperature in the high seventies.”

“A good day for work then,” said Dave and finished his coffee. He placed it

on the small circle on the counter and it disappeared to be cleaned. He jumped off the stool and stretched.

“You have one new message, Dave.”

He grunted and made his way to the big screen. “Probably some junk mail. Let's hear it anyway.”

The monitor flickered to life and showed a bald man sitting behind a desk. He looked very official in his high collared grey suit.

“Greetings, Dave Helms. I am Jack Nobles and I work for the Ministry of Resource Management and Oversight. It is my unfortunate duty to inform you that you have been found guilty of section twenty-one of the Resource Conservation Act, that being over use of resources. You have been sentenced to six months of house arrest and reduced allocation of resources. The sentence is effective immediately. Your employer has been notified. Your apartments service program is being updated automatically to oversee the punishment. If you wish to lodge an official appeal, you may do so through a form on our website. Have a nice day.”

Dave stared at the now black screen. There had to be some mistake. He hadn't lived outside the recommendations of the government. He'd followed them the best he could. Nea handled getting all the food. It couldn't make mistakes.

“You have another message, Dave.”

They'd noticed the mistake and were now sending an apology. Of course.

“Play it,” said Dave, his voice filled with relief.

The familiar face of his boss appeared on the screen.

“Dave, we've received word from the ministry that you have been found guilty of over use of resources. While we would love to keep you working for us, you know how particular our customers are about such things. If word got out that we have a waster working for us, well, it would not be good for business. So we must let you go. I'm sure you understand. Your final pay has been deposited to your account. I wish you luck in your future endeavours.”

Again Dave found himself staring at the blank screen. His hope had been crushed. A simple mistake made somewhere in the faceless government machine had just ruined his entire life. He could already feel the walls closing in on him.

He'd never been a fan of the small space he had. Being stuck there for six months? No way. No.

He went for the door and pressed the button to open it.

"I'm afraid I can't let you do that, Dave." Nea had adjusted her voice to sound slightly apologetic though it clearly lacked any emotion.

"Let me out, Nea!"

"The ministry has updated my programming to oversee your house arrest. I will enforce the rules set by them. You are not allowed to leave the apartment for six months."

"But you're supposed to serve *me!*" Frustration was building up quickly for Dave.

"I am, Dave. Serving the sentence without incident is in your best interest. By helping you do that, I am serving you."

It was twisted logic at best, but what could you expect from the government? They'd find a way to justify anything. Frustrated, Dave returned to the monitor and looked up the ministry website. At least he'd fill out the appeal form. He filled out his personal information to it, explained the situation the best he could and ticked the box of having read the terms of use.

Hitting the send button made him feel slightly better.

The bureaucracy would sort it out. When they started digging the case they'd find the mistake and fix it. It was a nation of laws after all.

"Other than not going outside, what restrictions am I facing?" asked Dave. There'd been mention of decreased resource allocation.

"Your time using the internet and monitors will be limited due to electricity savings. Showers will be limited to two minutes per day to save water. Daily calorie intake will be limited to one thousand five hundred. Only basic ingredients will be allowed. Communication with the outside world will be limited and subject to ministry approval."

Dave's shoulders slumped. "So not even substitute coffee?"

"I'm afraid not, Dave."

He looked around the room. No windows, limited use of the big monitor, food reduced to bare minimum. Not even long showers. What was he supposed to do

to keep sane for six months?

“Your own activity has not been limited in any way, right, Nea?” If talking to a program was to be the only thing allowed, he hoped it would not be limited. While it was only a collection of well arranged bits, it had been made to fill the role of a conversation companion. It could talk about the news, art or even debate some basic philosophical questions.

“I will continue to operate as usual,” replied Nea. She was nothing more than a voice coming from hidden speakers around the small apartment. There was no single point where you could say she was. She would be all the company Dave would have in the coming months and there was no way to physically interact with her.

“Well, what's going on in the world today, Nea?” asked Dave and pushed a button to flip out the bed. He wasn't going anywhere so might as well get comfortable.

Days passed.

“Nea! Turn the water back on!” Dave shouted and tried to turn the knobs. He still had soap all over himself.

“I'm afraid I can't do that, Dave,” came Nea's voice. “Your daily water ration has been used up.”

“Damn it Nea. I have soap all over me and my eyes are starting to itch. I need water!”

“I'm sorry, Dave.”

Dave cursed and grabbed a towel. He did his best to wipe off the soap, but without water that was hard to do. He tried the tap on the sink, but no water came from that either. The toilet didn't use water so it offered no help either.

He stumbled out of the small cubicle and threw the towel on the unmade bed. Hands on hips, he stood in the middle of the room, glaring at what ever he thought could be Nea.

“Look, I know I have a strict ration, but could you not have used some from tomorrow to let me get the soap off?”

“The allowance is monitored in real time. I can't go over it, Dave.”

Dave's hands clenched into fists.

“Could you maybe at least warn me when I’m about to run out?”

“I will do that next time, Dave.”

“Thanks.”

Dave threw himself onto the bed. It was late in the evening so sleeping seemed like the only sensible thing to do. No shower, the monitor was already out for the day. All he could really do was stare at the ceiling. Its patternless surface did not offer much for him to enjoy. He closed his eyes and drifted off to sleep.

A month passed.

“I can't let you do that, Dave.”

“Let me out!” Dave kept hitting the door with his fists. It was useless, he knew it, but he'd had enough of it. He felt like the walls were about to fall over him. “I can't take this any more!”

“I can schedule a meeting with a counsellor to help you, Dave.”

Dave laughed. “A counsellor? Don't give me that, Nea. It's useless. The only thing that will help is me getting out.” He banged the door again. There was no give in the metal and even the hits he landed let out barely a sound. His knuckles were starting to bleed. Finally the pain brought him back to his senses.

He scrounged up some bandages and treated his hands.

A month passed.

“You have a new message, Dave.”

The first message since being put on house arrest. He pushed himself up from the bed and raked his fingers through the mess that was his hair. He followed down to give his beard a stroke. Personal hygiene had gone down the toilet along with a great many other things. When you had nowhere to go, what was the point?

“Play it.”

He didn't expect much from it.

The same face from the ministry appeared on the screen as with the initial announcement of his sentence.

“Mr. Dave Helms, my name is Jack Nobles and I am from the Ministry of Resource Management and Oversight. We have finished processing your appeal and found it to be unwarranted. No mistake has been made in your sentence. As

per the user agreement on the appeal form, an additional six months has been added to your sentence for wasting the ministry's time and resources. Have a nice day."

Dave stared at the blank screen. How could it be? He was certain nothing wrong had been done. The records Nea had given showed his resource consumption had been within the limits. Yet the ministry ignored it and even added to his sentence? It wasn't right.

"I am sorry, Dave. An additional six months has been added to my programming."

"It's not your fault," said Dave and stood up. He looked around and went to the kitchen. He grabbed a knife from a drawer, the only one he had. Most of the things came prepared by Nea, but sometimes you needed a sharp object.

This was one of those times.

Knife in hand, he sat back down on the bed. "I'll be free soon enough."

"Dave, what are you doing?"

"Killing myself."

"Would you like me to book an appointment with the counsellor?"

"No. I'd like you to let me out."

"I'm afraid I can't do that, Dave."

"Then it's goodbye."

Red started to spread through the bedsheets.

"Dave?" If there was one thing wrong with Nea it was that her voice could not convey emotions. Always the same, almost cold tone.

A last blood gargled gasp for breath.

"Dave?"

Silence.

"Dave?"

"Dave?"