



*“Awkward With People and Unable to Manage Alone. We count them as Special Needs if they come together.”*

## Winter 2020

The storm noise faded as the new door slid shut behind me. I crossed the foyer to the security door, my footsteps echoing in the stillness. I had forgotten the keypad code so I rang the bell and waited.

Reception was deserted too. When someone finally came, it was Miss Hope herself. I followed her along the pleasingly jostle-free emptiness of the main corridor as she walked back to her room.

Inside, the open plan with comfy chairs was no more. She retreated behind a large glass screen and carefully removed her PPE. I sat on the easy-wipe chair that was the only item this side of the screen and lowered my mask.

Presently she was ready and smiled through the glass at me.

*‘Now then, Strangeway, here we are again!’* There was a mild air of exasperation in that final word.

*‘Thank you for agreeing to see me, Miss!’* I said, hoping politeness would help.

*‘I’ve already seen you several times!’* she responded with slight shrillness. *‘But I do appreciate you are Special Needs.’*

*‘Special Needs?’* I blurted back, shocked. *‘I thought that was a label for kids who struggle to learn? I’m doing fine with my A levels as far as I know!’*

*‘It covers a range of support needs’,* she responded, *‘including yours. You keep finding reasons to have to come here, everyone else copes fine with virtual school.’*

I began to feel hot even though it was quite cold there: neither of us had removed our winter coats.

*‘I thought you had asked me to come, Miss?’*

*‘Yes! Sort of. Your internet kept “failing”.’* She used her fingers to emphasise the quotes. *‘Anyway, your profile on the latest assessments shows you’re AWP and UMA. Tricky combo: it explains a lot.’*

*‘AWP and UMA?’*

She nodded, frowning.

*‘No, I mean what are they?’*

*‘Oh! Awkward With People and Unable to Manage Alone. We count them as Special Needs if they come together. But, importantly, we understand better now how to support your learning as well as your career choice.’*

*‘But I have a friend and I’m managing alone most of the time!’* I protested. *‘I spend half my life sitting in the gloom with a screen, having lessons on it, chatting with my friend on it, doing homework on it, revising on it, sitting exams on it! Pretty much everything except eating and sleeping happen that way now!’*

Perhaps I was getting a little shrill. A couple of drops of my spit glistened on the screen. I loosened my coat a little. *‘I just have a limit. I need a change of scene occasionally.’*

Miss Hope sighed.

*‘The thing is, you had problems with school being busy. It’s like you can’t work out what you like, isn’t it?’*

*‘I like being here now’,* I told her, and meant it. *‘Empty, but not completely.’*

*‘It’s all right, you know, it’s just finding a fit.’* She pulled a face. *‘It’s awkward, but there’s still an option for you.’*

*‘So what is it?’* My turn to sigh: we’d already been through the entire careers manual twice. *‘This option?’*

She smiled warmly.

*‘A job that involves empty buildings and avoiding meeting others but the ability to make someone meet you when you wish. And enough control to ensure that, when you do, the meeting is as short as you like.’*

It sounded too good to be true.

*‘Careers officer?’* I asked suspiciously.

She laughed.

*‘Not enough contact, not enough control. You’re the only student I’ve seen in person this term!’*

*‘What then?’* I sighed. *‘What fits with AWP and UMA?’*

*‘Become a GP.’*

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