

## 5.

### *The Council*

Everyone was seated around Daniel and waited for him to begin. Only Touraz, who was lying lazily by the cosy fireplace, looked at the former archaeologist indifferently. Daniel gazed around the room with a hard expression on his face and said:

“I am not intending to tell you the whole story of my horrid experiences in Brennenburg Castle, I will only tell you that which is absolutely necessary.”

If anyone felt anyhow disappointed, they didn't show it. Five pairs of eyes were set upon Daniel's face, greedy ears caught every sound that floated in the anticipation-condensed air.

Daniel heaved, sighing deeply:

“Our destination is an ancient mithraic structure of underground halls and chambers. It might be guarded by traps, but I fear we will face something of a much worse nature. We will talk more about these dangers soon. I happen to know its exact location, so getting there should not be much of a problem. By the way, I strongly recommend taking an umbrella or a large hat with you.”

Everyone nodded. Unlike Daniel, they had lived in Africa for most of their lives and knew all about its deadly climate.

Daniel continued:

“Our priority is to find and rescue people from my colleague's expedition. His name is Herbert, and if it weren't for him, I would certainly not sit here right now and tell you all this. Why I need more people? You see, inside there are obstacles of the kind that can be beaten only by a few, strong men. But I warn you – this will be very dangerous. We might

not get out of there unscathed, but as long as you stay with me and do as I say, you will survive. So, if any of you wants to quit, I am not stopping you.”

Nobody neither spoke nor moved. Daniel felt strangely sad.

*What am I getting them into?*

“I assume all of you have the necessary tools?” he asked loudly.

The audience nodded.

“Great. Now, I mentioned some dangers, didn’t I? Listen very carefully.”

Daniel leaned a bit so that the fiery reflection of the hearth blazed in his eyes. Ibrahim, Alfred, Mannuel and Fabio moved closer.

“I suspect the place holds at least several ancient stone relics called Orbs – objects that will yield great power to the select few who can control it. This means that we will certainly encounter a being called the Shadow, or the Guardian of the Orb. It is an evil breath, taking visible form of a red organic tissue which grows on any surface, consuming all matter that stands in its way. You awake it by moving an Orb from its original place, like... a pedestal of sorts.”

Once the Orb casts its long shadow onto you will taint you, and you will only be able to free yourself from the Shadow’s relentless pursuit by throwing the Orb away or taking control over it, which is unimaginably difficult.

“Now, I don’t know whether we will encounter them here in Algeria, but in Brennenburg Castle there were, maybe still are, these horribly deformed, human monsters. I...I hope never to see them again but every night my dreams are turned into nightmares.

“But... never mind...so, you cannot defend yourselves against these horrid creatures unless you carry some kind of a

weapon, I think. I... never had a chance to try. For now, we'll work under the assumption that our minds are the only weapons we've got. In my experience, the darkness is ally. I wish I had realised that back then...I was weak.

"I met two types of these monsters but please, don't ask me to describe them. Let's just hope we won't encounter them there."

Daniel paused for a moment to gather his thoughts. Fabio spoke instead:

"I think I can get us guns, ammunition and sabres just in case..."

Daniel shook his head.

"Weren't you listening? The best weapon against these monsters is your brain, a strong one at that..."

Daniel considered for a second.

"If you can, get us those sabres though, we might have a use for them."

Fabio nodded knowingly. Ibrahim stood up and went to fetch a few bottles of scotch, vintage 1815 – "just to loosen the tension". Daniel knew Ibrahim and Alfred wouldn't accept money for their help, so he turned to Fabio and Manuel:

"I don't know if you expect anything in regards to payment, but if you do, I have money."

They shook their heads.

"We don't want money, we hunger only for adventure." Manuel assured Daniel. The latter smiled.

"Adventure you will have in excess, of that I can guarantee."

Ibrahim returned carrying a handful of bottles and drinking glasses. Everyone poured themselves a glass of whiskey and sat back comfortably, hungry for more stories. For a few minutes the gulping of alcohol was the only audible

sound in the candle-lit and cozily heated living room while everyone digested the disturbing information.

Daniel still doubted Manuel and Fabio would agree to come and besides, he felt slightly guilty for letting them participate. But his past was a clear example of his attitude to people – it was something he couldn't escape from.

Moreover, while drying his glass Daniel came to a highly uneasy conclusion – he didn't feel like he was where he should be. It's like the entire Brennenburg experience changed him; he thought the only thing that was to be left of him would be a ball of nerves and horrid dreams. But no, right now he felt like he was no longer meant to live among normal people, to live a normal life. He felt he was no longer weak and timid, but strong and indifferent.

He had changed.

*It's time.* Daniel thought. He left the living room assuring everyone he would be right back.

“What's this?” Fabio asked when Daniel put a small metal chest on the table.

Daniel hesitated.

“Listen, this will be a shock for you, but I assure you, this is neither hallucination nor trick.”

He opened the chest and held Agrippa's head high.

The reaction was instantaneous.

Manuel fell off his chair. Fabio cried some vulgar words, Alfred choked on his whiskey and Ibrahim run to help him.

Mayhem lasted a few minutes. Ibrahim attended Alfred, Fabio was shaking his head and pinching himself as if wanting to wake up, and Manuel kept assuring himself that he would no longer “take part in this nonsense”.

Daniel tried to get their attention back.

“I warned you. If my fears are proved right, you will see much worse than this before it’s all over. You all agreed! Now just listen to me at least one more time. This is...”

“Heinrich Cornelius Agrippa. How come you’re still breathing, you bastard?” Ibrahim hissed, fury blazing in his eyes.

Daniel was thunderstruck.

“You *know* him?”

“Oh yes, I do.” He said, a sad streak flashing across his face.

“When I was a kid I used to live in a village near Brennenburg. My father was one of the servants in the castle there, he used to praise Agrippa and his apprentice Alexander, the baron of Brennenburg. One night my father didn’t return home. I was scared. Scared, but curious. So, I sneaked into the dark castle and followed the blood trail which led me to the prison warden.

“As I made my blind fucking way through the blood-stained corridors I heard my father’s inhuman scream. I glued myself to the cold, stone wall as I saw him being dragged to the room at the very end of the hallway. I was frozen with fear. Only another blood-curdling scream made me approach the massive metal door. You know what I heard?”

Daniel shook his head. Ibrahim stared icy cold daggers at Agrippa as he spat:

“*Him* assuring my father he was going to be sacrificed for the benefit of the world. For the greater good. My father pleaded for mercy, not even for himself, but for me and my mother. Agrippa said it depended on the result of the experiment. That my father was probably going to be no more than a single element of the chain that was yet to stretch. And then...then I heard Alexander humming; “*paint the man, cut the lines, paint the man, cut the lines...*”. My father stayed

silent. Or maybe it was I who screamed so loud I couldn't hear him. Anyway, *they* certainly heard *me*, so I had to run head over heels to get out of there. It was a miracle I did."

Daniel suddenly remembered Alexander's angry words:  
"*He escaped? Where is he now?*".

"I am sorry, Ibrahim, but we need him. His knowledge can be the difference between living or dying. I trust him – he owes me his life."

Ibrahim snorted.

"Daniel, remember my letter warning you not to go to Brennenburg? I wrote that people come out either dead, or with their sanity lost forever. I didn't think you'd return insane *and* naive, though. Agrippa has nothing to owe you, believe me."

Daniel held Ibrahim's gaze.

"I have to trust him. WE have to trust him."

Fabio looked as if he couldn't believe his eyes. Mannuel was squeezing his eyelids as if checking his vision. Alfred stood immobilized, looking at Agrippa with shock and disgust.

After a few minutes of unpleasant silence Fabio exclaimed:

"How come this thing *lives*? What's going on? Am I dreaming this?"

"Why have you shown us this awful decaying head?" Mannuel sounded offended.

"It isn't decaying. Show them, Cornelius." Daniel asked politely.

The head cleared its throat. Mannuel almost fell backwards over his chair again. Everyone else took a step back.

"Hello, my name is Heinrich Cornelius Agrippa. I know it is difficult for you to meet me, but I am not surprised. I was trapped in a "soul container" device for hundreds of years,

placing my soul into a weakened body, a husk to ensure I would not die. And then, as the Shadow was wreaking havoc upon the castle, and I thought all hope was lost, Daniel showed up. Using a tonic invented by my former apprentice, Johann Weyer, he freed me. I have devoted my entire life to occultism and the Orbs were the objects that drew my attention the strongest. I know a lot about these ancient impossibilities closed in the shape of a sphere, but my dear apprentice Johann was the true master of the Orbs. He collected so many of them...I suppose you haven't even heard of him, have you?"

The thunderstruck audience shook their heads.

"Right that's great, everything is good, now get to know each other and we will continue." Daniel said impatiently.

"Hey, I am Mannuel" Mannuel said, having picked himself off of the floor sometime during Agrippa's monologue.

"Fabio"

"Alfred"

"You do remember the tortured servant's son's name, don't you?" Ibrahim hissed, clenching his hands into fists.

"No, I admit I don't...so many memories to hold..." Agrippa looked embarrassed. Ibrahim sat down without a word.

"Everyone sit down, I want to ask you something before we go on with the technical aspects of our five-men-and-a-talking-potato expedition." He said bitterly.

Hesitantly, they all did as he asked. Ibrahim glanced at everyone with a scary expression.

"I guess you have never heard of the Legend of the Black Eagle?"

**Hell no...**

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