

8.

Daniel's mind refused to stir. It wanted to sink deeply back into the blissful abyss of unconsciousness. It didn't agree with the idea of waking up only to discover that the nightmare isn't over. But still, every nightmare has to come to an end.

Doesn't it?

Daniel opened his eyes. It made no difference whatsoever - he was surrounded by pitch black. It took some time for his eyes to adjust to the darkness and discover the emptiness of the tiny prison cell. Daniel shivered slightly. This structure was almost a twin resemblance to the ones of Brennenburg's prison. But Daniel couldn't have been brought back to the rotting Prussian castle. Not again. The horrible prospect caught Daniel completely by surprise. He had to still be dreaming. Or maybe he had died and ended up in a personal hell.

The last thing Daniel could remember was being dragged and thrown into some kind of a portal – uncannily similar to the one in the Orb Chamber of Brennenburg. Daniel blinked. He tried to follow the insanely rapid chain of events that proceeded his imprisonment. Escape from Europe, arrival to Africa, meeting old friends and making new ones, plotting a rescue mission, revealing Agrippa, an unexpected visit from the strangers in black robes, strangers with the ORBS. Then hiding Agrippa, hanging above a vast gulf, through the portal and...here he was. His nightmarish fate greeted him again with a firm, warm hug.

Daniel looked around the cell. It was empty except for the peculiar pipes poking out of all four walls. Daniel understood at once – these were the connection pipes between each cells allowing prisoner number one to hear the screams of the tortured prisoner number two. The system Daniel knew so well. The only difference was made by the number of the pipes – in here there were several whereas in Prussia there was only one, connecting two cells. Daniel had an odd feeling these pipes were formed in some kind of a inter-cell web. He hissed:

“Hey...anyone hear me?”

For several seconds he could only hear his own disturbed breathing. Then...

“Hello? Who’s that?” it was Mannuel’s voice.

“It’s Daniel. You okay?”

“Yes, I am quite fine...it’s just...” he didn’t bother to finish.

“Hey? Who’s there? Daniel? Mannuel?” Fabio’ voice.

“Yes, we’re here!” Daniel called back, regaining confidence - he wasn’t alone this time.

“Thank God! I thought you were dead...or worse,”

“Oh, it’s good to hear you, dear fellows,” Alfred’s relieved voice came from nowhere.

“Yeah, yeah, I feel like some kind of lunatic – hearing disembodied voices.” yet Ibrahim didn’t sound disturbed at all.

Daniel let out an enormous sigh of relief; they were all alive and in fine condition. The next question was: what is going to happen with them? Are they to be tortured? Perhaps killed by starvation or dehydration? And what do those tall vicious men needed them for?

“Daniel...please do something...” Mannuel’s faint cry made Daniel’s hair stand on end.

“What’s the matter?” he asked, trying to keep his voice steady.

“There’s a dead body lying right next to me...I think it’s been here for weeks...argh, if you could smell this...”

Daniel frowned. Dead body? What for? If it was dead it meant that it no longer contained

(“THE VITAE!”)

Daniel shook the unwanted, mental scream away.

“Uhm, can you hear me?” Fabio’s voice floated inside everybody’s cell.

“Yes,” replied the remaining four within seconds.

“There’s a...I know it sounds ridiculous but I can see a noose hanging a few inches above my head. And all the four walls are engraved with one and the same word: suicide. It is like the prison is trying to make me kill myself,”

“My cell has round holes all over the walls. They're wide enough to squeeze a hand in,” Alfred replied.

“Mine is spacious. Almost comfortable. Add some lights and a sabre and I'll feel safe,” whispered Ibrahim.

“Hmm, that's remarkable,” he added a few seconds later.

“What?” asked Daniel and Alfred. Fabio and Mannuel kept quiet.

“There is no door in here. I am shut in here by the set of rusty gratings. And behind it there is a beautiful plant in a flowerpot,” Ibrahim's voice softened a little bit.

“How about you, Daniel?” asked Alfred. Fabio kept quiet as did Mannuel.

Daniel looked around his prison, trying to distinguish any shape or color different than black.

He moved forward.

Soon enough, he faced an ajar door which led him to a hallway with a dead-end.

As Daniel moved further into the hallway, the wall at the end of the hall was suddenly lit up by two torches fastened side to side. As the light shone, a simple stone table came into appearance, bearing a chained man with a sack over his head. Daniel spotted a dreadful butcher's knife lying by the side of the table. Then, to his horror, he heard a loud, blood-curdling howl coming from the cell he just left.

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