

4.

“Wha...what option? What are you...?” Daniel gasped as he slowly rose from the dirty ground. Ibrahim threw him a very intense look and Daniel quickly caught up.

“Ah. I see what you mean. But I don’t really want to talk about it right no...” Daniel’s sentence was cut short as Ibrahim came closer out of the blue and hugged his old friend tight. A few minutes later they were sitting at a table with hot cups of fresh, steaming tea in their hands. Daniel hid the leather bag under his temporary bed beforehand so that the subject of its contents wouldn’t be agitated. Daniel sensed the impatient breath coming out of his comrade, but nevertheless asked Ibrahim to hold his questions. So he did, with not a single word of objection. He escorted the exhausted Daniel to his bedroom and assured him he would always show up should Daniel ever need anything, and that they will talk more the following day. Daniel agreed and thanked Ibrahim weakly, and the next moment he was striding along the pathways of sweaty unconsciousness, not experiencing a single dream as he passed through...

Daniel woke up slowly as he felt the first rays of sunlight touch his face. As he watched them coming through a neat window he tried to hold on to the moment, not wanting to let the feeling go. No monsters. No nightmares. No creepy sounds. No haunting memories. Daniel knew perfectly they would all soon return with full effect and wanted to keep them away for as long as possible.

“Good morning, Daniel. Any nightmares?” Ibrahim was standing in the doorway.

“No. This time they let me rest.”

“Let’s hope it’s not the last time. Listen, you told me yesterday you wanted to go on a rescue expedition. I will help you but I will be needing help as well. Anyway, first things first: Do you have any money?”

“Yes, I have quite a lot.”

“What currency?”

“Originally, thalers. But I had them exchanged right after I arrived here.”

“Good. Now you’ll need to buy some...”

Daniel cut in.

“Tools, yeah. I’m going to do that today. Everything’s arranged, I just need to have something to carry them in.”

“That won’t be a problem; I have an old trolley in the storeroom. Right, I have to leave for a while to run some errands. If you’re going out, there’s no need to lock the front door. Touraz is the best guardian.” Ibrahim smiled feebly: his sandpaper face wouldn’t allow more than that.

“Breakfast is on the pan. Help yourself.” Ibrahim turned and went to the door.

“Thanks for everything!” Daniel called after him. He didn’t hear a reply, just the faint thud of the closing door.

A few hours later a trolley full of archaeological tools stood locked in Ibrahim’s storeroom. Daniel went to his bedroom and relieved Agrippa of his leather bag.

“Uh...I’m glad to see you, Daniel. I think I would have been roasted alive if you hadn’t turned up. Well, as alive as I can be...”

“Sorry, Cornelius. I forgot about you...in these past few hours I was free of all effects. You know what I’m talking about.”

“Yes of course, my friend. I understand that the look of my head brings it all back down on your mind.”

“You’re such a forgiving person, Cornelius. You have my gratitude.”

“Oh...it’s nothing Daniel, really...”

“Agrippa. I’m going to reveal you tonight.” Daniel cut in. Agrippa looked thunderstruck.

“What are you going to do? Reveal my presence to this man?”

“Yes, that’s right. I trust him. Don’t worry.”

“I...I really can’t do anything to prevent this Daniel, I can only ask you but...do you trust this man won’t suffer a heart attack or something?”

Daniel laughed bitterly.

“Believe me Cornelius, Ibrahim has seen much worse things in his hard life. You must understand...” Daniel knelt beside the bed and looked the head straight in the eye. “I have to show anyone who trusts me and offers to help who they truly accompany.”

Agrippa sighed.

“All right Daniel, I’m leaving it to you.”

Daniel spent the next hour wandering through the house which reflected its owner wherever he looked. Small statues, precious stones and mysterious artifacts were exposed both on the ground and the first floor. Daniel was studying one of the large maps when he heard Ibrahim’s voice behind him:

“Still the same tastes, eh?”

Daniel turned around rapidly and held the rolled map in an automatic act of self defense. Ibrahim nodded sadly.

“That’s exactly what I thought. This isn’t going the right way, Daniel. It’s gonna be much worse.”

“Maybe you are right Ibrahim, but as long as I stay sane I will try to find out what happened with Herbert and the search team I was once part of.”

“Yes, and you escaped one horror to end up in another. Do you really want to go through with this again?”

“You wouldn’t understand. I have changed.”

“And you will keep changing, my friend.”

“I don’t care.”

“You need to *REST*, Daniel. Your mind is in shreds. You should at least try to mend the broken pieces.”

Daniel’s face went out of color.

“Mend the broken pieces...they are spread in the torture chambers...mend them, Daniel” He kept muttering to himself with a dead voice. Ibrahim felt a whiff of fear for his friend, and his sanity. He came up to the cadaverously pale Daniel and slapped him in the face. Daniel took a few steps back and shook his head.

“Oh...what the um...sorry I...feel kind of weak...perhaps I should...”

“Perhaps *I* should watch my tongue a bit more often. Sorry, Daniel. Now come with me. To the living room.” The abashed Ibrahim said, guiding Daniel towards one of the rooms and patting him on his shoulder. Daniel shook slightly as he had thought Ibrahim was going to say “*To the morgue.*” Ibrahim put Daniel carefully in one of many chairs formed in a circle when a loud barking echoed.

“Oh, so it’s starting...Wait here.” Ibrahim quickly went to welcome the visitor and returned within a couple of minutes.

“Daniel, you said we’d need a small team to rescue Herbert and the rest of the expedition. So, when you were out buying tools I swept through the homes of my colleagues and found a few volunteers. Here’s the first one. May I present to you Fabio?”

A man in his early twenties entered the living room looking around with enthusiasm and interest, courage and great nerve

radiating from him. Daniel stood up and they shook hands. Fabio's grip was firm.

"This is head of our dangerous expedition and his name is Daniel. He went through horrible things so you'd better not piss him off." Ibrahim said jokingly.

"I'm honoured, sir." Fabio said and nodded respectfully.

Knock knock knock.

"This is Mannuel. He's a son of my old friend here in Egypt and was highly recommended. It's good to have a father's word behind you, isn't it, Mannuel?" Ibrahim asked a reasonably looking man slightly younger than Daniel. Mannuel took his hat off and bowed briefly.

Knock knock knock.

"I think you know who this is..."

Daniel saw who just entered the room and rushed to hug him with a loud cry:

"Alfred! I knew you were still living here! Long time no see!"

Alfred, a tall man with kind expression on his face, hugged his oldest friend tightly and said with relief:

"Daniel...Good Lord...I thought you were dead. Where have you been?"

"That's a long story, Alfred. I will have to tell you some other time." Daniel let his friend go.

"I'm afraid not, Daniel." Ibrahim's voice filled the candle-lit room. "You see, we're going to have a little council meeting tonight and we'll need every piece of information you can provide. Don't worry; you won't have to tell the whole story, just the part that is connected with our venture."

Daniel looked resigned, dreading the forthcoming moment. Everyone was staring at him with anticipation. Daniel closed his eyes. Monsters. Nightmares. Creepy sounds. Haunting memories.

“Okay, let’s all sit down.” Daniel agreed and took his seat in a circle of people who would soon risk their lives for his case.

To be continued...

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