

11. Redemption

One Hour Until Dawn

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Kapitel 3: 2B Defend yourself

He follows the eyes dashing at him as if they're moving in slow motion. In a hurry, he sweeps through the earth around him for something he could use as a weapon. After all the hardship he doesn't want to go down without a fight anymore. Finally, his fingers touch a big rock which has to be one of those fallen ones from earlier. The size of the rock is too big for a single hand to grasp it, but he doesn't have time to use his second hand to help.

With all his might he lifts his new weapon in the air. The weight is tearing on his fingers and shoulder, but he refuses to let go. With a shove of his upper body the heavy mass clashes against something. Josh can feel the sudden impact vibrating down his arm right into his chest. The panic which has risen inside him brought his senses on the edge, making him flinch in surprise of the cry of the creature. He really has found his target in the darkness - with dumb luck that is. Nevertheless the hit has been hard. Unfortunately, he has let go of his only weapon which was now lost somewhere in the cave.

Hannah seemed as surprised by the hit as Josh was, yet she recovers much faster. He may be blind, but he can nevertheless feel her move towards him. The brief rebellion only has bought him some time.

His triumphant smirk gets frozen by the cry of a querulous Hannah right in front of him. He opens his mouth to say anything, although he knows that it probably would be in vain. He will never know.

Before he can form his first word he once again is caught in a familiar grip. While he is unable to get even a single noise out, his head is pressed with brute force, squeezing his skin. The last thing he notices is a sharp rip on his neck when his already darkened vision fades away completely.

A slow rhythm reaches his mind, but his ghost still floats weightless through an empty space. After all this pain he had to endure such an indolent state is like heaven to him if not for the disturbing drumming.

Don.

Don.

Don.

Why can't it be quiet for him to appreciate the peace? Silence. All he wants is finally some silence.

Don.

Drop.

Drop.

The noise grows louder until his mind realizes what it is. It's water. The rhythm of falling drops gets disrupted by his stretched groaning when he begins to move. He doesn't know how long he has lain face first in the dirt, but he doubts it could have been for long, since his clothes still are slippery wet. His limbs feel numb which is better than being in misery, he remarks to himself. If he would have lain here for much longer without being conscious he could have died, though. He isn't sure if the latter wouldn't have been the better alternative.

Without thinking about any consequences he slowly moves his fingers and neck. He covers carefully his face with his dirty hand and immediately spits out in agony. His mouth is covered with a gooey fluid and his nose and forehead are burning under his touch. The wound above his left eye must have started bleeding again when his head got smacked on the ground. He blows his aching nose in order to breathe more freely, but he is too weak to get it free. Now he is sure that being dead would be the better option.

"So, you gave up at last." Josh is irritated by the dark voice he knows all too well. He had to listen to it for weeks after all, but he has expected he'd never hear him again.

"I thought you wanted to leave. Why are you still here?" His mouth is dry. He has to collect saliva to get the words out clearly and yet he still sounds drunk.

"It is me who asks the questions, Joshua. You should know that. On the other hand, what do you know anyway?" Someone is walking around him in heavy shoes as if he has all the time in the world. Josh doesn't care that he is being mocked by Dr. Hill. All he wants is to lay here and move as little as possible avoiding the pain. There is always pain. He is so sick of it.

"The only one to blame is you. Every choice you made, every path you took has led to this moment. You're in pain because you deserve it." After every word penetrating the air Josh buries himself further into his palm.

"Stop messing with my head!" he has to press out every word through his constricted lips. "You are NOT real!"

A chuckle taunts him from the shadows causing Josh to flinch. *"Of course I'm not. I*

thought we already had established that in one of our previous sessions. Pay more attention, boy."

"I did pay attention. You wanted to leave. Just go and leave me alone like everyone else." A deep sigh escapes him.

"You are alone because you totally screwed up. We already did establish that as well. The question is what will you do about it?"

All he wants to do is to ignore the voice of his doctor, but Hill silently demands a reaction; so Josh gives in.

"The game is over. I lost. There is nothing I can do." He doesn't have the courage to talk the truth out loud so he whispers the words.

"Precisely. You lost." Dr. Hill has been moving around him the whole time, but when he spat out his last word, he immediately stops. *"However, you may have lost one game, but you still are a piece of this game board."* Josh has spent hours with the man talking behind closed doors and learned that almost everything which comes out of his mouth is a lecture or an advice of its own. The doctor has the gift of planting an idea inside the head of his patients so that they think they had figured out everything on their own when in fact they only were led to what the doctor wanted them to believe. The game was his idea. He has told Josh to reconnect with his friends. All Josh did, was deepen the idea of healing himself by healing everyone else in the process.

It is happening all over again. Dr. Hill wants to plant something inside his head. Should he accept it?

"This is not a game board. This is not a game."

Dr. Hill stomps down in disgust. *"Life is the biggest game, is it not? Every insect, every plant is a piece gambling on the biggest game board called life. You played and you put yourself on the sideline with your actions. Will you bring your piece back on the board, or will you accept your defeat, cursing the rules like a spoiled kid?"*

Those words spoken by an illusion shouldn't affect him, he knows that. And yet, despite being cramped and rolled up on the ground, he doesn't want to prove them right. He straightens his body, ignoring the stinging in his limbs until he lies on his back with his hand still covering his face.

"Could a child do what I have done? I planned everything and-"

"And yet you're crawling in front of me like a baby. The time we discussed your past is over, what happened doesn't matter anymore. What matters is your future. What will your future be, Joshua? Will this cave be your future?"

Josh doesn't answer, but he does think about what was said.

"Do you want to live?" It is always Dr. Hill who asks the important questions.

"Yes," he hears himself whispering. Is he speaking the truth? Does he want to live? Dr. Hill doesn't seem to care whether it was a lie or not.

"That's what I wanted to hear." Josh can feel something grab his hand in a firm grip forcing it away from his face. He doesn't even have time to react to the sensation of getting pulled up. A little nauseous but steady he is back on his feet again. In disbelief about what just happened he observes the hand with which he recently got forced upright, but he can't make anything out in the darkness. Nevertheless, he gropes his way through the air around him, but there he can't find anything as well. He is alone.

"I can do this. I can do this", he assures himself, although he still doesn't know just what exactly he can do. Despite having a throbbing head and still being unable to get enough air through his nose, he stumbles a few steps until he meets something to hold on to being moist under his touch. He follows what he believes to be some wooden planks in hope to find the exit.

He absently licks his lips, tasting copper and dirt again. This time, however, he doesn't swallow but instead spits it out. He smudges the strain of blood drying under his nose with his sleeves when he finally discovers a faint light in the distance.

"Will this cave be your future?" The words of Dr. Hill resound in his ear. After a few seconds he lets go of the plank and walks out into a much wider area. It's still dark in here as well, but somewhere above him have to be a few small holes through which moonlight finds its way in. At least now he can see what he is walking on.

He passes stalagmites and stalactites while he searches for any clue about how he might get out of here. After what couldn't even have been ten minutes he already is out of breath causing him to pant when he notices some grooves in the dirt which have to be made by men. He attempts to bend down to examine it, but after almost falling over, he decides it is for the best to stand upright for now. Those grooves have to be some kind of rails, remnants from the old miners.

His head twitches when he hears something crack and presumably splashing on water, but he can't make out from which direction the sound comes from. Down here in those damn mines noises seem to come from everywhere.

"It's fine. You're fine," he's talking out loud to distract himself from whatever he just heard. At least his illusions seem to have decided to restrain themselves. He starts humming while he follows the rails on the ground.

Once in a while he stumbles, but he is able to catch himself by grasping the wall every time. *Mike and Sam had come here so there has to be a way out.* That thought keeps him walking. He never has had the desire of walking down into the mines. Beth had suggested that they all could do a test of courage by going down here, but their mother had made them swear to never attempt to climb down the shafts. The mines weren't a good place for a test of courage anyway, Josh had said to his sister. He had smirked at her and told her they rather should go into the sanatorium.

Everything had been planned. Hannah wanted to pretend to get abducted while Beth would get the others on edge with her talking. Josh had prepared some recordings of screaming people and strange noises he wanted to play while walking through the building. They wanted to pull it off last year, but then the snow storm had started condemning them all to stay inside the lodge.

He stops in his move and inhales deeply through his mouth. He has to focus on his situation.

By now he doesn't dare to take his hand from the cold wall out of fear of collapsing. He shakes all over and he doesn't even know if it's because of the cold or if it's because of exhaustion, but he keeps going.

The shaft gets smaller and he already fears that he has made the wrong decision and that he will meet a dead end when his eyes finally see a warm, yellow light. He quickens his steps, eager to reach it sooner rather than later. The amber light of the torch stings in his eyes which already have accustomed to the darkness around him. He gets as close to the torch as he can, taking as much of the heat as he can. He shuts his eyes and savors every second of being near something warm. After heating up his fingers, he fumbles at the torch in order to get it out of its holder. A dry laugh escapes his lips when he finally gets it free. Now he would at least be able to see.

With the torch in hand, he continues his walk, humming louder than before. He doesn't think about who might have lit the torch or has put it on the wall in the first place. All he cares is that he has a source of light. Unfortunately, this small victory doesn't last long since he gets tired again all too soon. The weight of the torch seems to increase in time to a point at which Josh nearly loses his grip. He needs to rest.

The shaft has ended some time ago and he now stands in a larger area. He spots a big stalagmite against which he leans his body, but it's not enough. His head hanging down, he slips along the raw surface until he kneels on the ground, catching his breath.

It's then when something catches his eye. In the light of his torch something flickers silver on the ground right beside him. He blinks and loses sight of it, making him believe he was just imagining things all over again, when the unnatural flicker happens a second time. He carefully digs in the earth just to tense in shock the moment he touches the object. His fingers still brush the wet sand from the small thing. But Josh immediately recognizes what he is holding.

"Beth," he groans silently. With his thumb he carefully strokes the little beads on the ribbon and caresses the thin metal plate beside it. His gaze wanders to the almost identical bracelet on his own wrist. Some of the blue pearls on Beth's bracelet are cracked, but other than that it's still whole. Holding it after such a long time almost feels like holding his sister once again. He clasps the ribbon into a fist and leans his head back on the stone looking up into the black cave.

1. "Take the bracelet with you."

2. "Dig a grave for it and leave it behind."