

He couldn't tell how long it had been since sunlight had last touched his eyes. In fact, he wasn't even sure he could tolerate the daylight if he were to see it. How long had he been down here?

Come to think of it, he'd even forgotten where 'here' was. As if to remind himself, he braced his back against the dusty wall he spent his time sitting against, and stood up. His knees shook at first, reminding him that he hadn't gotten to his feet for quite some time. He took a step – wobbly, to be sure – then in the midst of putting his right foot out for another, his toes stubbed against the other wall.

Reaching out with his right hand, he felt a wall scant inches away. Turning with that wall at his back, he took two steps, then sensed the wall right before his face. Sighing, he closed his eyes – as if it mattered in the total darkness of this confine – and the memory came back. He had, of course, measured his prison before, probably many times. But sometimes after his frequent fitful rests, he became disoriented, and had to remind himself.

He sank to his knees, feeling the decrepit wood moaning under his weight. The planks were rotting, and in places, he could feel a dirt floor through their cracks and holes. A lone tear slid through the dust caked on his cheek and dropped through the tangled mess of the hair hanging past his face to splatter soundlessly onto the wooden floor.

The past several 'weeks' – if one could measure time by the restless sleep in the dark – had begun to erode at his memory of how long he'd been trapped here. For a while, he'd at least tried to keep track of the days, or as near as he could figure them, devoting his mind so much to the task that he'd willingly surrendered his knowledge of identity, age, friends, family, even the reason he'd ended up in this utterly dark place. However, now that he'd lost track of even that little thread of memory, he would have traded anything to remember his own name.

Not for the first time, a fit of anger coursed through him. What could he possibly have done to deserve such a sentence? He was a gentle man, or so he

felt at heart. Surely he hadn't caused harm to another living being, human or otherwise. He couldn't imagine having done any act heinous enough to deserve this endless misery.

Perhaps he was the victim of some cruel person, who thought it good sport to abandon a fellow human in this cell and see how long it might take for him to lose his sanity. And indeed, he had already felt his mind begin to fray.

The walls were completely smooth, and he knew he had not the strength to dig through the earth and attempt escape. Even after the memory of how he arrived here had faded, he realized the only way out was up, but the maddeningly smooth walls prevented him from climbing – as did his weakened muscles – and the ceiling of this space was apparently far above his reach.

A thought occurred to him, and although it seemed to him to be fresh and new, it had in point of fact come to his mind thousands of times already. By his own reckoning, at minimum months had passed since his imprisonment, and likely years. Not once had he ever found a morsel of food, nor a drop of water save his own tears. The only thing that seemed to abound was dust, which seemed at random intervals to drift down from above. Yet with no food or drink, he never felt hunger or thirst, and his existence still seemed to carry on despite the lack of essential nourishment.

His mind puzzled over this fact, as he once again settled into a sitting position against one of the walls. Having nothing else to do, he allowed his mind to simply run in circles with this conundrum, until it wore itself out, and his eyes drooped again into slumber.

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"Still no sign of decomposition?"

"None whatsoever, sir. Frankly, we're baffled."

"You're not the only ones. And until you get un-baffled, we leave it as-is."

"Sir, there's more to it than just perfect preservation, and you know it. You yourself have noted how every so often it changes position."

"Check that attitude, Mister. And remember, we never get anything on the motion sensors. Unless we do, speculation of that manner is off-limits."

"Yes, sir. Understood, sir."

*...footsteps...*

*...time...*

*...scrape of metal against metal...*

*...footsteps...*

"What the-?"

"Sir, something's happened to the floor above it!"

"*What's* happened?"

"Unknown, sir. But it almost looks as if someone – or *something* – has carved something in a foreign language directly above it."

"Impossible!"

"Agreed, sir. Still, you can see it as well as . . . sir? Sir, what is it?"

"This language, it's not foreign, it's just . . . ancient. Used to be spoken and written on this planet *ages* ago. I think they called it . . ."

". . . Sir?"

". . . *English.*"

"I've never heard of it, sir."

"I have . . . oh my God . . ."

"What does it say, sir?"

" 'Morgan Darcey – Dying as he lived, until he truly dies, may he always see, while in living death he lies'."

". . . What was that, sir? I thought I heard something?"

"Not heard . . . *felt.*"

*...rest...*