

My eyes opened. At first I wasn't sure of this in the darkness, but after a moment, I saw a dim glow coming from my left side. I started to sit up, but my head struck something. I tried to move, and found that I was confined in a small space. It felt like smooth, cool metal surrounding me. Brief panic coursed through me, and I threw my hands out. They didn't even get to arm's length before hitting more of the metal. It was surrounding me!

I pushed hard against it, kicked it...I screamed...I turned over and braced my hands and knees, then pushed against the metal until my back spasmed in pain, and I collapsed, sobbing and gritting my teeth.

"Well, now that you've gotten that out of your system, I hope you'll be a bit more rational about this. There is no way out...at least, not that I've found."

I finally figured out that the voice had come from the same direction as the dim glow, and realized that whatever I was in, it wasn't completely metal. This side was some sort of transparent material, and the dim glow was coming from another chamber like the one I was in. And in that chamber was another man.

The glow barely illuminated him, but after seeing him, I was grateful. It appeared that he had lesions covering his skin, and the hand that he had placed on the transparent side of the chamber was barely recognizable as a hand. I turned away. He gave off a chuckle that sounded like a cough.

"Not surprised. I'm sure I'm not a pretty sight. You won't be either, once they get to you."

I turned back over, breathing hard. "What did they do? Hit you with radiation?"

"I should be so lucky. I might already be dead. No, it's far worse than radiation."

I wiped my face and tried not to cry. "What was it, then?"

He sighed, deeply. "Sometimes it's a mildly corrosive liquid that burns the skin. Sometimes they cut off the air until you choke. Sometimes, it's just plain heat."

I looked again. "How long have you been in there?"

He shook his head. "I've forgotten. I've forgotten everything...everything. Listen to me...soon, they will speak to you. It is important that you-" Suddenly, his eyes widened. I noticed that the glow had taken on a different hue. He started coughing. He turned to me and tried to finish speaking, but couldn't get enough breath in his lungs. With each cough, droplets of blood flecked the window between our chambers. A minute later, all life had gone from his eyes, and I was alone.

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I awoke from a fitful doze, and heard speaking. The voice was cold, emotionless. It was saying, "...that you cannot escape. You must also have realized that this will not be pleasant. What you have seen, you will soon know first-hand. If you will open your mouth, you will be given your only taste of water. You will receive no further nourishment. We do not waste resources on the condemned."

I opened my mouth. I heard a slight whirring, and realized they were opening a valve to give me the water. Suddenly, it hit me! The other man, he had started to tell me something before he died. It must have been a warning against the water. I quickly closed my mouth and turned my head aside. I felt a small stream of water hit the side of my head. The whirring came again, the valve was closed.

The voice came again. "You have failed, just as they all fail. Your execution begins."

"Wait...wait!" I beat on the metal. "Failed what? What do you mean?"

There were a few moments of silence. "One way or another, you are here to die. The water was laced with a quick and painless poison. If you had accepted it, you would not have suffered. However, you turned from it, and now your execution will be carried out as you saw. There are no second chances, and you will not hear from us again."

For a brief moment, I lay still, stunned at the idea that I had just sentenced myself to a slow and painful death. Then I scrambled to turn over, hoping I could lick up some of the spilled water, but then I saw the dim glow coming from panels above me, and instantly the water steamed and evaporated in the sudden, blistering heat that beat down upon me. I screamed and tried not to touch any of the metal, but it was no use.

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I don't know how long I was there. Every so often, they would torture me, and the pain and exertion of each session would drain me of energy, and I would slip into unconsciousness until the next time. As well as heat, acids, and suffocation, I was also periodically pierced by small, sharp needle-like probes all over my body. Each time I thought I would grow immune to the pain, the next session would feel even more intense.

One of the worst parts was that I could still see the corpse of the other man. The one who had died just after I woke in this chamber. His lifeless eyes were dried open, and stared at me. I tried not to look at him, but it was almost a compulsion.

One time, I awoke not because of pain, but because of a sound. The sound of thumping and screaming to my right. I slowly turned my head as it subsided, and I heard panting. Dimly from the glow of my own chamber, I could see another chamber there, with another man, who had apparently just made his first, futile escape attempt. I licked what was left of my lips, and spoke. "It's no use. There is no way out."

He turned and peered at me. The look on his face was probably much the same as the look on mine when I saw the first man. "Who are you?" he asked.

"That's not important." I knew I didn't have much time. I had to tell him about the water. "Listen to me carefully, please! When they offer you-" I heard a slight hiss, and suddenly found no breath. I struggled vainly, trying to cough out the words to help him, but they would not come. My vision went red, then slowly black. The last thing I heard was the new man screaming as I died.