

Prologue

The smell was camphor. It stirred memories of antique furniture and old books. Flat on his back, arms walled against his body, he felt every breath return to his face like a warm echo. No sound but his heartbeat. Amidst the throbbing pain growing inside his head, he forced his sticky eyelids open only to find a deeper shade of darkness.

Must've been some night.

Recollections fell into place. His breathing quickened to match the rising sense of dread as he sucked in the stifling air. Hands and feet crept to explore the dimensions of his camphor-scented prison. Recognition came salted with fear.

Calm down. Stay with it, don't panic.

He pushed at the lid. It wouldn't give. Still harder, heels drumming on the base. His efforts produced a grey line on the opening side. The box was not airtight.

How long had he been here—how long could he last?

He pulled his knees to his chest, braced both hands and feet on the lid and pushed with all his strength. He grunted, feeling the veins in his neck bulge under the strain. Lights flared behind his eyes. His hair, stuck to the base of the box, tore away. Engulfed in pain, close to blacking-out, he stopped to rest. When his panting eased, he probed the warm stickiness of his wounded scalp. Wet fingers wiped across his sweaty face and brought the taste of blood.

That's when panic crushed him. Chest heaving, he pounded the lid with flailing fists and feet. Hot liquid flooded his thighs, soaked his clothes and drowned the scent of camphor.

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