

BROTHER

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EXCRUCIATING, NIGHTMARISH pain; that was all John knew. For some indefinite time, John had been with the Enemy. They'd taken him, imprisoned him, and then tortured him in exquisitely brutal ways, to the point that John could barely remember what he was being tortured for. Their creativity in their punishments was matched only by the agony which those punishments had made his life.

Some days they chose blunt instruments; indeed, sometimes literally, pounding at him with baseball bats, walking sticks, old-fashioned police nightsticks, billy-clubs; perhaps just hands and feet, faces covered with clownish grins, delighting in their dark and horrid work. Some days it was precise, surgical; they might very delicately remove a three-inch square piece of skin from his torso, show him the cracks in the ribs they'd broken the day before, and then give him his meal for the day: the same skin they'd just removed.

The necessities of life were completely unknown to him. At first, he'd been living in his own filth, but he'd long since ceased to have any filth in him. Other than the occasional cruel mock-meal the Enemy granted him, he'd not eaten in he knew not how long, to the point that even the living cockroach they stuffed in his mouth he'd chewed and swallowed with gusto, like a piece of the finest steak. Of course, when the Enemy saw that, they'd punched his stomach repeatedly with commands to throw it up, then forced him to vomit with the handle of a convenient vice-grip they'd been recently using to pull off a toenail or two. And so his stomach was deprived of even such miserable fare.

It could be so easy, he sometimes thought to himself. Many others taken by the Enemy had done it; most of them, in fact. They were back home, living their lives, with full stomachs and rested heads. Uttering just one sentence would do it. Sometimes, in the throes of agony, he'd feel that sentence coming up his throat, like the vomited cockroach; it took everything in him to choke it back down, to deny the Enemy the only thing he really wanted. The Enemy wasn't interested in John's pain; he wanted John's submission. And that alone, John would not give.

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There had been a better time. John was young, really still a child; but when he'd been a younger child, he'd known his father, and his older brother. He'd not always been a *good* child—indeed, more than once his father nearly regretted that he'd sired this child at all. But ultimately, his father loved him, and had taught him what he needed to know.

Once, John had been hungry; how far-away that time now seemed, when hunger was something he could address by merely asking! His father had been sitting at the table with John's older brother beside him. In front of them was a piece of bread; a fine, white loaf; and it looked delicious. Little John's mouth watered at the sight of it—that mouth now so dry it couldn't water at the choicest of meals—and he'd reached out to grab some. But his father had stopped his hand.

"John," said his brother. "Why do you want this?"

John was confused. "Because I'm hungry," he'd answered, and his father had smiled while his brother continued to speak.

"Are you sure you're hungry for this?" he'd asked. "There's a lot of other food around."

No less confused, little John had answered, "It looks good." John's brother had smiled.

"Indeed," he replied. John's brother was much older than he was, and had helped bring him up since he'd been born; John looked to him the same as he did to his father, and took his word just as much for wisdom and understanding. "It does look good; and it *is* good. But why do we eat?"

"Because we're hungry," John had answered, and his brother nodded.

"To sate our appetites," he agreed. "But will this bread sate the appetite that's troubling you now? Are you hungry in a way this will fill?"

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John again felt that cockroach coming up his throat, and it took everything in him to swallow it back down again as the pokers were removed from his feet. More and more, those magic words that would end all the pain and misery started to retch up from his stomach and into his throat, and it was growing harder and harder to keep them in and force them down. The Enemy, or at least the minion who was currently tasked with the Enemy's will, smiled a bit; he'd noticed what John had been struggling with, and was ready to do his work.

"It would be really easy, wouldn't it?" he said to John. His grin was sickly, hideous, like the bared teeth of a wolf on the hunt, or of a lion in search of its prey. "You know what you have to say, don't you? Why not say it?"

John didn't have the energy to answer, and lay mute; the Enemy's sickly grin just widened.

"You know the rest of you have, don't you? The rest of you that we took that day? Every one. Even the one you called father."

John ignored this. It wasn't his blood-father, of course,

but one who had stood like a father to them. He didn't think the man would have broken; but even if he had, it didn't make John's task any different.

"I know you're hungry," the Enemy went on. "I know you're hungry, and tired; and I know that you're hurting. It can all stop. This"—he put the red-hot poker to the top of the arch of his right foot, as the bottom had been seared beyond pain; John pulled in a breath, a process which, given his broken ribs, itself was agonizing beyond words, and bit his lip hard, drawing blood with his teeth, lest he let out a scream—"can end, right away, in the blink of an eye." And he moved the poker off John's skin, snapped his fingers, and smiled.

"Just like that, it's over. And we'll get you cleaned up, get some meds for your pain, bind your wounds, and give you all the food and drink you'll ever want." Again he snapped his fingers. "Just like that. You don't even have to mean it. Just say it. And all this ends."

It was true; John knew it was true. The world was full of people who had done it; people he knew well had done it. People who bore the marks of the wounds that had broken them. Some of them seemed to regret it. But some of them—most of them, even—seemed happy. And *all* of them, without exception, were healthy, and had full stomachs, and fine pillows to rest their heads on.

The Enemy leaned in close to his face, his grotesque grin like a perverted clown. "You're hungry, aren't you?" he asked. "Don't you miss the taste of food? The feel of a full belly? The cool of the water on your throat?"

Oh, he missed them; he missed them dearly. They'd certainly sate his appetite, as they'd sated it many times in the past. He wanted to do what the Enemy said, more than he'd wanted anything else before. But would it sate the appetite above all the others? Were those appetites worth the price he'd pay?

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When the Enemy had come to take his brother, he'd struggled. He'd struggled against the Enemy, and against his brother, and against himself. His brother had been a rock, an immovable bulwark against every evil; and indeed, the Enemy had never broken him, couldn't even claim to have broken him. But they *had* taken him, and they *had* killed him. To have him gone was incomprehensible. For a long time he lost any concern for what his father and his brother had taught him, and brought him up to be; for a time, he hated his brother for leaving him alone in the face of the Enemy, and in the face of the whole uncaring world.

But over time, he'd remembered. He'd remembered more and more of the things his brother had taught him, about the lessons he'd passed down from his father, and how they wanted him to live his life in the face of a world that hated everything he was, in the face of the Enemy whose only goal was to destroy what his brother had built. He taught others about what he'd learned and remembered; he'd struggled to live more and more his brother's way of life, and he'd become more and more like his brother as he'd done so.

It came as no surprise to John, then, when the Enemy came for him. He just hoped he'd be able to hold up the way his brother had.

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Young John had struggled internally to answer the question his brother had asked him. He didn't really understand the question; when he was hungry, he ate. Wasn't that the whole point?

"My stomach's empty," he said simply, and his brother smiled.

"Indeed," he replied. "But if all you need is to fill your stomach, there's plenty of food over there." He gestured to the side of the kitchen, where indeed there was an abundance of other breads, cheeses, fruits, and other food. "That will fill your stomach. This bread, though; this bread is different. This bread is special, for an appetite of a different kind."

His brother then ate a piece of the bread, as John watched him, and then took a cup and drank from it. He then held out a piece of bread to him with one hand, and the cup with the other, toward young John, an ineffably loving smile on his face.

"So John," he said, "my brother. Can ye drink the cup that I have drunk?"

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John's teeth sunk into his lip again, deep, and he could taste his own blood flowing from it. His eyes watered with the pain; but he did not scream. That crawling, disgusting cockroach would *not* come out of his mouth; his brother wouldn't let it. Had he not promised it so?

This day had been the worst so far, an endless parade of increasingly creative agonies without ceasing. They were certain not to permanently wreck any of his parts; they wanted him to have that hope, that if he gave them what they wanted he'd be healthy, and happy. Destroying him would take that hope away, and there'd be no need for him to surrender to them.

But had he not already surrendered to another? Did not another already hold his heart?

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John had taken the cup from his brother and drunk deeply, savoring the rich, salty flavor of the dark red wine. He could feel the good, heady strength of the elixir flow through him, and his older brother smiled at him as he handed the cup back to him.

"I'm glad you've drunk," he said. "Remember this wine, and this bread that you've eaten, when one day your stomach is empty and your throat is dry."

* * *

John remembered. Indeed, through the pain he could remember little else. But he remembered how his older brother had given him food and drink, and that gave him more strength than the food that the Enemy so delighted in denying him. And that very fact filled his Enemy with rage.

"Oh, John," said the minion currently tasked with brutalizing him. "John, John, little John. None of this can be worth

it. Can it?”

John made no reply; not from defiance, though he was defiant, but because he presently lacked the ability to speak.

“Do you know what we did to your brother? Much worse than what we’re doing to you. When we were finished with him, he begged for mercy, begged us to kill him, prayed out loud that he’d never been born. Did you know that?”

They were lying to him; he knew it, and they knew he knew it. So he didn’t have to respond, and the Enemy gave a short laugh.

“So what if we kill you, John?” he asked. “Should we kill you? Just end your life?” He leaned in very close to John’s face.

“We’ll never kill you,” he whispered. “You’d like that, wouldn’t you? If we killed you?” John would; he longed for death, more than for anything. But the Enemy just twisted the screws under his thumbnails and laughed. “Never. We can keep this going *forever*, John. And we will. You won’t die until *we* say you die. *We* have the power; *we* control your life and your death.”

John heart sank hard, and the Enemy could see it in his eyes. So again he leaned in close.

“Do you want to die? Are you ready for it all to end, John? We *can* make that happen. Just say the word; just ask us to let you die. We will. You just have to ask.”

This was something new, something John hadn’t considered before. Ask them to die; ask them to send him on his way. Don’t ask them for life, for relief; ask them for death, the sweet release that only death can provide. He was far beyond longing for life; he almost wasn’t tempted by it at all. But death? The instant end of all his pain, without the need to live with the shame of surrender?

But who controlled him? Did the Enemy control him? Did he want to owe the Enemy for anything he had? Had he already forgotten the wine and the bread that filled his empty

stomach and wet his arid throat?

The Enemy leaned in close to him, knowing he had to lean in if he were to hear John’s strained and breathless voice. And through all the pain, the unspeakable agony, John gave the Enemy his answer.

* * *

When they had taken John’s brother, they’d come like thieves in the night, and taken him away under cover of darkness whom they might have taken any time in the day. But his brother had been serene that whole day, as if he’d known what was coming; and he’d told young John some things he hadn’t understood at the time, but which he’d come to understand all of a sudden, now, when the Enemy was so close to breaking him, closer than he’d been through all the torture and pain.

“Remember,” said his brother; “remember always *what you are*. You are a *man*, and control your own soul; I have given you food and drink to give you strength to keep your own. *Use it*; drink the cup that I have drunk, and none can take from you what I have given.”

John hadn’t understood that then; but he understood it now. The Enemy had taken everything in the world from him, even his body itself; but he still had his brother. No one could ever take his brother.

* * *

“Death is nothing,” he gasped through the pain, at the Enemy’s smirking face. “Life is nothing. Do what you will; I can drink from the cup my brother gave me.”

The smirk disappeared, replaced by a palpable rage, and the Enemy unleashed all his fury. John felt every blow, exquisitely; but he knew they were all for the best. He didn’t die that day; he didn’t die for a long time. But he knew that no matter how long he lived or how terrible his death, no matter how long he was held or how limited his range, he was always and forever his own. He was always and forever free.

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