

Little Brother

Emily Hutton (2017)

Hungry and cold. That's all he felt these days. There was never any food, or water, and the lack of warmth made it unbearable. The flimsy clothes he was handed upon arrival were threadbare, and he hadn't been able to feel his fingers for days.

Winter had once been his favourite season; the snow had captivated him with its beauty. But now, it was as though winter was mocking him, with its harsh winds and biting chill. Every day exhausted him; every day, it became harder to move.

The guards had noticed; he was sure of it. The amount of work he completed had diminished and the overall result had become sloppy. He'd seen the guard's dissatisfaction, and had paid the price of displeasing them. But he couldn't help it; it was too difficult. It was too much. Every day, he saw the other workers dropping like flies from fatigue and it was all he could do to not be one of them. He was determined not to become another corpse added to one of the piles.

The guards were a constant presence, mocking and taunting them as they worked, yelling derogatory comments as they stood back and watched. It was stifling, being observed and having no privacy. He couldn't help but think of his life before the guards had come, before the propaganda had turned their countrymen against them, before the invasion that led to their capture and he was ripped away from his father and sister.

It had been a simpler time. He had lived with his family in a poor area of the city, but they had made do without the nurturing care of a mother. They always had food on the table and their community supported each other. When he was younger, he would play soldiers in the streets with Franz, a neighbour who was two years older, but much smaller in stature than him. Now though, he wished they had played knights and dragons like the other boys at school. The memories would be less painful.

'Get into line, blöde hund,' a soldier said, jabbing a gun into his back.

He stumbled into the man in front of him, but didn't dare look at the soldier. He wasn't suicidal.

'Is this all of them lieutenant? Then let's begin. Batch 198435, stand up.'

He straightened his back as much as it would allow him. If he showed them how exhausted he felt, he knew he wouldn't survive. He just had to pretend he could still work, even though he couldn't imagine remaining upright for another hour.

‘What about this one, sir?’

One of the soldiers stopped in front of him. Ignoring the voice in his head screaming at him to keep his eyes lowered and to show respect, he looked up. His eyes fixed on the contemptuous gaze of the officious-looking guard who had asked the question. Strangely, the longer he stared, the more he could sense a gradual weakening of the initial scorn that the guard had directed towards him.

Another soldier stopped beside the first and looked him up and down. ‘Perhaps. We’ll take him and see what the doctor thinks.’

‘Move it, runt,’ the guard ordered, the army-issued gun poking his stomach, urging him forward.

The heavy chains linking the workers together were removed and replaced with lighter ones that were better suited to an individual. It also meant there was no room to breathe. They walked for ten minutes, past the workers and towards the area where, weeks ago, he had been separated from his family. Another painful memory.

‘Commander, here’s another one for the doctor.’

The commander didn’t look up ‘You know the procedure, private.’

‘Yes sir.’ The private dragged the chains, forcing him to walk behind the soldier. ‘Sit,’ the private said as they stopped beside a small table outside the doctor’s barracks.

‘Number’

‘75392’

‘Birth place’

‘Leipzig’

‘Year—’

‘Private! What are you doing?’ another officer yelled from the door.

‘Basic information of a possible test subject, sir.’

‘Haven’t you heard? Another load is coming in today. The doctor is done with this lot.’

‘No sir, I hadn’t heard.’

‘Fool. Report to your senior officer. Everyone’s needed. This batch is the largest yet. Get that scum to the chamber and be quick about it.’

As soon as the officer left, he was yanked to his feet and shoved in the direction of the work camp. He closed his eyes and imagined the exhaustion ahead. He wondered how long he’d be able to hold on before he was shot. But, they continued past the entrance of the camp, towards an area that he had never seen before.

‘Where are we going?’ he stuttered.

‘Shut up and move.’

Confused, he shuffled along the road and kept his head bowed when other guards stopped to talk with his escort.

‘Here, climb in. Don’t be seen and don’t make a sound.’

They were out of sight of the other guards, hidden between the fence and an abandoned building. The guard was pointing at a hole half dug into the dirt and half into the wall. It looked big enough for a small child. Though he was still young, he wondered if he would fit.

‘Hurry up.’ The guard was fidgeting and looking towards the entrance.

He took a breath and slid into the hole backwards. Once he was in, the guard slid a slab of stone in front of him and he was left in darkness. For hours, he sat, confused and alone. Was this a new form of torture? Was he being tested? Why was the guard making him feel even more terrified than what he already was?

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It was dark when the guard returned.

‘Out.’

He struggled to move, able to shift an inch before the guard was forced to help him out. Shivering, he asked, ‘Why? What’s happening?’

‘You don’t remember me. Do you, brüderchen?’ the man asked in a soft voice.

He straightened. Only one person had ever called him ‘little brother’, and he had hoped he would never have to see him again. The last time he had seen his pseudo-brother was three years ago, when he had grimly set off for the army.

‘Franz?’

‘We have to leave before anyone notices I’m missing.’ Franz pulled him up and started walking in one motion.

‘But, I don’t understand. You were recruited and—’

‘Brüderchen, you don’t have to understand. You just have to listen. You’re not safe here, and if we don’t go right now, you’ll never leave this place. I can’t lose you, not again, not forever. You’re the only person in my life now who isn’t fanatical about purity.’ With a look of pain in his eyes, Franz turned away and started moving towards the entrance.

‘But, there’s no way out. I’ve seen people try and they were killed.’

‘They didn’t have me. You’re going to make it, brüderchen, I promise.’

He didn't have any choice, but to believe Franz. After all, it was escape or death, and he knew which he'd prefer.

They slid along the edges of buildings, hiding in the shadows and trying to limit the noise they made. When they reached what looked like a gap between the fences, there were guards surrounding the area.

'Here's where it gets difficult, brüderchen. Those guards over there can't know we're here. If they do, an alarm will be sounded and we'll be killed. I can't leave the camp and, if I'm gone, they'll notice and we'll get caught. There's a village two days walk from here. If you can reach it, you'll be safe. Good luck, brüderchen.'

Franz pushed him towards the gap. He turned, opening his mouth to say a final goodbye. Suddenly, a spotlight hit the fence, enveloping them in a blinding light.

He could hear shouting in the distance as he turned to run. Franz yelled in surprise and cursed at his childhood companion, playing the part of angry soldier.

A shot rang out and he crumpled to the ground.

Breathlessly, he gasped, "Run..."