

TORMENT

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 BREAKNECK MEDIA

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“It is easy to go down into Hell; night and day, the gates of dark Death stand wide; but to climb back again, to retrace one's steps to the upper air - there's the rub, the task.”

-- Virgil, *Aeneid*

TERRA



1

SIBERIA

Ice cold air seeped through the slate gray stones of the cell wall, infusing the darkness with a biting chill. But it wasn't the frostbite taking root in Matt Brenton's toes that held his attention. Nor the frost coated layer of bile clinging to his ten day old beard. He'd grown accustomed to the company of pain and filth. With each rise and set of the sun—seen only as a reflection of light through the cell door—Brenton's mind slipped further from reality and into a kind of hellish dream world. Pain numbed his mind. Time escaped him. But his captors had taken notice and were making an effort to regain his full attention.

Brenton stared at the hand on the table. Skinny, frail and bloody, it didn't look like his, but the pain pulsing up his arm and radiating through his body confirmed it with each whack of the blade. Brenton twitched as the dull fishing knife neared the third finger of his left hand. He wasn't sure if the rusty odor filling his nostrils came from the blade or his blood, but it centered him enough to speak.

“Wait,” he said, his voice like a pitiful stranger's. “Please, don't.”

The masked face of his torturer, a man without name who reeked of

garlic...or body odor, lowered into view. “Tell me what I want to know,” said the voice with no accent. “No further harm will come to you. Just confirm for me what I already know to be truth and you will be set free.”

The knife rested on the skin of his ring finger, just above the spot where a wedding ring would soon rest. His mind, desperate for distraction, flashed back to his proposal and found perspective instead.

It was raining. Not hard. But enough to make the oceanside view gray from top to bottom. Decidedly un-romantic. But this was the spot. They had spent several long summer nights at this spot, watching heat lightning and talking about space travel, alternate dimensions and other geeky topics that interested him. He knew Mia was humoring him most of the time. But she listened.

When he dropped to one knee, she listened harder than ever.

He heard no cheer. No hoopla. Just a whispered, yes, and a tight embrace—the kind that says, I will love you until death do us part.

Happily Ever After.

Not quite.

A year had passed since the proposal, eight months more since he'd been deployed, delaying the wedding. At least ten days since he swerved off the road under a barrage of gunfire and a near death run-in with an IED in northern Afghanistan. The assailants took him from the ruined convoy and killed his team. Wounded and blindfolded, he spent the next few days delirious, hungry and in motion. Always in motion. As the air grew colder he realized they were heading north. By the time they reached their destination, his wounds had just begun to mend, but his heart had broken. He knew he'd never see home or Mia again.

The pressure of the blade on his finger ripped him back to the present. He looked into the eyes of his captor, then back to the finger. If

there was any chance, any chance at all he could see Mia again, he had to take it. Pain pinched his finger as the blade began to slice. “Okay! All right! I’ll say whatever you want me to.”

The blade came away.

Brenton looked at his hand. Two fingers lay separated, but the ring finger wriggled at his command—still attached, though bleeding. “What do you want to know?”

“Only for you to confirm our intelligence.”

Brenton nodded. “Anything.”

His captor walked behind him. A click echoed through the cold air. “What is your name and rank?”

“Staff Sergeant Matthew Brenton, U.S. Marine Corps.”

“Please confirm the following.” Brenton heard the unmistakable tone that added, “or I’ll take the finger.” Confirm *anything* the man says.

“You intended to cross the Afghani border on a mission to infiltrate Russia?”

“I did.”

“You are a sniper, yes?”

Brenton squinted. This couldn’t be happening. “Yes.”

“One of your country’s best?”

“Yes.”

“Elite?”

“Yes.”

“Is it true that your government—the United States government—sent you here, to Moscow, with orders to assassinate President Misha Alexandrov?”

Brenton’s eyes widened with a shock near that of losing a finger. “What?”

“Answer the question!” The voice of his captor was closer to a growl and the sound of metal on stone revealed he had picked up the knife again.

“Yes! Yes, it’s true.”

“What...is true?”

Brenton’s head sagged. He was committing treason on a gross scale, not only admitting to something awful, but an outright act of war. “My orders...were to assassinate President Misha Alexandrov.”

His captor walked in front of him again. He held the knife in one hand and a mini-tape recorder in the other. He clicked the stop button on the recorder. “Thank you.”

“Please don’t kill me,” Brenton said, followed by a guttural sob.

The masked man surged forward with the knife, swiping it down, tearing through sinews. Brenton screamed. “Don’t kill me! God, please, don’t kill me!”

He sobbed and shook as the man stepped back. Brenton’s vision narrowed as he stared at the stone floor. The knife fell at his feet.

“I am a man of my word,” said his captor, allowing his Russian accent to tinge his voice for the first time. “You are free to go.”

Brenton saw the booted feet of the man pivot and walk from the cell, leaving the door open behind him. Brenton sobbed. Spit from his mouth rolled onto his beard and froze to the thickly crusted surface. He fell from the chair to his knees, looking at his freed hands, numb and incomplete—but free. Sobs turned to laughs as Brenton picked up the knife and his detached fingers. If he packed them in ice, maybe they could be reattached?

Loud chopping rotor blades shook the cell, building in pitch as they sliced through the arctic air. Brenton stumbled out of the cell, through a short hallway and into the brightness of a clear day, the sun striking a gleaming white, foot thick, layer of snow. A black helicopter lifted up and peeled away from a cleared helipad. As it flew away, the helo dove down and disappeared below a precipice.

Brenton rubbed his eyes, trying desperately to focus them in the harsh light and absolute cold that crystallized the moisture around his eyes. Then he saw it...the edge of the precipice upon which his cell—a stone shanty attached to a small log cabin—stood. There were no trees.

No rocks. No life. Brenton spun around, scanning his surroundings. He saw the same thing in every direction. He'd been marooned on the top of some stone spire in the middle of nowhere.

He clenched his fists and felt a wash of pain from the bloody stumps where his two fingers used to be. He looked at the hand, at the empty ring finger, and refused to give up. He ran for the edge, pushing his bare feet through the snow, one pain-filled step at a time. Reaching the precipice, Brenton fell to his knees and clenched his hands in the snow. The cliff descended at least one hundred feet and ended with a line of boulders and jagged edges. He won his freedom from the cell, but he was more of a prisoner than ever.

He would die here.

Alone.

Brenton screamed at the sky, his voice raw and wet. He screamed and screamed, pouring out his anguish to the world. When only his distant echo responded, Brenton held his head in his hands and wept quietly for several minutes, then found his voice. "Christ." The word, meant as a curse, opened his eyes. He hadn't thought about God since childhood. But now, with nothing left but pain and despair, who else was there to listen to him?

"Are you there?"

Brenton looked at the sky. Soft cumulus clouds drifted over the barren plains, their shadows casting a deep purple shade on the flawless sheet of snow. Holding his breath, he listened for a reply. Surely, if there were a God, he would reply now.

God didn't speak.

The only sound came from the gentle touchdown of snowflakes landing on the ground—like quiet flicks of static. In that quiet, Brenton found some kind of peace, perhaps supernatural, perhaps a primal connection with nature. His logic said that a man facing death had no choice but to make peace with his past, accept it for what it was, but he couldn't help wondering if he felt something more.

He turned his eyes up again. “If you’re really there, God, Allah, whoever you are, I don’t want to freeze to death! I don’t want to starve!”

His voice echoed again, bouncing off the distant cliffs and returning faded and distorted. “Please! Get me down from—”

A pop and shift of snow beneath his knees drew his attention down. Before he could realize what the line slicing across the snow beneath him represented, it slipped away and fell, taking his body with it. As he descended through the frigid air, Brenton didn’t scream, he simply mouthed a final request, “Let me see her again.”

Then his body struck the rocks below. Bones shattered. Brain matter splashed and froze. Guts slid free and melted into the snow. His end had been tortured and horrific, but in death, he had been spared from the horrors yet to come.