



## **The Brothers Of Abraham**

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ABRAHAM EDGED towards the body. The gun lay broken across the crook of his arm, the spent shells lying in the mud some ten feet behind him. There was still the faint smell of gunpowder in the air, but the breeze was taking care of that. A fresher smell, blood perhaps, rode the breeze towards him and he used his spare hand to stop his nostrils before the smell made him lose his breakfast. He nudged the body with the toe of his boot, leaving traces of muddy water on the pale skin, the fine hair there streaking into darker lines where the water ran.

The body was torn by a hole in the chest, its edges still running with blood. Traces of silver shot were visible in the depths of the wound, and they smoked like tiny meteors in the darkness. The rising of the chest was so faint as to be almost imperceptible, but it was there. Abraham's training allowed him to see it, to hear the ragged breaths as they passed the jaws, still heavily furred and dripping pink frothy saliva. The eyes were open still, and as he bent towards them, blocking the sunlight, the pupils expanded until the iris was almost invisible. A blink. The tongue snaked around the jaws, mopping the saliva, wetting the teeth as if preparing for a final bite. Was there recognition in those eyes? Abraham thought not. He twitched almost imperceptibly, and an urge to urinate almost overcame him. His eyes blurred at the sight of so much blood, and he swallowed saliva continuously. An itching began deep in his bones as if they were attempting to re-knit themselves. He ignored it, pushed it away. He blinked his eyes to clear the blurring and looked down at the fallen creature.

It began to stir. Abraham took this as his cue to stand. He reloaded the weapon, the shells prepared early that morning. As the body rose, its body human, its feet and hands still clawed and covered with wiry hair, as its jaws began their relentless champing anew, Abraham fired. The body fell once more; feet slender and elegant, its hands once more five-fingered and pale. Abraham knelt beside it, brushing the hair from above its eyes, exposing a broad forehead, upon which blood had sprayed like a red fan. He crossed himself and spoke.

'My brother,' he said, and removed the gloves that he used to load the weapon.

It took little more than five minutes to remove the head and bury it along with hands and feet in a shallow grave some distance from the body. The skin had turned a mottled grey in death, and Abraham's knife cut through skin and bone and muscle and sinew like it was so much curd wrapped in cheese cloth. He marked the grave simply, with a twisted crucifix of green willow and sprinkled the site with a few drops of

his own blood from a vial around his neck. He left the wood as light fell around him, stopping only to urinate against a tree, the pungent yellow liquid steaming in the cooling air. Abraham allowed himself a smile and marked a notch onto the butt of his weapon with a sharp fingernail. Its white streak became a twin for the one already there, although that one was darkening. He began to whistle as he walked, and soon the last tree was far behind him, leafy paths turned to black tarmac and the lights of the city began to call to him.

‘Leave the bottle,’ he growled at the barman. He had taken a table in the bar farthest from the window and threw his feet up onto the stool opposite. Dried mud and leaves rained to the stained floor, although they did little to dirty the place further. Abraham poured a generous splash of vodka and drank it down in one, using his tongue to gather a few stubborn drops of the icy, syrupy liquid from his glass. He waited. The vodka warmed him from within and he replenished his glass, sipping this time to extend the life of his drink. He may be here all night. His gun lay fully loaded under the table, in a holdall alongside another dozen shells. Traces of silver dust coated them all so that to see them in the light gave them an unearthly sheen, as though they were coated in moonlight. He nudged the bag lightly with his foot, as if to assure himself that it was still there. As he drank, he stroked a finger along a long scar down his forearm. It shone pink against the tanned skin there, and no hair grew over it. It was a stark reminder that to let your guard down was to invite death. The gash, caused by the claws of another of Abraham’s brothers, (the first he had eventually killed, notch number one), had bled for three straight days, and by the end, Abraham was in danger of dying from the infection and blood loss. He proved strong enough however, and in time the wound healed. He took it as a sign, and took time to study it before and after he hunted. Just to remember.

Of Abraham’s four brothers, two lay dead, one still cooling in the earth. Of the two remaining alive, Marten was the oldest and largest. He sat in his Ford Mustang watching Abraham through the window of the bar. His lip curled defensively up from his teeth and a low growl escaped him. He drummed his fingers impatiently on the steering wheel.

‘Come on, brother, come out where I can have you,’ he whispered to no one in particular. He meant to end Abraham’s life tonight, but as

much as he wanted it, dreamt about it in fact, he couldn't do it in full view of the bar. People just would not understand. He considered calling home, arranging a rendezvous with one of his girls, but it had taken nearly a week to track his brother and he did not want to let him out of his sight now. He checked the time. It had just gone ten, and the moon hung like a glass eye above him. Marten rolled the sleeves up on his shirt, noted the coarse hair on his forearms and cursed. Too damn much.

'Come on, Abraham. I will not come in for you,' he whispered again. He felt the familiar stirrings in his gut, a buzzing in his head like the onset of tinnitus. He shook his head, and was alarmed at the spit that flew from his mouth. Already? He cursed again and checked himself in the rear view mirror. His eyes had gone grey. They were ringed with gold, and his eyelashes were thick and black. Even as he watched his cheeks began to hollow. He growled. Too damn late! He wrenched the car into gear and roared away from the bar. At least he now knew Abraham's movements. There would be other nights.

Inside the bar, Abraham smiled. He stood and slung his holdall over his shoulder. He could smell burning rubber from Marten's tyres, and even the vodka hadn't dimmed his senses so much that he hadn't been able to sense his brother from the second he pulled up outside. Marten did nothing to disguise his musk, and the raw sound of his breathing was audible even through the walls of the bar. Abraham left the bar. Rain had begun to fall, washing out the clarity of his sight so that it appeared he was looking at the world through a veil. It slicked the dark hair to his scalp, on the backs of his hands. He followed a trail of rubber on the tarmac, and when that faded, he followed the heat from the car's exhaust, and when *that* faded, he followed his nose. Marten was the easiest to track, but would be by no means the easiest to kill. He would have preferred to take on Simon first, the only other surviving brother, but he would take them as and when the opportunity arose. He looked at the moon through the rain, and closed his eyes against both the iridescent orb, and against the buzzing that had begun in his head. Too much vodka, he thought. He pushed the buzzing away deep down in himself, willed the itching that irritated his very marrow to cease. Once again in control of himself, he walked on.

The house loomed out of the darkness. He approached it from the front, content that Marten and the girls would be safely ensconced in the cellars. He could smell their musk on the wind, and in it, he could

discern eight in all. So he had gathered another one. Abraham smiled again, mindful of the tautness across his face that he was sure hadn't been so pronounced only days ago. He had to be quick. He pulled his gloves on, smoothing the tight leather so that they almost formed a second skin, and pulled his shotgun from the holdall. He checked the chambers, content that he had loaded it before entering the bar, but checking anyway, loving the smell of gunpowder and silver that rose from the dark metal barrel. The itching in his bones began anew, and this time he let it come. His head buzzed, familiarly, and he shook the noise out like it was a fly in his ear. He flexed his hands and felt the seam at the tip of one finger split. He stared at the frayed cotton and smiled.

'My brothers,' he whispered. 'It ends tonight.' He turned towards the side door of the house.

He felt the approach through his feet rather than heard it, and because he wasn't relying on the slow passage of sound through the air, he was able to anticipate, turn and deflect the worst of the blow that came pummeling down on him through the night air. It was Simon. His eyes glowed bright silver and there were tufts of coarse hair sprouting from his hands and forearms. He was hunched as if his back was bowed, and from his mouth, along with the frothy spit and curses, came a steadily rising howl that set the hair on Abraham's neck standing. The itching intensified, and he found his hand could barely form a fist around the trigger of the gun. Simon had backed off after the initial attack, to better assess his opponent's position, and found he was staring into death itself.

Abraham used the delay to leap backwards, holding the shotgun trained on Simon the whole time. He dropped to his knee and steadied the gun across the bridge of one arm and held its weight easily with the other. His eyes widened as the shotgun fired, and he cursed as he followed the trail of the silver shot over Simon's bowed head. His brother wasted no time and renewed his attack, transforming as he came. Hair thickened, and the face that had once thrilled Abraham in its ability to open the legs of so many willing girls, sagged, stretched and broke apart with the arrival of the beast. The hunched back cracked audibly and lengthened, pushing hair through the ruined shirt. Feet and hands became clawed, furred things. The curses that spat from Simon's mouth almost liquidly dissolved into growls. It took no more than the leaping attack to complete his change. He stood facing Abraham, a huge wolf, snarling and snapping at the very air as if to use it to drag his brother closer to the ravening jaws. Abraham kept his eyes on the creature,

amazed as always when one of his brothers changed, but no less intent on ending him. He feigned a jump back, and as Simon hunched to leap at him, he stood suddenly and threw the shotgun over itself so that he was holding the barrel, brandishing it like a club. The wolf came in range and Abraham brought the stock of the shotgun clean down upon the wide brow bone. A single whimper escaped the wolf's jaws, and the life went out of it. He shook as he reloaded, and bent briefly to stroke the blood-matted fur on his brother's head.

'Brave one,' he whispered and crossed himself. He shot Simon dead, the silver shot smoking as it passed through the brain and neck. He looked down at the ruin at his feet, and reloaded once more. He scanned the house for movement, saw none. He tightened his fists again, so alarmed at the splits in the gloves that he cast them off. He closed his eyes and willed the itching to cease, willed the buzzing in his head to abate for just a few moments more.

He made to move for the house, forgetting the corpse of his brother, now fully human, fully dead. He stopped only to urinate on the side of the house, a great steaming arc of yellow in the night, obliterating the stench already smeared there. Marten. It was his house after all.

'I'm coming, brother,' he said to himself, flexing his hands as if to drive the feelings away.

Marten heard the shot, felt the loss of his brother as he had felt the loss of all his younger siblings. Abraham. There was just the two of them left now. He pushed the girl away from his lap, and she turned to mewl at him like a cat. He bared his teeth and growled. She quietened and slunk back to his harem, content to nuzzle and caress there.

Abraham should never have got so close. Had he taken on too many for his harem? Were they clouding him? And not one had yet provided him his progeny. Marten was furious but knew that he had strength on his side. And of course, Abraham thought he still had surprise on *his* side. Marten laughed. The girls looked up suddenly at this change in him, smiles forming briefly. The smiles died as they saw the fierce grey glint in his eyes, recognised the twitching skin and thickening hair that signal Marten's own elaborate change. They went back to their business, unwilling to draw his attention this time. He howled.

Marten bounded across the room, a great black wolf, eyes glowing silver-grey. His hands and feet were the last to change, the pale skin drawing back like a drawn curtain, revealing thickly furred, clawed

paws that resembled those of a wolf, only bigger. The claws were longer and sharper. His bones creaked as he ran, the burrowing itch fading only as the transformation completed. He stopped suddenly and turned to look at his girls. They shrank away from him, a growing murmur coming from them as they admired him, feared him, desired him. He was their lord. He was their love. They fell upon each other, biting and kissing and licking and shrieking their delight as he looked at each of them in turn. Marten could hear their shrieks as he left the room and tore up the long flight of stairs that led to the main house. He heard the cries turn to barks and howls as he ran, his sharp ears picking out each girl, his lightning mind turning their face over and over, remembering their smell, their place. As much as was possible to him now, he smiled. It would end tonight.

The wolf approached Abraham slowly, its head fixed, as if its grey eyes were attached to his with an invisible cord. Abraham, to his credit, stayed his ground, although the wolf, even on all fours, could have pressed its nose into his chest.

'Brother, we can be only one. As it has always been, so it is now.' he whispered, nodding deferentially. The wolf's tail twitched and raised high above its back, the hackles joining its base to the mane at its neck standing as though electrified. Abraham knew that this was exactly what his brother was feeling. Electricity. For a moment he felt insanely jealous, but then remembered his duty here. His hands groped at the trigger on the shotgun almost blindly, and he pushed hard down within himself, quelling the insane itching that threatened to undo him from within. The wolf edged forward, its head lowered, spittle drooling from the black lips, eyelids half closed. Abraham took the moment of quiet and swung the gun around to the front, pulling the trigger almost simultaneously.

The roar from the gun was tremendous, matching easily the roar from his wounded brother. Blood flecked the wall behind the wolf, the wound in his shoulder dripping onto the hard wood floor. The wolf's front paws skidded in the mess and he clattered his sharp claws trying to find purchase. Abraham knew he had no time to reload, and threw the gun down, reaching instead to his coat pocket. The knife there was ebony handled, with a blade of silver. He brushed against the cutting edge and it sank in to him. He smelled the raw smoke of burning skin and withdrew his hand quickly. He thrust in again, having realised the

blade's geography in his pocket, and this time grasped the handle firmly and withdrew the knife. All this happened in a matter of seconds, and in that time, the wolf's wound had closed, the blood dried to a crust in his fur. He faced Abraham, strengthened by the pain and fear, and the lips drew back to reveal gums as black as night, threaded through here and there with flecks of pink. The wolf's teeth dripped with saliva, and his tongue lolled to taste the air. A low growl had begun deep in his chest, and Abraham matched it with his own, the combatants both showing their readiness to fight. It was Abraham who struck first, not content to give his brother the edge. The knife sliced through skin and fur and gristle, opening a ghastly wound in the creature's flank. Again the smell of gunpowder and scorched hair filled the room. The wolf howled his pain, and flinched away from the bite of the silver, snapping at Abraham's hands as he went. The second bite took skin and blood with it, and Abraham clutched the injured limb to his chest, growling deeper. The itching was unbearable now and he shook his head violently to dislodge it. A fierce buzzing had started in his ears, and he used his uninjured hand to wipe a sheen of pink sweat from his face. Even through the haze of hormonal battle, he could hear the rasp of his hand against the stubble. He shouted his anger and was alarmed at the barking sound.

The wolf came in low, snatching at the cloth of his jeans, snapping and tearing so that his leg was laid bare in seconds. He dodged the next thrust, bringing the knife down hard with both hands, ignoring the swelling pain in one of them. The blade struck bone this time and the wolf screamed. Hot breath steamed the air, and Abraham smelled meat and blood and fear. He prised the blade free and struck again. He dropped the blade suddenly, unable to hold the blood-slicked handle. The wolf was still, breathing heavily, coughing blood in a violent pink mist before it, and Abraham took his chance. He straddled the great creature, reaching around its throat to grasp great hanks of skin and fur. He pulled these tight in opposite directions and the wolf struggled, feeling its air supply dying. Elated in victory, Abraham growled, and elation turned to anger and then fear as the growl turned to a howling bark and his hands sprouted hair and the fingers crumpled into deadly claws. His grip on the wolf lessened, and he felt the bones in his body re-knitting themselves to match those of his opponent.

'NO! It is too soon!' he cried, but what came out was a bark. He leapt from the back of his brother and landed on his hands and knees, still able to walk upright, but stooping with the weight of his elongating head.

The wolf sprang up and turned on him. They fell as one hard onto the floor, snapping and writhing against one another. With a great splintering crash, the combined weight drove them through the floor and into the cellars below. Abraham heard his brother exhale in one giant rush of air as they collided with the stone floor beneath, scattering the harem in a screaming wave. He swung his head and looked and saw the ragged end of a floorboard protruding from his brother's chest and one more through his neck. Hot blood pulsed across them like a half-submerged stone in a river. The great wolf's eyes dimmed and the grey fire died in them. Abraham snapped weakly at the prone wolf, drew his black lips back and snarled into its face. He raised himself up, crawled away from the cooling body, and licked slowly at his own wounds, tasting his own as well as his brother's blood on his fur. The world dimmed as Abraham's body became his master. He twitched his tail and fell into the greyness.

Abraham woke and stood naked in the chilled cellars of his brother's house. *His* house now, he presumed. He smiled as one of his girls entered the room. He held out his hand to her.

'Marten?' he asked.

The girl flattened herself against him.

'Buried,' she whispered, running her nails along the length of his thigh.

'The head?'

'Gone, of course,' she laughed.

The itch seated itself deep in Abraham's bones. He shut his eyes and let it come.

'It's mine, then?' he asked.

The girl at his side howled her reply and stood away from him, raising her tail, exposing herself to him. She barked at him over her shoulder and he dropped to all fours to join her. Abraham silently remembered his fallen brothers, and realised he could no longer feel the itch in his bones or the buzzing in his head. His back arched, and he looked to the ceiling and howled. He followed his queen into the largest room and smelled the musk and heat of his harem.

They fell upon him as one, all lust and claws and teeth. There was young to make.

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