

Bread

By benignmilitancy

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Long after.

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Bread

Neo was sick.

I should have known something was up, Trinity said, when the Agent pulled off your gun harness.

He stepped on my coat, said Neo, stifling another urge to sneeze. And since when do Agents have to steal UMPs?

Trinity's face showed that she was not amused. Neo fueled her convictions by looking down with a wandering stare, the kind she was fond of calling the it s-still-Thomas-Anderson-in-there-brown-eyes-puppy-dog look. She folded her arms once, and Neo knew that he would not win. Even if he was the Savior of All Mankind.

Bed, Neo whispered tiredly, and shuffled off to his cabin.

Meanwhile, Morpheus was thinking.

He sat underneath the hard light of the mess hall, staring undecidedly at an indeterminate crevice. He sighed, and shifted, and spun the metal drink slowly around his hands.

Surrounding him, all signs on the Nebuchadnezzar pointed to rest. Link cut the eternal Matrix feed to black silence before retiring, shutting the captain off from its everlasting activity. But Morpheus knew better. He knew that those minds trapped inside would never truly know rest. It was the human inside of him that empathized with those minds' plights. After all, a life of ignorance was a life of insomnia & but sometimes, Morpheus knew, insomnia followed suit long after escape.

Long after.

Morpheus shifted again. He watched the smoke of his drink rise and dissolve in the faint red glow of the EMP. The darkness surrounding him suggested night, and subsequent drowsiness, but Morpheus sat determinedly at the table, unfazed by the blanket of sleep descending over the Nebuchadnezzar. Yes, he thought, staring at nothing, he was the mixed human compound. Dormancy mixed with activity. Dreaming mixed with waking. In some way, Morpheus had vowed never to dream that deeply again, so as to forget, and so he acquainted himself with yet another level of insomnia. But insomnia, for Morpheus, was not a cause for disdain, but a cause for praise. Insomnia kept him inside of safety.

Insomnia was the struggle for what mattered in realms where nothing ever mattered at all. Insomnia was the difference between life and death. But, most importantly, insomnia was the great divide between purpose& and complacency.

Morpheus quietly raised the drink. He straightened, stiff, and focused his eyes to a change in the light.

Neo, Morpheus called, and sipped.

Neo found his way to the table and sat down despondently. He slid into the chair; Morpheus watched his movement cautiously. Neither man said anything for a long time, both content with fixing their eyes upon the white steam of the small drink.

After a while, Neo asked, You re not going to reprimand me?

Morpheus shifted in his place, spun the cup about his fingers. Nothing about his face revealed an answer, except for a miniscule lift of the corners of his mouth.

The Agent, Neo coughed. Damn, Morpheus, he thought, I can t ever tell if you re amused or just planning another one of your evil schemes.

Neo lowered his tired eyes, spent by the speculation, and Morpheus lowered his also; and the mess hall was silent once more.

No, Morpheus said, although Neo did not lift his head to listen. Don t worry about it.

Neo pursed his lips slightly. It was a strange but rare feeling when he experienced Morpheus silences; he felt like Anderson again, bowing before a vague but noble presence&

Morpheus studied his friend. The man was ill, that much was true, but he was spent so much more by something else; not sickness, nor disintegration, but insomnia. Sleeplessness had robbed him of the color in his face, and sleeplessness had dulled the resolve in his eyes. The insomnia that protected Morpheus was killing Neo.

It seemed odd. Morpheus had always seen in Neo a valiant but breakable soldier, who, unlike the machines, could grow wearisome simply from internal struggle. He had seen firsthand the selfless love fortifying itself within Neo s soul, and, with it, Morpheus had witnessed an ordinary man s enlightenment. Neo s path was beautifully torn, meant to be tread only by those whose hearts could withstand the insurmountable. That was what made Neo strong, not skill, but endurance he could fight thousands of wars with himself and still emerge a victor.

Focus, as Morpheus had once offered, focus can help one to heal. But now, as he looked upon the face of a weary friend, he knew this great purpose was plagued by unrest.

With a voiceless sigh Morpheus rose, crossed the room, and retrieved an object covered with knit cloth. It was round and made a hefty noise as it touched the tabletop. Neo blinked in the hazy light as Morpheus untied the cloth and carefully took out the object.

I wish I knew& Neo whispered to himself as the object was being unwrapped. I wish someone would tell me it s alright to have& doubts& from time to time...

Bread? Morpheus asked. Neo blinked. His face expressed slight surprise at this abrupt show of ambiance. When he did not respond, Morpheus broke off a sturdy portion and laid it in front of him.

Come, now. Eat, Morpheus commanded, and watched as Neo took the bread.

Reluctantly, Neo lifted the coarse thing and tasted it.

It s sweet, he remarked, and the captain smiled peculiarly, now tying the cloth.

Yes, Morpheus said. Bread is very rare to come by in Zion. I used to eat it myself, as a child. They made it every time the fleet made a full-housed homecoming.

Who did?

The priests. Morpheus smile faded a bit as he stared down the well of his drink. I save bread to& hold onto memories.

Memories?

Yes.

Neo peeled at the black granite crust and smelled the white wheat of it inside. He briefly wondered where these priests grew their crops.

Morpheus sensed his thoughts. Much of the bread is prepared with ash. I remember, when I was young, stealing off into the ash pots to take bread and ash cakes to the other orphans.

Neo saw Morpheus smile faintly behind the steam of the metal cup. A priestess spotted me, though, and I was punished quite harshly. His smile widened. Harshly being forced to cut wood while Niobe stirred ashes.

Both men were silent again.

I never did ask what she did to be forced to stir ashes. She was only a bit younger than I, and& much smaller, but& much stronger& so we agreed to exchange our punishments. She cut firewood while I stirred ashes& Mmm. Priests are very particular about ashes, Morpheus sipped his drink, and sighed. Very particular. Almost obsessive. The color and texture& must be to certain standards, because much of the bread s livelihood depends upon the ash...but I won t bore you with the logistics. Neo nodded, signaling for him to continue.

Being as young as I was, and quite disrespectful, I was struck hard upside the head many times& but they never raised a hand to Niobe. Not once.

Neo bit the bread s hard, sweet shell to break the everlasting silence. Morpheus fell into the unconscious habit of gently spinning his cup.

Do you drink? Neo asked, tilting his head towards the cup.

No.

Neo casually ran a hand through his brown hair. Coffee?

Yes.

How often?

Morpheus usual amusement surfaced. As often as often is.

Dammit, Morpheus! Neo rasped, then coughed defiantly. Can t you ever speak without using riddles?

A sound like soft laughter rose inside the captain s chest, and disappeared inside the friendly air. If you wanted a drink, you simply could have asked for one.

I don t want one, Morpheus, Neo said sourly. He pressed a palm against his right temple. I want to get rid of this damn throbbing headache.

He reached over, clutching the piece of bread close to his mouth, breathing in its scent. He missed real, opaque food.

You should be sleeping, Morpheus mused.

So Trin says& um& don t think I can ask for an aspirin, can I?

I m sorry, Neo, said Morpheus. No.

Neo sighed, realizing again just how much he had taken certain things for granted, things that were rendered precious in Zion but were wasted to excess in the Matrix.

He then pictured Morpheus as a child to steady his mind. He imagined young Morpheus working to stir ashes, being overseen by Niobe and the priests. He could not imagine Morpheus being struck by the gentle people, but, somehow, he could see Morpheus being struck by Niobe, perhaps in play or in folly. Laughing, maybe, in the shared course of punishment. Soft strikes& swatting& He lowered his eyes to the metal cup, and glimpsed into the past. He could see Niobe striking Morpheus many times about the head and shoulders, then making tender apologies in those same areas later, when the black bread was broken and the night had fallen upon Zion just like this& and the laughter abounded softly&

Neo coughed slightly, feeling he was intruding upon a moment of the present. The window of timeless vision closed as he willed himself to the present, sitting across the table from his nostalgic friend.

Well, Neo thought, I can indulge too. You know, when I was Tom, I used to call in to work sick all the time.

Morpheus lifted his steady gaze, curious.

I fell behind on too many days, though. Rhineheart got used to yelling at me as soon as I walked in the door. Thomas Anderson is exactly the example you should follow if you want to see a pink slip stapled to your forehead. In retrospect, I know I deserved it. I was always coming to work late& for a while I thought it was all the graveyard shifts and Thai food&ha!

Neo broke his quiescent mood with a soft laugh.

You think memories in the Matrix aren't real& he began. When the captain did not protest, he continued. But the most real memory I ever had was the one where I& I had been drinking, and& and, for some reason I couldn't explain, I was pissed off at my boss& so I went to Rhineheart's secretary and asked her something really underhanded about his, uh& his dictation .

Morpheus was silent.

I remember it because, that was the first time I learned how to be sober. Neo fell quiet. In mind and body. And that's what made it real.

Morpheus lifted his mouth in a mixture of amusement, incredulity, and compassion. Neo wished he had been drinking instead of eating bread.

He rose, unable to think of an excuse. Like you said, sir, lack of sleep. You and Trin were right after all. Heh.

Sleep is very good, Neo, Morpheus said. It repairs the body and encourages better brain functioning& so next time you'll notice when an Agent steals your UMP.

Neo pursed his lips, and, smiling, walked back to his cabin.

The eleven links read CLOSED. Morpheus shut his eyes and leaned back in the operator's chair, determined to meet with insomnia on his own terms. He was deluded to think anyone would pick up his signal at this hour.

In the darkness, one link blinked twice. Morpheus' eyes fluttered open in the glowing green light of the call. He picked up the headset.

Logos to Neb. A voice of smoke poured into his ears. Captain Morpheus.

Captain Niobe, Morpheus whispered drowsily.

What's the matter?

Nothing. No Sentinel activity, if that is what you mean.

Wanted to talk?

Yes.

Niobe sighed, and the very effort of it filled the headset. Morpheus, hasn't anyone ever told you you're completely, absolutely, irrevocably insane?

He smiled and folded his hands. Someone has, many times over.

A swift sound chimed the other end with laughter.

The green links glowed.

After a few moments, Niobe asked, Do you think they'll prepare some for us? Do they do that anymore?

Morpheus turned the drink on the seat of his lap. It was growing cold. Thirteen days, I believe. I can only hope.

Yes, agreed Niobe. Real food; I wouldn't trade it for anything.

Silence from his end.

Morpheus? What's wrong?

I& was thinking.

Of what? Our good times together?

Perhaps, lowly woodcutter.

Forsaken ashpot.

I lost most of my hair as a child, toiling in the smoky hearth, tending to the fire. But I don't blame you. I blame myself for my naïve generosity to you.

En garde. I blame you as well.

Have you no shame, woodcutter?

No, but I think being beaten by the entire clergy is punishment enough. He heard her smile, and he closed his eyes at imagining the expression on the matching face. Anything I did pretty much made itself obsolete.

Indeed. Imagine my ego upon your tiny fists of wrath.

It taught you humility, if anything, ashpot. Utter baldness and bruised self-esteem are simply other side effects of long-term treatment.

Direct afflictions, I said. Every day I cried out, Stockade, woodcutter! and every day the men passed the hearth with five more backhands and the collective response, Stir that counterclockwise now!

Don't blame me for your childhood traumas, Niobe purred in false injury, with a twinge of wistfulness resonating in her voice.

Morpheus breathed more slowly, more steadily. How could I forget?

She sighed, yawned. Oh, it's late. Sparks will have my head if he sees me playing around with his headset like this.

Oh, that will make two of us, then.

Heads and breads, said Niobe. Heads and breads.

Morpheus lifted his cup to the other end, as if to toast the precious link, and shifted softly in his chair, and placed the metal rim to his slightly amused lips.

I'll be waiting.

END