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To those at war, especially the wars nobody sees, may you find peace

One

In his personal hell, Christian Donatus Severn, eighth Duke of Mercia, considered the pedagogic days the worst of a horrific lot—also the most precious. The days when his captors used his suffering to teach the arcane art of interrogation might cost him his sanity, even his honor, but they also ensured he would some day, some night, some eternity if necessary, have that sweetest of satisfactions—*revenge*.

“You see before you the mortal form of a once great and powerful man, Corporal,” Girard said, pacing slowly between the table his prisoner had been lashed to and the damp stone wall where the corporal stood at attention.

Girard was a stranger to hurry, a necessary trait in a torturer. A big, dark, lean acolyte of the Corsican, Girard lived in Christian’s awareness the way consumption dwelled in the minds of those afflicted.

“Our duke is still great, to my mind,” Girard went on, “because His Grace has not, as the English say, broken.”

Girard blathered on in his subtly accented French, and despite willing it to the contrary, Christian translated easily. As Girard’s ironic praise and patriotic devotion blended in a curiously mesmerizing patter, Girard’s superior, Henri Anduvoir—the actual intended student—lurked off in the shadows.

Bad luck in a man’s superiors was not the exclusive province of Wellington’s army. Girard made a science of extracting truth from those reluctant to part with it, and pain was only one tool at his disposal.

Anduvoir, a simpler and in some ways more-evil soul, was plainly addicted to hurting others for his own entertainment.

Christian filled his mind with the lovely truth that someday Anduvoir, too, would be made to suffer, and suffer, and suffer.

“*Yet*. Our duke has not broken yet,” Girard went on. “I challenge you, Corporal, to devise the torment or the prize that will break him, but be mindful that our challenge grows the longer His Grace is silent. When the good God above put Mercia into our hands all those months ago, we sought to know through which pass Wellington would move his troops. We know now, so what, I ask you, is the point of the exercise? Why not simply toss this living carcass to the wolves?”

Yes, please God, why not?

And then another thought intruded on Christian’s efforts to distance himself from the goings-on in that cell: Was Girard letting slip that Wellington had, in fact, moved troops into France itself? Girard

played a diabolical game of cat and mouse, hope and despair, in a role that blended tormenter and protector with a subtlety a better-fed man might find fascinating.

“We yet enjoy His Grace’s charming company because the duke serves another purpose,” Girard prosed on. “He did not break, so we must conclude he is sent here to teach us the breaking of a strong man. One might say, an inhumanly strong man. Now...”

The scent of rich Turkish tobacco wafted to Christian’s nose, cutting through the fragrance of lavender Girard favored and the perpetual damp of the Château’s lower reaches. Christian’s meager breakfast threatened a reappearance, a helpful development in truth. He focused not on Girard’s tilting, philosophical French, but on holding the nausea at bay, for he had reason to know a man could choke on his own vomit.

A boot scraped, and by senses other than sight, Christian divined that Anduvoir had come out of his shadows, a reptile in search of his favorite variety of heat.

“Enough lecturing, Colonel Girard. Your pet has not told us of troop movements. In fact, the man no longer talks at all, do you, *mon duc*?” Anduvoir sucked a slow drag of his cigar, then gently placed the moist end of it against Christian’s lips. “I long for the sound of even one hearty English scream. Long for it desperately.”

Christian turned his head away in a response Girard, who was by no means a stupid man, would have predicted. Anduvoir was an infrequent visitor, though, and like any attentive host—or prudent subordinate—Girard trotted out the best entertainments for his guest.

Anduvoir moved into Christian’s line of sight, which, given the careful lack of expression on Girard’s face, was bad news all around. Anduvoir was short, dark, coarse featured, and behind his Gallic posturing, suffused with the glee of a bully whose victim could not elude torment.

“A quiet man, our duke.” Anduvoir expelled smoke through his nose. “Or perhaps, not so quiet.” He laid the burning tip of the cigar against the soft skin inside Christian’s elbow with the same care he’d put it to his prisoner’s mouth, letting a small silence mark the moment when the scent scorched flesh rose.

The blinding, searing pain howled from Christian’s arm to his mind, where it joined the memory of a thousand similar pains and coalesced into one roaring chant:

Revenge!

“Lord Greendale was a man of great influence,” Dr. Martin said, clearing his throat in a manner Gilly was coming to loathe, the way she’d loathed the sight of Greendale lighting one of his foul cheroots in her private parlor.

“His lordship enjoyed very great influence,” Gilly concurred, eyes down, as befit a woman facing the widowed state.

The bad news came exactly as expected: “You should prepare for an inquest, my lady.”

“An inquest?” Gilly gestured for her guest to take a seat, eight years of marriage to Greendale having taught her to produce an appearance of calm at will. “Theophilus, the man of great influence, was universally disliked, approaching his threescore and ten, and the victim of an apoplexy in the

midst of a formal dinner for twenty-eight of his most trusted toadies. What will an inquest serve?"

Since Greendale's apoplexy, Gilly had dared to order that the fires in her parlor be kept burning through the day, and yet, the physician's words chilled her more effectively than if a window had banged open.

"Lady Greendale..." Martin shifted a black satchel from right hand to left, making the contents rattle softly. Gilly was convinced the only items of interest in that bag were a selection of pocket flasks.

"Countess, you must not speak so freely, even to me. I will certainly be put under oath and questioned at length. I cannot imagine what the wrong words in the hands of the lawyers will do to your reputation."

His wrong words, over which he'd have no control, of course. A just God would afflict such a physician with a slow, painful death.

"Reputation matters little if one is to swing for murder."

"It won't come to that," Martin said, but he remained poised by the door, bag in hand, as if lingering in Gilly's presence might taint him not with her guilt—for she was innocent of wrongdoing toward her late spouse—but with her vulnerability to accusations. "I had Harrison consult on the case, and he confirmed my diagnosis by letter not two days after the apoplexy."

Dr. Theophilus Martin had observed this precaution not because he was intent on safeguarding Greendale's young widow, but because his late, unlamented lordship had created an air of mistrust thick enough to pollute every corner of the house.

"What am I to be charged with?" Stupidity, certainly, for having married Greendale, but Gilly's family had been adamant—"You'll be a countess!"—and she'd been so young...

Dr. Martin smoothed a soft hand over snow-white hair. "You are not accused of anything."

His lengthy, silent examination of the framed verses of Psalm 23 hanging over the sideboard confirmed that Gilly would, indeed, face suspicion. Her life had become a series of accusations grounded in nothing more than an old man's febrile imagination, and he'd made those accusations where any servant might have overheard them.

"They will say I put a pillow over his face, won't they?"

"They can't. You had a nurse in the room at all times, didn't you? Lovely stitch work, my lady."

Gilly had been accompanied by two nurses, as often as possible, and the stitch work would go to the poorhouse as soon as the inquest was over.

"If I was with his lordship, a nurse was always present—or you, yourself. Will the nurses be suspect?"

She did not ask if Martin would come under suspicion, because quite honestly, she was too afraid to care. He'd been summoned to Greendale Hall on many occasions, and had socialized with Lord Greendale as often as he'd treated him. His solicitude of Gilly now likely had to do with seeing his substantial bill paid.

"I hired the nurses based on my personal experience of them, so no, I shouldn't think they'll come under suspicion," Martin said.

Because the physician was eyeing the door, Gilly fired off the most important question, and

Hades with dignity.

“Who’s behind this, Theophilus? My husband is not yet put in the ground, and already you’re telling me of an inquest.”

Though thank a merciful Deity, Martin’s torpid humanitarian instincts had resulted in this warning at least. Another smoothing of his leonine mane followed, while the fingers of his left hand tightened on the black leather handle tellingly.

“I thought it the better part of kindness not to burden you with this news prematurely, but Lord Greendale himself apparently told his heir to see to the formalities.”

And to think Gilly had prayed for her husband’s recovery. “Easterbrook ordered this? He’s still in France or Spain or somewhere serving the Crown.”

“As heir to Lord Greendale’s title and fortune, Marcus Easterbrook would have left instructions with his solicitors, and they would in turn have been in communication with King’s Counsel and the local magistrate.”

Men. Always so organized when bent on aggravation and aspersion. “Greendale was the magistrate. To whom does that dubious honor fall now?”

“Likely to Squire Gordon.”

Gordon was a hounds-and-horses fellow, and he’d never toadied to Greendale. A fraction of Gilly’s panic eased.

“Shall you have some tea, Theophilus? It’s good and hot.” Also strong for a change, Gilly’s second act of independence from the infernal economies Greendale had imposed on her.

“Thank you, my lady, but no.” Martin turned toward the door, then hesitated, hand on the latch.

“You needn’t tarry, Theophilus. You’ve served the family loyally, and that has been far from easy. He’d served the family discreetly, too. Very discreetly. “I suppose I’ll see you at the inquest.”

He nodded once and slipped away, confirming that he would not call in even a professional capacity before the legalities were resolved, not if he wanted to maintain the appearance of impartiality. Not if he wanted to keep the Crown’s men from turning their sights on him as well.

Gilly added coal to the fire—rest in peace, Lord Greendale—and stared into the flames for long moments, weighing her very few options as best one could weigh options when in a flat, terrified panic.

As her strong, hot tea grew tepid in the pot, she sat down with pen and ink, and begged an interview with Gervaise Stoneleigh, the coldest, most astute, most *expensive* barrister ever to turn down Greendale’s coin.

And that decision very likely saved her life.

“Girard gave me final orders concerning you.”

Christian turned his head slowly. He was still recovering from the last teaching day, a sorry effort on the corporal’s part, consisting of familiar tortures enthusiastically applied the better to impress Anduvoir, while Girard had stood bristling with silent censure.

Girard did not approve of brute maneuvers that produced no results, and one had to respect Girard

sense of efficiency.

“You don’t care that Girard might have given me orders to kill you, do you?”

The jailer sounded Irish, or on rare occasions when nobody else was about, Scottish, and Christian admitted—in the endless privacy of his thoughts—to being grateful to hear English in any accent other than French.

And typical of Girard’s cunning, the jailer was also a frequent source of small kindnesses intended to torment the prisoner with that most cruel weapon: hope.

“Girard said I’m not to allow you to suffer, on account of what’s gone before. Said you’d earned your battle honors, so to speak, though it would be a mercy to allow you to join your duchess and your son. He said you’re a man who can trust no one, and the life that awaits you won’t be worth living for long, assuming your enemies don’t ambush you from the hedges of Surrey.”

Ah. The old lie, for Christian had no enemies in Surrey, and his wife and son yet thrived at home in England. Severn was a veritable fortress, staffed by retainers whose loyalty went back generations. Girard was simply a petty evil allowed to flourish in the bowels of the Grand Armée’s outpost on the slopes of the Pyrenees, and this claim that Helene and Evan were dead was merely a blunt weapon in Girard’s arsenal.

Which Girard would pay for using.

Christian focused on ignoring the man speaking to him, a big blond fellow with watchful green eyes and a wary devotion to Girard. Girard referred to him as “*Michel*”; the other guards quietly referred to him in less affectionate terms.

The jailer held a gleaming, bone-handled knife, its presence a matter of complete indifference to Christian—almost. The knife had become something of a friend to Christian—for a time—until Anduvoir had found a use for it no man could contemplate sanely.

“Orthez fell in February,” the jailer said, still lingering near the open door of the cell—a taunt, the door leaving the cell door unlatched when Christian was powerless to escape. “That was weeks ago, not the way you’d know, poor sod. Bordeaux was last month. Toulouse has been taken, and we’ve heard rumors Napoleon has abdicated. Girard’s gone.”

None of it was true. These fairy tales were a variation on the stories the jailer told from time to time in an effort to raise hopes. Christian knew better: hopes that refused to rise couldn’t be dashed.

The jailer came no closer.

“I’ve seen what went on here, and I’m sorry for it,” he said, sounding Scottish indeed, and damnably sincere. “Girard is sorry for it, too. This was war, true enough, but when Anduvoir came around…”

But nothing. Christian was tied to the cot, a periodic nuisance he’d long since become inured to. Girard’s greatest cruelty had been to show his prisoner only enough care to ensure Christian wouldn’t die. The mattress was thin but clean, and Christian probably had more blankets than the infants quartered elsewhere in the old château.

He was fed.

If he refused to eat, he was fed by force. If he refused to bathe, he was bathed by force as well. If he refused his occasional *sortie* into the château’s courtyard, where fresh air and sunshine assaulted him

senses every bit as brutally as the guards assaulted his body, he was escorted there by force.

Eventually, the force had been unnecessary, for a man strong enough to escape was a man who preserved the hope of revenge, and Christian wanted to remain that strong. He endured the fresh air and sunlight, he ate the food given him by his captors, nourishing not himself, but his dreams of revenge.

Girard had understood that too, and had understood how to manipulate even that last, best hope.

Christian was required to heal between sessions with Girard or the various corporals, and he was given medical care when the corporals—or more often Anduvoir—got out of hand. Now he'd earned a simple, relatively painless death.

He tried to muster gratitude, fear, relief, something.

Anything besides a towering regret that revenge would be denied him.

"I'm sorry," the jailer said again. "I'm so bloody sorry."

Girard had said the same things, always softly, always *sincerely*, as he'd lowered Christian carefully to the cot where the mandatory healing would commence.

Christian felt the knife slicing at the bindings around his wrists and ankles, felt the agony of blood surging into his hands, then his feet.

"I'm sorry," the jailer said again.

And then Christian felt...nothing.

Two

“Orders fly in all directions once the guns go silent.”

Devlin St. Just—Colonel St. Just, thank you very much—was complaining about peace, one of the career soldier’s dubious privileges. “During wartime, the paperwork was limited to one side of a line,” he went on. “Now we’re galloping the length and breadth of Europe because pigeons simply won’t do.”

“If you brought Baldy orders, they must be important,” Marcus Easterbrook observed—though he was finally *Lord Greendale* now. He would not bruit the title about until he’d received word of the final outcome of the inquest, bad form being an offense among Wellington’s officers tantamount to treason.

Easterbrook took a nip of brandy, then passed his fellow officer the bottle, because a victorious army was supposed to be a gracious, cheerful institution—also because, like many who rode dispatch, St. Just had the ears of the generals. Brandy, alas, constituted the sum total of the amenities available in Easterbrook’s tent, unless one counted the occasional camp whore.

Colonel St. Just was built like a dragoon, big, muscular, and capable of wielding rifle or sword with deadly intent. Easterbrook did not envy the larger man his dispatch rides, though. For the sake of the horse, the rider traveled light, and for the sake of the orders, he traveled hard, taking routes more direct than prudent.

“One shouldn’t swill decent brandy, Easterbrook.” St. Just tipped a finger’s worth into his glass. “Bad form.”

St. Just had been born on the wrong side of the blanket, but it had been a *ducal* blanket. Easterbrook poured himself three fingers into a chipped glass and moderated his reply accordingly.

“One develops a certain tolerance for lapses of form during war.”

“Does one bloody ever.” St. Just swirled his drink, held it under his not-exactly-delicate nose, then set it on the table untouched. “Tell me about this lost duke. He’s the talk of the entire camp, though we hadn’t heard of him up in Paris.”

A small mercy, that.

“The lost duke is a legend here in the South and around the passes,” Easterbrook said, wondering why, of all vices, St. Just had to be willing to gossip. “The eighth Duke of Mercia was attached to Wellington’s Peninsular Army, serving mostly on His Grace’s staff. He’d produced his heir and bought a commission in the family tradition.”

“One baby does not a ducal succession ensure.”

No, it did not, alas for the poor duke, though if memory served, St. Just had a proper litter legitimate siblings.

“You’d have to have known Mercia,” Easterbrook said. “Had all the brass in the world. As arrogant as only a duke born and bred can be, and as his cousin, I can assure you, the succession was not in jeopardy. My father was younger brother to the ducal heir, though Papa took the surname of his bride as a condition of the marriage settlements. I am every inch a Severn.”

“You know His Grace?”

As if a duke would not associate with a mere cousin?

“He was my only living adult relation on my father’s side, his father having been my eldest uncle. In any case, Mercia bought his colors and served honorably, but simply disappeared one morning last summer. We found his uniform, shaving kit, and his horse near a stream running north of the camp, and concluded he’d drowned while bathing.”

Though as a boy, Christian had swum like an otter. Easterbrook had even said as much to the investigating officers, who’d viewed it as possible evidence of desertion.

Desertion, by a peer and an officer. The board of inquiry hadn’t been very fond of their ducal comrade. Pity, that.

St. Just was apparently not impressed with the brandy, for he ran his finger around the top of the glass rather than consume his portion. “A grown man drowned in a stream?”

“You served in Spain?”

“For years, clear back to Portugal,” St. Just said, that finger pausing in its circumnavigation of the rim. “Yes, I know: sudden floods, tinkers, locals sympathetic to the French, French deserters... His Grace would have been well blessed to die by drowning.”

“He might agree with you, were he still alive. Smoke?” Easterbrook certainly agreed with him.

“I don’t indulge.” He didn’t indulge, he rode like the wind, and he’d paused a moment, eyes closed before consuming his midday peasant fare of black bread, butter, boiled potatoes, and beef cooked to mush. After the belching, farting company in the officers’ mess, such a paragon should have been a refreshing change, and yet, Easterbrook was not enjoying St. Just’s company.

Easterbrook clipped off the end of a cheroot, because he *did* indulge.

“A few weeks after Mercia disappeared, we heard rumors the French had captured a high-ranking English officer out of uniform.”

St. Just shifted his stool a foot closer to the tent flaps tied back to catch the prevailing breeze. “Poor sod.”

“I know men who wouldn’t bathe, lest they lose the protection afforded them by their officer’s uniform.” For the French considered any English officer captured out of uniform a spy, and indulged their interrogatory whims on such unfortunates without limit or mercy.

“I certainly kept my colors handy,” St. Just mused.

Easterbrook passed the cut end of the cheroot under his nose and took a whiff of privilege and pleasure, however minor.

“I was seldom out of uniform myself. When the rumors died down, a letter was carried from Paris unknown to one of Wellington’s aides, unsigned, but purporting to be from a French doctor. Said

titled English officer was being held under torture and should be quietly ransomed.”

St. Just paused, his glass halfway to his lips. “That’s unusual.”

Ransom was unusual and officially unavailable, both sides having decided to hold prisoners for the duration of the hostilities. At last count, some Englishmen had enjoyed the dubious hospitality of Verdun for more than ten years.

“Suspiciously unusual,” Easterbrook allowed, though Christian had been lucky from the cradle, and protocol regarding prisoners was often honored in the breach. “Word of the letter disappeared in diplomatic channels, but spies were sent out who apparently reported to Wellington that they found nothing, heard nothing, saw nothing.”

Thank God.

“And yet, you began to hope?”

“Hope for what? By that time it had been months. Mercia was raised with every privilege and wasn’t shy about indulging himself. Even in the officers’ internment up in Verdun, he would have fared badly. How would a man like that cope with torture? How would any man? And after that much time, one had to wonder if Mercia would even want rescuing.”

St. Just studied his drink, when most officers would have long since tossed it back and helped themselves to a refill.

“His Grace had a wife and son. Why wouldn’t he want rescuing?”

“Cleaning up after Soult, we’ve freed some prisoners of war, and they did not fare well in the hands of the French.”

“The French themselves did not fare well,” St. Just countered, peering at the label on the brandy bottle as if actually reading what was written there—in French, of course. “One doesn’t expect prisoners to enjoy full rations, regardless of whose care they’re in.”

“The deprivation is only part of it.” Easterbrook used the oil lantern on the table to light his cheroot, then poured himself more brandy and cast around for a change of topic. “Is there any pleasure more gratifying than decent libation, a lusty whore, and a good smoke?”

“A lasting and fair peace,” St. Just said, his gaze off to the northwest, in the direction of Mercey Olde England, no less. “But you were telling me about your cousin.”

The colonel would rather discuss a missing duke than naughty women. War did strange things to some men.

“The lost duke, whom I believe to be with his Maker as we speak. When Toulouse fell a few weeks ago, some half-soused Paddy of questionable loyalties let slip that a titled English officer had been held in some crumbling château in the foothills of the mountains. Seems the place was built on the site of a medieval castle, complete with dungeons. He said the prisoner was freed when the castle was abandoned by the gallant French.”

“They’re the defeated French now.”

“So they are.” Easterbrook lifted his glass in salute and took a drag of pungent tobacco.

And made another effort to change the damned topic. “You shipping out for Canada with everybody else?”

“I have family obligations, though I doubt I’ll sell out. You’ve concluded this Irishman was lying?”

This was the same tenacity that ensured orders entrusted to St. Just reached their destination, no matter what. Easterbrook was beginning to hate his guest nearly as much as he respected him.

“The Irishman was...” Easterbrook paused as the acrid smoke curled toward the tent’s ceiling. What to say? To crave a wealthy dukedom wasn’t a sin, was it? “The Irishman was none too sober, and his motives were questionable. What was he doing inside that *château*, hmm? And where is this lost duke now, when every soul knows the Emperor has abdicated.”

St. Just twitched the tent flap, as if to let in a bit more light, though Easterbrook took small satisfaction from the smoke bothering his guest.

“If Mercia was tortured at length, his mental faculties might not be at their sharpest,” St. Just said. “And what would he gain by marching even this far north, as opposed to making his way direct home from the coast?”

“How could he afford passage home? How could a man subjected to deprivation and torture for the long travel any distance on foot? Assuming he’s alive—which I have not for months—he’s a bloody hero. As for those impersonating Mercia and claiming to be the lost duke, we give them a hot meal and nominal courtesy, until I can assure the generals we’ve another charlatan on our hands. Then the mountebank is run off to make shift with some other scheme.”

And still the damned man merely sat back, folded his arms over a broad chest, and watched the smoke curling upward.

“For a French physician to put something in writing like that... He’d have been shot as a traitor in the *Republique* if the letter had fallen into the wrong hands.”

Tobacco was said to calm the nerves. Easterbrook inhaled deeply, until the tip of his cheroot flared bright red, then let the smoke ease out through his nose.

“Mercia might have been taken prisoner, but what are the chances the French would capture a man naked from his bath, deny him the chance to get into uniform, realize he’s a bloody duke, and continue to hold him for interrogation against all policy to the contrary? That would exceed *bad fortune* considerably.

“Besides,” Easterbrook rose as he went on, because it was time to run his guest off, “we suffered no lapses of intelligence that suggest this prisoner might have been Mercia. Mercia was in on all the meetings, consulted on strategy, had even scouted some of the passes. He’s a canny devil—was a canny devil, for all his arrogance—and the French would have been well served if they’d laid their hands on him.”

“If he broke.”

Easterbrook tipped the bottle to his lips, because it would somehow be empty when he returned to his tent, victory and graciousness notwithstanding.

“I’d break,” Easterbrook said quietly. Perhaps he’d had too much brandy, or perhaps he’d spent too much time in the company of Colonel Paragon St. Just. “I’d try to hold out, but one hears stories, and I’m sorry, St. Just, one officer to another, I’d break.”

“You don’t know that.” St. Just rose too easily for a man who’d ridden the distance from Paris. “My thanks for the hospitality, for the meal, the drink, and your company. I’m off to check on my horse.”

Bless the beast. “Your horse?”

“I ride my own mounts. I’m safer that way, and as much ground as we’ve covered the past few days, I need to take him out and stretch his legs, keep him from stiffening up. You’re welcome to join me.”

“Excuse me, Colonel Easterbrook, Colonel St. Just?” A subaltern who might soon be of an age to shave came puffing to a stop right outside the tent, then saluted with the exaggerated enthusiasm of the young and never injured.

“Anders.” Easterbrook took one last drag on his smoke, tossed the stub to the ground, and rubbed it out with the toe of his boot. “Are you on an errand for Baldy?”

“General Baldrige has another lost duke for you, sir. We put him in the officers’ mess.”

“Famous.” Easterbrook chugged the dregs from the brandy bottle and tossed it aside. “Does this one at least speak English?”

“He doesn’t say much at all, sir, though his eyes are a frightful blue.”

“Well, the poor devil got that much right. Fetch my horse, Anders. St. Just and I will hack out where we’ve dispensed with His Latest Grace. Come along, St. Just. Lost dukes only show up once a week so in these parts. They’re our entertainment, now that the Frogs no longer oblige.”

Christian stood outside the tent, the spring breeze nigh making his sore teeth chatter—though it hadn’t obscured a word of the exchange that had taken place inside.

“He’s another lost duke.” The subaltern had kept his tone expressionless as he passed along the message to some general. “Third one this month, but we’ve sent for Colonel Easterbrook, sir.”

“Poor Easterbrook.” The senior officer blew out a gusty breath, and Christian heard what sounded like a pen being tossed onto a table, then a chair creak. “I suppose this one has a tale as well?”

“Not that I’ve heard, sir. He looks... Well...”

“Permission to speak freely, Blevins.”

“If I were claiming to have wandered the heights for months, living on nothing, perhaps crazed from a blow to the head or captured by Frogs, it would help if I looked like him, sir.”

“Elaborate.”

“He’s skinny as a wraith, and his eyes look like he had a front-row seat in hell. He isn’t babbling and carrying on like the last two did.”

“The last four, you mean. I suppose Easterbrook will be forced to denounce this one too, but a bit of Christian charity won’t go amiss. Take the man to the mess tent, observe the proprieties, and give him a decent meal. One never knows, and it doesn’t do to offend a duke, particularly not a mad one.”

Interesting point, suggesting this commanding officer had a grasp of strategy.

“Aye, sir.”

Blevins stepped out of the tent, conscientiously retying the flap, though it continued to luff noisily in the breeze.

Sounds were something Christian was getting used to again. Sounds other than iron bars clanging open and shut, rats scurrying, Girard’s philosophizing, his jailer’s doleful brogue-and-bu-

mutterings...

“You’re to be fed while we await further orders,” the blond, ruddy-faced Blevins said. From the crisp look of his uniform, Blevins either came from means, was particularly vain of his appearance—thinning hair could do that to a young fellow—or he’d only recently bought his colors.

Christian mustered two words. “Your Grace.”

“Beg pardon?” English manners had Blevins bending nearer, for the fifth lost duke spoke on quietly.

When he spoke at all.

“You’re to be fed, *Your Grace*,” Christian said slowly, each word the product of a mental gymnastic, like tossing separate pebbles into the exact center of a quiet pond.

“Oh, right you are, sir, er, Your Grace.” The man’s ears turned red and he marched smartly away only to have to slow his step when Christian didn’t quicken his own. Blevins’s embarrassment was not the product of a lapse in manners, but rather, pity for one who had parted from both his reason and his shaving kit some time ago.

“Afraid the fare is humble, Your, er, Grace. Well-cooked beef, boiled potatoes with salt and butter, the inevitable coarse bread, but it sustains us. Things are better since old Wellie put Soult in his place. The locals are happy to feed us, you see, because we pay them for their bread, unlike their own army.”

The words, English words, flowed past Christian’s awareness like so much birdsong at the beginning of a summer day. Easterbrook was coming, and Easterbrook could see Christian to England back to the arms of his devoted if not quite loving duchess, and their children. Evan would be walking and talking by now, losing his baby curls, perhaps even ready to be taken up before his papa for a quick hack.

Christian had enjoyed many discussions with his infant son while enduring Girard’s hospitality. He’d chosen the boy’s first pony—a fat, shaggy piebald—read him his favorite bedtime stories, and picked out a puppy or two.

In his mind, he’d gently explained to the child that papa had a few Frenchmen to kill, but would be home soon thereafter.

The scent of roasted beef interrupted Christian’s musings like a physical slap. He categorized his perceptions to keep his mind from overflowing with sensory noise. Scents were English, or rural, or French. Cooked beef was definitely English. The pervasive mud smelled merely rural. The damned orange cat with the matted fur stropping itself against Christian’s boots was French.

He bent carefully and tossed the cat—he did *not* pitch it hard, as he wished to, or wring its neck—several feet away. Cats were definitely French.

“Shall I fetch you some tea, Your Grace?” Blevins’s adoption of proper address had become enthusiastic, if not quite ironic. “The wives are good about keeping us supplied with tea even when the quartermasters can’t.”

“Hot water will suffice. My thanks.” For even the thought of tea sent Christian’s digestion into a panic.

This time, Blevins succeeded in keeping a straight face to go with his, “Very good, Your Grace.”

Did dukes no longer thank their servants? Blevins’s expression cleared, and he hustled away.

Perhaps the man thought Christian would finally be shaving.

Soon enough, Easterbrook would come, and then on to England, where Christian could begin to plot a just fate for Anduvoir and Girard, and all would at last be well again.

“Not hoping must be hard,” St. Just said as he and Easterbrook made their way toward the officer’s mess. The tent lay on high ground, and gave off the same beguiling, smoky aroma as every mess St. Just had had the pleasure of approaching from downwind. “Mercia is your cousin, after all.”

He kept his observation casual, because something about Easterbrook’s reaction was off. If any of St. Just’s family had turned up missing, and then been reported found, he’d be dancing on the nearest fountain and bellowing the good news to the hills.

While Easterbrook’s mannerisms suggested dread.

“Mercia is a young man,” Easterbrook replied. “If it is him, and he still has his reason, and his health is not entirely broken, he could get back to his life, or a semblance of it.”

Anybody held by the French for months would have reserves of resilience St. Just could only envy, though the creature they found in the mess tent was pitiful indeed.

He sat alone at the end of one table, taking small bites of boiled potato, setting his fork down and chewing carefully, then taking another bite. His beef was untouched, his appearance unkempt, his bearded features sharp, like a saint newly returned from a spate of praying and wrestling demons in the wilderness.

“A real duke has pretty manners,” Easterbrook said, approaching the table, “but he’d be tearing into that beef if he’d been kept away from a good steak for months. I’m Easterbrook.”

He sat across from the skinny, quiet fellow with the brilliant blue eyes, and crossed his arms over his chest.

“My teeth are loose, Colonel,” the man said. “I cannot manage the beef, because the French became too parsimonious to feed me the occasional orange. Or perhaps they ran out of oranges themselves.”

“Ah, but of course—shame upon those niggardly French.” Easterbrook shot a long-suffering glance toward the several officers malingering two tables over. “Perhaps we should take this discussion outside.”

St. Just would have preferred to shoo their audience away, because the cool mountain air would cut right through the wraith at the table.

“We should take the discussion outside, Your Grace, Marcus,” said the wraith—softly. *Ducally*, St. Just’s informed opinion.

“My apologies,” Easterbrook replied, “Your Grace, indeed.” His tone was so punctiliously civil as to be mocking.

The man rose slowly—perhaps he could not abide leaving his potatoes unconsumed—and nobody moved to help him. St. Just discarded the notion given the determination in those blue eyes.

“Look here,” Easterbrook said when they’d drawn a few steps away from the mess tent. “If you were Christian Severn, Duke of Mercia, you’d bloody well not be sporting that beard. You look like you haven’t shaved in weeks, your hands are dirty, and without putting too fine a point on it,

wouldn't want to stand downwind of you on a hot day.”

None of which, in St. Just's opinion, had any bearing on the present situation.

“My hands shake too badly to wield a razor, Cousin, though less so now.” His Grace—why the hell not refer to him as such?—held out a right hand that did, indeed, suffer a minute tremor. “The French would not shave me, because I might succeed in slicing open my throat against the razor, regardless of the barber's skill. They clipped my beard occasionally instead.”

This was more logic, but Easterbrook waved an impatient—and also slightly unsteady—hand.

“The Duke of Mercia was a man in his prime, for God's sake. You're skin and bones and you have no uniform, no signet ring.”

Which, of course, the French would have taken possession of immediately upon capturing the fellow. Inside the mess tent, shuffling and murmuring suggested the audience had shifted close enough to hear the exchange.

“I was fed enough to keep me alive, not enough to keep me strong. You insult your cousin, Easterbrook.” The man spoke softly, as if he refused to entertain a lot of bored officers who at midday were not yet drunk.

“Half the camp knows I was cousin to Mercia,” Easterbrook spat as Anders led his horse up. “Having me identify the imposters has become a standing joke. My cousin was left-handed, you are right-handed with only your right hand. Explain that.”

The explanation had St. Just itching to hop back in the saddle and ride anywhere—Paris, Moscow, Rome—provided it was far, far away. His Grace held up his left arm, on the end of which was an appendage bearing five fingers; the last two of them bore old scars and curious angles at the joints.

“As a gift to the commanding officer, the guards decided in his absence that I was to write out a confession to present their superior upon his return from Toulouse. My captors neglected to realize I was left-handed.” The lost duke spoke slowly, each word chosen to convey the most information with the fewest syllables.

“The guards limited their attentions to the hand they thought I could not write with,” he went on. “I did not write out the confession in any case. When Colonel Girard was done having his guards beat me for their cheek, he was effusively apologetic.” That last phrase was flourished with subtle irony and such a perfect enunciation of the final consonants, that St. Just paced off a few feet, the better to curb his anger quietly.

“Anybody who reads *The Times* would know the story of the lost duke,” Easterbrook said, a bit desperately, to St. Just's ears. “My cousin was a robust man, handsome, fastidious, vain about his person. His family connections would be listed in *Debrett's*, and known to anybody who moved in the good Society. You're skinny, dirty, disgracefully turned out...”

He ranted on, for he was ranting, his voice rising, likely for the benefit of the officers inside the tent, but St. Just had heard enough.

“Easterbrook, mind your horse.”

Anders held the reins of a grand chestnut beast, solid, but with a hint of Iberian grace and refinement. The horse was pawing and curling its upper lip while craning its neck forward.

Toward the lost duke.

“Aragon?” Easterbrook was apparently not that canny a fellow. Beside Aragon, St. Just’s mouth was standing perfectly calm.

“Not Aragon,” the lost duke said, walking toward the horse. “Chesterton. You took my horse, Cousin, and changed his name. I suppose I am to thank you for looking after him when God knows what might have befallen him had he remained in French hands.”

The beast pawed repeatedly, and wuffled, a low, whickering sound of greeting.

And the love of a mute beast was, to St. Just, better evidence than any interrogation would ever yield.

“You’ve found your duke,” St. Just said. “Either the horse has read *Debrett’s* and colluded with an imposter, or that’s his master, plain as day.” A half-dozen officers had shuffled out of the mess tent in their uniforms declaring them cavalry, and not a one argued with St. Just’s conclusion.

Easterbrook scowled as the horse nuzzled at the lost duke’s pockets, each in turn. The duke scratched at the animal’s shoulder. Had the bloody horse been able to, it would have purred and hugged its owner.

“By God...” Easterbrook took a step toward a man whose death would have been convenient, but tragic. But the duke held up a hand—his good hand.

“Do not, I pray you, embarrass us both with an excessive display of sentiment comparable to that of this lowly beast. If you would show your welcome, fetch writing utensils that I might communicate with my duchess posthaste. A change of clothes would be appreciated as well, as would a bucket of water, a clean cloth, and soap.”

The horse gave up nuzzling empty pockets, but was either too well-bred or too canny to nudge more strongly at a master who would likely topple at such attention.

For the first time, Easterbrook’s expression conveyed consternation and...shock. “You don’t know Helene then. God help you, nobody told you about Helene.”

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