

NO MAN'S TERRITORY



Duncan Gaye

No Man's Territory
BY DUNCAN GAYE

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NO MAN'S TERRITORY

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CHAPTER 1 - THE COLLAPSE



March 1918, Near St. Quentin, France:

The dawn had not yet broken. Lieutenant Alistair Harrow pressed the binoculars harder against his eyes, willing them to penetrate the gloom beyond the curls of barbed wire. The metal was ice cold. Through the lenses, the landscape appeared in shades of gray. He saw the fractured terrain of no-man's-land. The mounds and contours becoming visible could have simply been earth and mud, or they could have been the bodies of the fallen. Nobody seemed to care either way anymore. In the distance, German positions lurked, just out of sight but clearly present. Beyond, the shattered remains of a forest.

He had stood on this ladder twice daily for three weeks, and in time, he came to understand the language of silence in a way only those who have honestly known its like can fully grasp. It was not just the absence of sound. It was something more primal and insidious.

He did not take his eyes off the front. His hands were steady, that was the key. He never let anyone see them shake. Below him, soldiers moved through their morning tasks. Alistair could hear it in the way they dragged their feet, men who had lost all hope of survival.

Lieutenant Harrow understood. The trench was grim. It smelled of latrines, deep mud, and lingering cordite from three days ago. This stench stuck to clothes, skin, and the inside of the nose. In deeper areas, the muck rose to knee-height. It was a thick gray that clung to boots, making each step a struggle that drained these men's spirits.

Rats. Always rats. They darted between the boots of standing men with a boldness as if they grasped the rules of survival better than the soldiers did. Alistair heard one, its distinctive skitter moving with purpose along the duckboards, its tail flicking back and forth. A young private hissed and stamped his boot in an attempt to shoo the unfortunate thing off, but the creature just stayed still. At this moment, neither the rat nor the private seemed willing to retreat.

The rungs under his boots on the ladder creaked with each shift of his weight. Rain soaked through the wood grain, and beneath the surface, the trench rot had already begun its patient work. Alistair noted this without sentiment. In three months, the ladder would collapse. Either they would be relieved before it happened, or they would cease to matter. The wooden support posts holding the trench wall upright were already bowing in places. The strain appeared as a gentle bulge. It seemed like the earth was slowly clenching the narrow space, like a fist tightening around a throat.

Alistair heard the rustling of a soldier directly beneath him and finally looked down to see who it was.

"Private," Alistair said, his voice pitched low enough that it would not carry beyond the trench. "Tighten those bootlaces, you look foolish."

The boy, for that was what he was, despite the uniform and rifle, looked up with startled eyes, then down at his feet where the mud-caked laces had come undone. His fingers trembled as he knelt to secure them.

"Yes, lieutenant Harrow. Sorry, sir."

Alistair turned away. No need to watch the humiliation. Six hours without a single shot. Six hours without the distant rumble of artillery or the crack of a sniper's rifle. Something was wrong.

He adjusted the binoculars and swept them left, toward the section of wire that had been patched after the last raid. One of his men had done the work and done it adequately. That was something. Not enough to matter, but something. The wire itself gleamed dully in the pre-dawn light, and beyond it, the crater-pocked earth rolled away toward the distant German lines. Nothing moved. Nothing moved for six hours. That was the problem. That was precisely the problem.

Alistair heard a young soldier cry out. Private Hawthorne—or was it Cawthorne?—had suddenly lost his footing on the wet duckboards. His arms windmilled, one boot slid out from beneath him into the mud, and for a moment the boy was entirely off-balance, his mouth agape. Alistair dropped his binoculars and slid down the ladder. His hand shot out and gripped the boy's shoulder, the muscle there rigid with panic, and held. Held firm. The boy was perhaps eighteen, all hollow cheeks and fearful eyes.

"Steady," Alistair commanded. The boy's frightened eyes locked on him at first, but then softened into something more like relief, or even gratitude. Alistair let him go with a casual wave, as if the boy's feelings did not matter. "Watch the boards, Private."

The boy nodded, then steadied himself against the ladder post, his breathing gradually slowing from the edge of panic. Alistair turned away before gratitude crystallized into conversation. Over three years of war, he learned that any acknowledgment of common suffering created a bond that would make the inevitable dying harder to witness.

His sergeant appeared through the predawn gloom, his strapping figure seeming to coalesce from the murk like a thought taking shape. Sergeant Wickham was a capable and methodical man, but he had a nervous habit of

often glancing at the wire, as if expecting the Germans to strike at any moment. When he spoke, he kept his voice low, barely above a whisper.

"Watch rotation, sir. I've put Cawthorne on the northern post, Matthews and Cross on the listening post at the wire. The lads in the reserve trench are standing to." Wickham paused, and his gaze, involuntarily, flicked toward no-man's-land. "All quiet up to now, sir. Too quiet, perhaps."

Alistair nodded in agreement, but he did not answer immediately. He was listening, concerned now that others had noticed the quality of silence pressing down upon them.

Alistair survived three years of war precisely because he had learned to listen for the unspoken. The earth was still. No distant rumble of German artillery. No crackle of small-arms fire from the forward positions. No whine of wind through the shattered trees beyond the wire. It was the kind of silence that came before catastrophe, the silence a man's nervous system recognized as a prelude to something terrible.

"Acknowledged," he said, finally. "Keep the men alert but not tense. The strain shows. Have them maintain position, no unnecessary movement."

"Yes, sir."

"And sergeant—yesterday, one of your privates looked like he was half asleep up there. I will not stand for such idleness in my unit. Make sure your men are ready for action. We are soldiers for Christ's sake, not gadabouts! That's an order!"

Wickham withdrew, and Alistair returned to the ladder. The rungs were slick beneath his palms. He climbed carefully, each movement precise, and pressed the binoculars back to his eyes. The world beyond the wire

remained unchanged. Gray upon gray, the suggestion of depth without revelation. The absence of detail was almost worse than the detail itself would have been. At least if they could see the enemy, a wisp of smoke, any type of movement or disruption, there would be something to measure against. This absolute stillness, this refusal of the world to give up its secrets, was something else entirely.

An hour passed. Or perhaps it was only thirty minutes. Time had become unreliable in recent weeks. The dawn gradually stole across the fields, bringing with it a wan gray light that revealed extraordinarily little and suggested everything. His eyes, pressed to the binoculars, began to water from the strain. Somewhere beneath the trench, rats chattered to one another in a language of survival. Yet, he did not move.

Above, in the space between the fire step and the parapet, a bird—a sparrow or some other common creature—alighted on the wire as if the war were a mere interruption in the natural order of things.

The order of things. Lieutenant Harrow knew he did not need to keep watch like this. He appreciated the risks. Any time he poked his head above the ledge, Fritz could blow his brains out the back of his skull. He had even seen it happen with his own eyes. He knew he had every right to order someone else to take his place on the ladder, Wickham, or any of the corporals.

Part of the reason was noble, to protect the men under his charge, naturally. The deeper truth, however, was that he could not trust a soul on either side of the wire. He could not take anyone's word for anything. He needed to be up here, to experience the veracity of the danger, to see it for

himself, to make it real. He would rather die in truth than live in the lies that were handed to him.

Alistair's hand trembled. Just slightly. Just enough so he noticed it, there, at the edge of his consciousness. He clenched his fist, then released it. The tremor subsided. Control. Control was the only thing that separated the officer from the animal. Control was what allowed a man to stand on a ladder in the pre-dawn dark and look out at the landscape that might kill him. He knew, with absolute certainty, that whatever came would find him standing.



THE LADDER TREMBLED slightly as Alistair's boots found purchase on the lower rungs. The descent took seconds. When his boots hit the mud of the trench floor, the impact sent a small spray upward, and the soggy ground accepted him as something real.

He leaned against one of the wooden support posts that held the trench wall from collapsing inward, and the wood felt solid. Real. He drew a Dunhill from the packet in his breast pocket. The matches came from a book marked with the name of some London hotel—a luxury from before, or perhaps a gift from the family solicitor.

He struck one. The flame flickered, casting a warm orange glow on his face. He was so exhausted, he could barely hold it between his lips, clenching his teeth against a fatigue that sleep no longer provided a remedy for. The cigarette caught. He drew the smoke in deeply, held it, exhaled through his nose.

For a moment, the sharp taste of tobacco felt like normalcy. It was as if a man could stand in a trench, smoke, and find some grace. He offered the

packet to Wickham, who stood nearby, nervously shifting from one foot to the other.

"Sir?" Wickham asked, though his eyes stayed fixed on the parapet, on the space beyond the wire where nothing visible moved.

"Cigarette," Alistair said, and it was not a command, though his tone made it impossible for the sergeant to refuse, even as he did.

"No, sir. Thank you, sir. If I may, I'd prefer to keep my wits sharp." Wickham's jaw worked slightly, and his hand drifted toward his rifle as if seeking reassurance. "Do you hear—"

But Wickham did not finish, because the world ended.

There was no sound at first. Only motion. The soggy earth underfoot suddenly erupted. It heaved upward as if something beneath it had awakened from a long sleep and was now thrashing toward the surface. Alistair felt his legs buckle. The support post he leaned against shattered completely. It burst apart, sending splinters flying. For a moment, those shards felt more real than breath.

Then the noise finally came. It was not like the artillery fire Alistair had heard in the earlier bombardments. This was not the crack of distant guns followed by the whine of shells arriving. This was something that consumed all other sounds, a roar originating from inside his own skull. Air, heat, and mud became a ferocious plasma that overwhelmed every one of his senses.

The mud bubbled up in a sustained, rolling surge that was less an explosion and more the manifestation of the Earth's own violence. Alistair saw, without being entirely certain he was seeing anything, a section of the trench wall collapse inward.

A man was standing there. Or had been. The distinction became unclear. There was now a pile of steaming mud where a man had been, and a spreading darkness that might have been shadow or might have been the worst thing his mind could conceive.

He was thrown skyward. The impact came from above and below and sideways all at once, a blow with no origin point and no end. In the split second before he lost all thought, it felt like he was being crushed, drowned, burned, and pulled apart, all in a singular terrifying instant. His body was momentarily weightless, suspended in an element, neither air nor liquid but something that existed outside the categories by which reality could be understood. But when he landed, he landed on something solid. Very solid. Something that pressed the air from his lungs with a violence that was almost intentional in its completeness.

Darkness, absolute, and suffocating. A weight upon his chest came from the earth itself. He tried to breathe and found breathing had become theoretical. He tried to move, but the mud packed around him like cement. He thought about his legs but realized he could not feel anything.

Everything was muffled. The sounds filtering through the packed earth above him were distorted and hollow. Someone was screaming; not in pain, but with the desperation of the damned who finally grasp their fate. The screams seemed to come from both far away and remarkably close, as if distance lost all meaning. He opened his mouth, and the earth filled it, coating his tongue with its chalky, salty taste and the copper-sharp tang of blood, his own or someone else's.

He tried to scream, but there was not enough breath for a scream. There was barely enough breath for anything. The weight on his chest was

immovable. He pressed his hands upward against it, not realizing it was a beam. His hands were strong and determined, but the beam resisted with its unyielding permanence.

The darkness became absolute. His eyes were open; he was almost certain they were open, but they perceived nothing. There was only the crushing pressure above him, the earth filling his mouth, and the distant, increasingly abstract sensation of pain radiating from the lower half of his body. A slow, terrible insight descended upon him: the world had indeed ended, and he had somehow survived.



HE DRIFTED IN AND OUT of lucidity with no reliable anchor. One moment, he felt the weight on his chest and the mud in his mouth. In the next moment, he sat in the reading room at Oxford. Sunlight streamed through tall windows onto leather-bound books. He read something, maybe Catullus or Virgil. Suddenly, his father's shadow crossed the page. Without warmth, his father said, "Remember, disappointment is a poor legacy." Then, Alistair found himself back in the mud, half submerged and gasping for breath that would not come, his lungs rattling like insects in a box.

Around him, the trench continued its slow transformation into a charnel house. The screaming stopped some time ago. What persisted was worse: the moaning of men who could no longer summon the energy for screaming, faint whimpers, the wet, terrible sound of a throat filling with blood.

Someone near him—the distance impossible to judge in the darkness—was praying in Latin. The words became noise, became a kind of rhythm against which the other sounds of destruction played themselves out. The

voice grew progressively weaker, less distinct, until finally it became something between a whisper and a rattle, and then it became nothing at all. The man, whoever he had been, fell silent.

Rats moved through the debris. Alistair became gradually aware of them, much like realizing a truth he had been trying to ignore. They were close. Remarkably close. He heard their claws scraping against stone, wood, and the broken remnants of the trench's contents. In a moment of clarity, or maybe delusion, he opened his eyes to see a rat's eye shining like a wet coal in the near-total darkness. The faintest glow seemed to come from everywhere and nowhere at the same time. The eye regarded him with an intelligence that felt almost insulting in its indifference.

He tried to move. His hands obeyed. He pushed upward against the beam and for just a moment—an eternity, really—it felt like it might move. But it did not. And when Alistair's strength gave out, which it did almost at once, the beam settled back into place with a sensation of finality.

He let out a scream, but it was not quite a scream. It was a raw, primal sound that did not belong to the species he thought he was. He screamed until his voice cracked, then pushed on through the hoarseness. Soon, the scream turned into a harsh scraping of his throat against the edges of its own failure.

Someone called out. His name, perhaps. Or a command. Or a prayer. The voice came from somewhere in the darkness, and Alistair tried to answer, but his voice was no longer his to command. What came forth was a mix of a whimper and a gasp. It was not enough. The voice calling out fell silent.

He was at Marlborough, being beaten by older boys for his size, his accent, his small hands. He was at Oxford, in a room with a girl whose name started with C or maybe K. She laughed at something he said. For the first time, he felt something like happiness or maybe relief at not being completely alone. He was marching toward the Front, his uniform pressed, his father's final words following him: "Do not disgrace the family." He stood in a trench that resembled this one, though it was from a different year, a different position. He watched a soldier take a bullet and plunge face-first into the mud, as if the earth called him home.

He was here. In the darkness. In the mud. In the heaviness of the beam. His throat was raw. When he swallowed, he tasted blood and something else—his own salt or the salt of the earth itself. The pain in his chest, where the beam rested, had become his baseline, the definition against which all other sensations were measured. The pain in his legs was almost abstract. He tried not to think. Thinking was dangerous now. Thinking led to awareness, and awareness led to the terrible clarity of his situation. It is easier to drift in the murky water of half-consciousness. Let memory and confusion blur together until it is difficult to tell what was from what is.

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The darkness began to change. It was a subtle shift, so gradual Alistair was not certain it was real. But soon, the new gray light, such as it was, began to reveal the full extent of the destruction. The trench was

unrecognizable. What was once a network of duckboards, posts, and reserve positions was now a hodgepodge of craters, collapsed walls, and broken timber. Bodies lay visible in places where darkness hid them. Some were moving with the faint, gradual movements of men dying slowly. Most were perfectly still.

Alistair did not believe he would be rescued. The part of him expecting stretcher-bearers or engineers or some other apparatus of the military to save him had disappeared in the darkness. Time and struggle wore it down, grain by grain, until it disappeared.

His eyes fell shut. He did not turn away from the sight before him; his body simply gave up the effort of keeping them open. He waited for the end with a calm resignation, knowing resistance would only drain what little energy he had left. He was going to die here, alone in a trench that did not exist on any map, surrounded by men who themselves were beyond witnessing.

The world would just as soon forget everyone. His death would be one more insignificant loss among millions. In accepting this, he found a strange sense of peace. The struggle was over, and he let go. He lay there, surrounded by the darkness, the mud, and the crushing weight, he waited.



THE FOOTSTEPS CAME out of nowhere. Alistair was no longer capable of discerning direction or distance with any certainty. His consciousness shrank to a narrow strip of reality. The sound of crunching debris approached, feeling more like a final mirage than a rescue, the mind's last farewell before shutting down. He tried to focus, to decide whether the

sound was real or whether he had finally crossed the threshold into the territory of the actually dead.

Boots appeared. First, they were all he saw: enormous boots, outsized against the rubble, approaching with what seemed like purpose. The light was still gray, still dim, but sufficient to reveal leather worn and mud-caked, and above the boots, a lower leg of colossal proportions.

Alistair's eyes traced upward, following the line of the figure as it saturated his narrow field of vision. There was something not quite human about the scale of it. The man—if it was a man—seemed to occupy space in a way other men did not. His dimensions were not right. Or the world had become exceedingly small, and this was a normal figure in an environment that had been shrunk to accommodate only the dying.

He wore a pale blue overcoat. The face resolved gradually, like a photograph developing in solution. Auburn beard, thick and unkempt. An old scar ran along his jaw, under his red stubble. Very dark, almost black eyes, regarding him with an expression Alistair was unable to classify, something close to clinical assessment, as if the figure were examining a mechanical problem that required solving.

"Ne bouge pas," the large man said. His accent was strange. His voice was a deep baritone. The words were French but mangled by another tongue underneath it. It took a second for Alistair to clear his mind enough to understand. Do not move, as if he had anywhere to go.

The massive man went to check another fallen soldier, just a few feet away. He nudged him with his boot, but the limp body stayed still, no movement or sound. His activity was economical. There was no wasted energy, no hesitation. His massive hands—as large as a man's head—

checked for signs of life, nonetheless. They moved with surprising gentleness, as if he feared damaging something else with them. He then grabbed the bloated corpse by the ankles and dragged it out of the way.

The big man turned his attention back to the massive log, raised an eyebrow and rubbed his chin twice. "Je peux," the man muttered. I can. As if reassuring someone. As if there was still doubt that a human being of his size was unable to carry out anything.

Alistair's voice, when it finally came, was almost unrecognizable. It sounded like a man who had been screaming for hours, days, or even years.

He rasped, "I'm Lieutenant Alistair Harrow, an officer. I—" The sentence broke off into a fit of coughing, and what he spat out was a mix of blood, phlegm, and the bitter taste of his own decay.

The man did not pause, did not acknowledge Alistair had spoken. He simply continued his work. His dark eyes fixed on the beam pinning Alistair to the earth.

"Calme-toi," the man said quietly. Calm yourself. It was a command, delivered with the certainty of a man accustomed to being obeyed, regardless of rank or circumstance.

Alistair's protests faded away. He realized that his authority, the very thing that defined him, was useless now. It set him apart from the others in the trench and gave him a sense of importance. But in this situation, it meant nothing. Worse, it was irrelevant. He was not an officer trapped under debris. He was just something to be moved. The person moving him followed a logic that had no ties to the hierarchies Alistair had always taken for granted.

The man placed himself at one end of the beam. He crouched down, his massive thighs tensing as he grasped the wood. For a moment, nothing changed. Then, with a surprisingly effortless motion, he lifted. The beam dislodged. It did not jerk or strain as Alistair's body had anticipated. Instead, it moved smoothly, gently. The weight that seemed impossible to budge, the weight that felt utterly immovable and permanent, turned out to be a manageable burden for someone with enough strength. He took three steps to the side. The beam swung away from Alistair's body and the giant lowered it onto the debris.

The pressure on Alistair's chest released. In its place came a sensation so complete and overwhelming that it erased everything else: pain. Both legs proclaimed their existence with a fiery screaming sensation. He gasped, opened his mouth to scream, and the man pressed his hand to Alistair's chest gently but with an absolute firmness communicating that this too was necessary.

"Pas seul," the man said. Not alone. Or perhaps: You are not alone. The distinction seemed important, though Alistair had difficulty articulating why.

The man—what was his name? Alistair should ask his name—straightened. He looked down at Alistair, and their eyes finally met for a moment.

"M—Merci?" Alistair managed to whimper, still unsure which language was useful in this situation, if any.

Without another word, the man bent down and grasped Alistair's torso with his enormous hands, so big they practically encircled his entire waistline, and hoisted the officer's entire body like it weighed no more than

a pillow. The pain of being moved was unbearable. It was the kind of agony that would normally cause someone to pass out, yet Alistair stayed conscious. He felt himself being lifted, his lower body dangling limply as the man slung him over his sturdy shoulder.

The man stood. The motion was smooth despite Alistair's body mass and despite its awkward distribution. Alistair's head hung down the man's back, his vision inverted and confused, blood rushing toward his brain. He saw the ruins of the trench from this new perspective. He caught sight of the bodies left behind.

And then they were moving. The man's stride was steady and careful. He avoided the deep shell holes and stayed on the remaining high ground. His footsteps were loud in the relative quiet of the morning. Behind them, the trench, the place where Alistair had almost died, the place where the men still lay, still waited, receded into the distance.



TIME BECAME THE RHYTHM of footsteps. Bounce and sway. Boots thudded against the ground, matching his deep, steady breaths. They moved through a space that was once pleasant, even idyllic, but now felt like a monument to death and devastation.

Alistair's world contracted to the view over Tomasz's shoulder: the scarred back of his neck, the slow roll of muscle beneath his shirt, and beyond him, the wreckage of battle drifting past. His vision swam. Consciousness and delirium traded places with each step. The pain in his lower body was constant now, almost bearable in its consistency. What was unbearable was the evidence passing below him, his field of vision speaking in a language of ruin.

A twisted piece of artillery, frozen mid-explosion, its barrel bent like a broken finger. A tree, or what was left of a tree, the trunk splintered vertically as if the earth tried to shatter it from the inside out. A shell hole, its crater filled with water the color of rust. The water was completely still. Alistair understood without being told; the stillness indicated the presence of corpses.

One soldier lay face-down, an arm reaching out as if trying to grab something just out of reach. Another sat upright at the crater's edge. He seemed to rest comfortably, but a dark stain near his abdomen revealed the truth. Blood seeped through his uniform into a puddle on the grass next to his corpse.

Then he recognized one. The body was partially buried, the mud reclaiming it gradually. But the uniform was visible, the boots distinctive. The placement of the body faced away from the trench, where he must have fallen mid-stride, no doubt running for his life.

"Wickham," Alistair whispered, and the name came out as barely more than air.

Sergeant Wickham. The man who glanced nervously toward no-man's-land. The man whose last words Alistair did not recall.

Tomasz made no acknowledgment he had heard. But his grip became somehow more secure, and he continued walking. As they neared the body, Alistair saw the face—or what was left of it. It lay turned in the mud, the expression frozen in a state that was neither peaceful nor in pain, but empty, vacant. The sergeant had never been a remarkable man. He had been competent, nervous, loyal in the way recruits learned to be loyal. And now he was mud, slowly being reabsorbed into the earth.

Behind them, the destroyed trench receded further into the distance and into the past. Around them, the view offered no consolation. The sky was still gray. The wind, when it came, carried the scent of death and the smell of earth that had been violently displaced and had not yet settled.

Somewhere in the distance—or perhaps remarkably close—a man was screaming. The sound was thin and high-pitched. It was the wail of someone who had been screaming for so long, the human voice had begun to deteriorate under the strain. And then it stopped. The silence that followed it was, if possible, worse than the sound itself.

Alistair struggled to pinpoint the moment, but he became aware they were alone. There were no other soldiers in sight, no rescue teams, no stretcher-bearers, no medics rushing to help. It was just him and the giant, moving through desolate slopes and rises, as if they were the last two living things in a place where only the dead belonged.

At some point—it might have been an hour; it might have been minutes—Tomasz slowed his pace. His steps became more deliberate, more careful. Alistair realized they were descending into a shallow ditch. There was water here, a small amount, just a trickle, but enough to suggest the earth had not entirely forgotten how to operate. Tomasz lowered Alistair with an almost reverential amount of care. He set him down in the ditch, keeping one arm underneath Alistair's shoulders, supporting him so his head did not fall backward into the mud.

A canteen appeared, the metal dented and scarred by years of use and war. Tomasz brought it to Alistair's lips. When Alistair drank, the water tasted like iron and earth and something else—something that might have been hope. Although Alistair believed hope dead in him for a long time

now. Tomasz's hand, the enormous hand, holding Alistair's head steady, was gentle. The word seemed impossible applied to anything connected to the war, but it was accurate. The hand was—Tomasz was—aware that Alistair's body was fragile and that survival clung by the thinnest of margins. One careless move would push them back into the abyss. The hand did not squash. It cradled.

"Thank you," Alistair whispered. The words felt inadequate, false, a tiny offering in the face of what this man had done. But they were all he had.

Tomasz said nothing. He held Alistair's head, positioned the canteen at his lips, and let him drink until his expression showed that he satisfied his thirst.

"Qui êtes-vous?" Alistair asked. It was a question that required asking, though he was not certain it required answering. Who are you? But the question and its asking held more than that. It contained: Why? Where are we going? What is happening to me? Will I live? Does it matter?

Tomasz was quiet for a long moment. His dark eyes were looking at something beyond the horizon. His massive chest rose and fell with each breath. When he finally moved, it was not to speak. He let out a long sigh. It expressed every mile he traveled, every death he witnessed, and all the losses around them. He readjusted Alistair's body more fully against the ditch wall, bracing him there with care, and they rested.

After several minutes, he stood, his enormous frame rising, and he reached down. His hands took hold of Alistair's torso once more, and with the same smooth motion as before, he lifted him. Carried him up out of the ditch. Positioned him across his shoulder again.

The answer lay in the motion itself, in the act of continuing. Tomasz paused to give water, holding him gently. Now, he moved forward, carrying him deeper into the morning fog, which rose from the earth like something being set free.

They walked on, the distance gradually dissolving into mist around them. The fences and landmarks they passed became increasingly faint, shadows of shadows. The bodies of men and horses alike became mere suggestions, shapes glimpsed and then lost.

They approached a stand of trees, and the view closed in around them. When Alistair looked back, all he saw was fog and a hint of the ruined field they crossed. Looking ahead, he saw only the endless forest, shadows within shadows, the ground rough with fallen trees and muddy puddles. The sound of their footsteps seemed to come from a different world, distant and unreal.

Alistair looked up at Tomasz's profile. He noticed Tomasz's jaw clenched and his dark eyes focused on a goal ahead. The man was huge and incredibly strong. His steps never faltered or wavered. He moved as if he carried nothing at all. Alistair's weight seemed insignificant compared to what he bore. He felt the bearing of survival, the harshness of the terrain, and all the choices that brought him to this moment, this forest, this impossible passage.

The fog closed around them like a hand, a mercy. Alistair, suspended across Tomasz's shoulder, gratefully watched the fog swallow the countryside. His small body was held by the tremendous strength of this man who had no reason to save him, yet had merely found him, lifted him,

and continued walking. The pain was still there, and it would always be. But it was no longer all he was.

The trees swallowed them. Their combined silhouette merged against the smoke-hazed horizon. They had merged into a single shape now, a unified form moving through the ruin with the inevitability of gravity. Behind them, the field lay empty and still. Ahead, somewhere in the distance, somewhere beyond the twisted wood and the fog, there had to be something else. Something that was not this. Something that was not death and mud and the smell of decay. Tomasz seemed to believe in it, and so Alistair allowed himself the luxury of hope. It was barely hope at all, really, but the refusal to stop breathing, the acceptance that he was being carried, and that being carried was, for now, enough.

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CHAPTER 2 - THE CAMPSITE



The camp announced itself first through its aroma. It carried the scent of burning fabric, spilled supplies, and the distinct aura of hasty abandonment, rather than the fresh stench of death they had been moving through for hours. Alistair's eyes, which had been drifting in and out of focus, snapped open as Tomasz's pace slowed. The fog began to lift. The view opened before them into a hollow depression, and in that depression lay the wreckage of a campsite. Burned tents with their canvas blackened collapsed in on themselves. Scattered belongings lay everywhere: a boot, a cup, and something that may have been a letter. The ink ran together, obscured by exposure to rain and snow. A mess kit smashed beyond usability. A helmet with a hole punched clean through the crown. Alistair's small body tensed against Tomasz's chest. His hands gripped the larger man's coat with urgency.

He then saw it: a French flag. The tricolor lay half-buried in mud near a collapsed supply shed. It looked trampled, as if someone ground it into the earth with their boots. The white of it was the color of old bone now, the red faded to something between rust and dried blood, the blue nearly black with accumulated filth.

The understanding arrived gradually, seeping in like groundwater. This was no ordinary debris field. This was his own. It had once been his. Tomasz's breathing changed, confirming it. His breaths deepened, becoming more like a stifled response to disaster. His camp, his men, his entire world, all reduced to ashes and scattered debris.

Tomasz rolled Alistair from his shoulder and dropped him in a heap next to the skeleton of a charred, shredded tent. Then, he stood still, his tall frame outlined against the gray sky, gazing at the camp.

The officer managed to push himself backward and prop his spine against a pole that somehow stayed embedded upright in the soft earth. He could see the camp a little better from this position. It was a line of five or six tents, each in a different state of ruin, partially concealed by a row of bushes. He was not immediately able to discern the camp's function.

The tent he leaned on was the most structurally complete, though its walls had been torn away. To his left, there was a single upright pole surrounded by a tangled mass of wet canvas, mud, ropes, and likely a few dead Frenchmen, or parts of them, anyway.

The next tent was partially collapsed; a dark gray mass of fabric draped over two central posts. The edges flapped slowly in the breeze, giving it just a hint of movement. The pain was getting into Alistair's mind, and the way the structure swayed reminded him of a wild elephant, or more precisely the ghost of one, lumbering towards him.

Further down from the fiendish creature, everything was scorched and flattened, with various lumps and protrusions visible under the canvas. Alistair could not be certain if there were two or three more tents, but he was confident more dead lay underneath.

He saw something shift in Tomasz's face. His jaw tightened, and the corners of his eyes drew in, but his expression stayed calm. It was his body that revealed his struggle. A tremor returned to his hands. His shoulders hunched inward, making him seem smaller, as if he wanted to disappear for a moment.

He approached a dead soldier who lay face down. Alistair could not see it all from where he sat. Only a part was visible. An eagle pin on his collar marked him as Polish, Haller's Blue Army. His position suggested he had not died instantly. He must have dragged himself a few dozen meters before ultimately expiring. Tomasz knelt beside him, his enormous frame folding like a hinge. And there, in that gesture, was something that Alistair had not seen before: he crossed himself. His right hand moved slowly, tracing the cross from forehead to chest, then to the left shoulder and right. His fingers paused on his chest, as if holding something inside that might escape if he let go. His lips moved, and Alistair heard nothing, but he understood the ritual.

Tomasz removed the eagle pin and slid it into his pocket. When he stood, his barrel chest heaved an exhalation, and his eyes turned skyward. Something inside him shifted. The paralysis broke. The knowledge had been absorbed.

Now there was only the work to be done. Tomasz moved through the camp with methodical purpose. He carefully examined a piece of canvas from a collapsed tent, tangled in charred wood, and decided it was worth the effort to free it. He looked through shattered wood from ammunition crates. He chose pieces long enough to be useful. Next, he came across a leather belt on a corpse. Alistair saw him hesitate before taking it, his massive hand hovering above the dead man's waist before unbuckling and removing it. He went through this process several times, always with the same hesitation, and collected half a dozen.

He cut cloth into lengths; each piece checked for strength. Some pieces were discarded, others kept and set in a small pile near where he laid

Alistair.

When Tomasz had what he needed, he returned. Kneeling by the officer, he lowered his big frame to make himself smaller. It seemed silly given their size difference, but it helped him get the work done. His hands, which trembled hours before, were now completely steady, moving with a new purpose.

He began with Alistair's left leg. His hands moved carefully, feeling the damage. Then he started working with the strips, creating structures, building support systems. He placed the wood slats alongside the limb, pressing them together firmly but gently, providing a framework. The fabric wrapped around everything, holding it all together. His movements were quick and deliberate, performed in silence.

Alistair tried speaking once. When Tomasz was working on the right leg, when the pain was particularly acute, Alistair whispered: "Je suis désolé."

I am sorry. For what? For being injured? For slowing them down? For forcing this man to dig through the bodies of his brothers to find materials to create a splint? The apology was inadequate, but it was all he had. And he knew those were incapable of touching what had happened here. They would not undo it. They would not repair the inescapable sense of loss that surrounded them.

"Pas d'excuses," Tomasz answered directly. Do not apologize.

And with that, he plainly continued working, finishing the binding on the right leg, then beginning work on a system of support that would allow him to carry Alistair another way. Made from the remains of his own

destroyed camp, the proper sling would hold Alistair's body differently against his frame.

Alistair would no longer be draped over the big man's shoulder. His ribs and torso would no longer be compressed under his own weight, making breathing easier. Instead, the canvas would wrap around him, drawing him tight against Tomasz's torso. His broken legs would be more comfortable as well, splinted and suspended in a horizontal cradle. His physique would be distributed more evenly, bodies brought closer together. Chest to chest.

Tomasz finished and tested it by pulling on the canvas and pressing against the splints. He wanted to make sure everything would hold. Then he looked at Alistair. In his dark eyes, there was an expression that might be apology, resignation, or just acceptance. This was how things were now, and how they would have to be.

He lifted Alistair with the same care as before. Now, he positioned him against his chest, settling his backside into the sling he made. The canvas held. The splints held. Alistair felt his broken body cradled and supported. His face was level with Tomasz's shoulder; his small frame pressed against the larger man's torso. Almost immediately, he felt Tomasz's heartbeat against his chest. He smelled the sweat and the earth, and the scent of his own blood mixed with the larger man's skin. The proximity was at once humiliating and strangely grounding. He was being swaddled like a baby, and he had to make a choice: to resent it or to accept it.

Tomasz stood up, shifting back and forth to test the balance. The sling held firm. He took a moment to gaze out at the camp's remains: the burned tents, scattered belongings, and the bodies of his brothers lain to rest in the earth. Alistair waited to see if Tomasz would glance back, if he would

acknowledge what they were leaving behind. But he did not. Tomasz simply turned away from the camp and started walking. They climbed out of the depression, leaving the hollow of his past behind, and headed toward whatever remained of the future. His stride was steady, with a slight adjustment for the new weight distribution, but its purpose stayed unchanged. Forward. Always forward. There was no other direction left for them now.



CHEST TO CHEST. THE realization arrived with an almost palpable shock. Alistair's small frame pressed against Tomasz's chest. His broken legs rested in the canvas cradle. Alistair's ear rested over Tomasz's heart. He counted the beats—alive, alive, alive. Each breath the big man took pressed against his ribs. Their uniforms, sweat-soaked and mud-caked, clung where they touched. He smelled iron and salt. He felt the tremor in Tomasz's arms, the adjustment of his stride, the deliberate care with each step. He was being held like a child. It was intensely intimate, but also deeply humiliating; the only thing keeping him alive.

It took some time to adjust. He needed to adjust how he moved, spreading the load differently. His steps were slow and deliberate, as if his body were having to calculate the new mathematics of carrying. Alistair sensed every choice, each shift in weight, and every posture change. He noticed in his own body when Tomasz changed direction or stopped to deliberate. Tomasz moved as if he were carrying something delicate, and the recognition he was the delicate thing being carried was both sobering and eye-opening.

The heat from Tomasz's body, the dampness of his undershirt, and the smell of arduous work filled the air. It was not an unpleasant smell. It was, in fact, deeply reassuring. It was the smell of effort, of labor undertaken, of a body working beyond its natural limits and continuing anyway. Alistair spent his life among men who attempted to conceal such things behind cologne and the rituals of cleanliness. Tomasz's rawness felt primeval and almost sacred. His presence demanded honesty and rejected pretense.

The metallic taste of blood lingered in Alistair's mouth, his own, he thought, though he was not sure. Beneath it, he smelled the coppery scent of Tomasz's skin. The larger man's neck was close enough for Alistair to see his pulse. He could have pressed his fingers to it and felt the rhythm of life, still going despite everything. But he did not reach out. He stayed still, knowing that any movement would force Tomasz to adjust, placing more demands on his already tired muscles.

The environment changed as they moved. They were descending a bit, entering smoother ground with fewer craters. Trees here had been damaged but not obliterated. The earth bore scars from past violence, but it was not chemically damaged. It still had the potential for new life to thrive. It was progress, or at least the suggestion of it. Hope, or the idea of hope.

They came upon a stream at one point. The water was remarkably clear, given everything. Tomasz slowed his pace as he approached it. He did not enter the water. He carefully knelt, lowering his center of gravity. He supported Alistair as he bent. Tomasz refilled his canteen from earlier, as well as a second one he scavenged from the French camp. He drank deeply before offering it to Alistair, who could feel the water travelling down through his body. The water was cold, shockingly so. Tomasz's hand held

the smaller man steady as he took his water, one massive palm supporting Alistair's head with a gentleness that was almost unbearable.

After a while, Alistair's mind, which had been reduced to purely bodily sensation for so long, began to reassert itself. Questions formed. Words demanded articulation. Around them, the country fields continued their slow transformation. The light was beginning to shift, the shadows lengthening. It was moving toward sunset's golden hour. The exhaustion Tomasz had to be feeling was becoming palpable, even if unspoken.

"Où allons-nous?" The question emerged as barely more than a whisper. Where are we going? But the words contained more. They contained: Why are you doing this? How much farther? Will I live? Does it matter?

Tomasz went silent for a moment. His stride continued, unbroken, and Alistair thought he had not heard, or had heard and decided not to answer. Then, his voice was soft and steady, almost conversational despite the mangled accent: "Ouest. Poste anglais."

West. English post. Alistair let his head fall back against the cradle of canvas. The soldier understood French, at least a little bit. He had understood this whole time.

Sometime later, Tomasz produced a flask from a secret pocket. He gently brought the bottle to Alistair's lips. He paused, wanting him to understand what was being offered. Then, he tilted it, letting the liquid flow into his mouth. The liquid was strong alcohol, some type of French liqueur. It burned down Alistair's throat like fuel. The taste was bitter and warm, like survival itself, and it spread through Alistair's chest like fire. For a moment, the pain in his legs took a backseat to the burning sensation.

"Facile," Tomasz said. Easy. His strong hand rested on Alistair's chest, stopping him from drinking too much. "Doucement."

The endearment, if it might be called that, was implicit in the gesture. Tomasz's care was precise. He controlled the dosage carefully. His large hand cradled Alistair's small body gently. He knew what the officer needed and made the necessary adjustments. Alistair's French was rusty, but it was more than enough. He was learning through proximity, through presence, and through the simple fact that Tomasz decided his life was worth saving. He was carrying that decision out with meticulous care.

The flask disappeared back into the coat. The alcohol was already kicking in. Alistair's mind felt dreamlike, with the lines between his body and Tomasz's starting to blur. He rested his face against Tomasz's shoulder and let the fire in his throat make the rest of the world small and distant.

They walked as the light continued to shift. The horizon opened before them, the trees giving way to open ground. The wind picked up as they left the shelter of the trees. It brought the smell of rain and a hint of coming storms. Tomasz's pace did not slacken. He moved ahead, his heavy frame shielding Alistair from the harsh wind. His strength kept him steady against the merciless gusts.



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THE SMELL OF STAGNANT water reached them first. It was a foul soup percolating through the earth, a collection of melted snow and groundwater that sat and putrefied for weeks or more. It absorbed the decay of everything that fell into it. Bodies, motor oil, equipment. The various disintegrating materials of a place that endured many years of war. The smell was profound, sweet, and rotten and chemical, all at once.

A distant rumble echoed across the field. Artillery or thunder. It had become genuinely impossible to tell the difference. Alistair's whole body tensed. His officer's instinct urged him to check the direction, the distance, and the likelihood of incoming fire. His eyes searched the sky for a dark speck of a plane and scanned the distant hills for flashes from artillery muzzles. Beside him, against him, pressed against him, Tomasz never looked up. His dark eyes fixed on the path ahead, his massive shoulders did not alter their bearing, his pace did not change.

The corpses were everywhere, distributed throughout the field as if scattered by a careless hand. Alistair, after a time, recognized a ghastly configuration. This was the geography of a battle that swept across this ground, fighting for every inch and leaving its dead where they fell. British, German, and French uniforms lay scattered: brown, gray, and blue. In death, the differences between them seemed to fade away.

The mud-stained fabric, the shapes that were once men, still held the basic form of human bodies, but stopped being human in any real sense. Some were recent enough that decomposition had not yet begun in earnest. Others had been here long enough for the earth to start reclaiming them. It took them back slowly, making their return unmistakable.

Tomasz guided them around a waterlogged body. It was swollen grotesquely, the uniform straining to hold it. The face lay sideways in the mud, and Alistair felt relief. He did not want to see the expression or what last moments had etched themselves into those features. His stomach churned, and he pressed his face against Tomasz's coat. He hoped the fabric might filter the air, keeping the stench of death from settling in his lungs.

A soldier lay sprawled face-down perhaps ten yards from their path, one arm extended as if still reaching for something just beyond his grasp. The uniform was British. Or had been. What was left of it was mud-colored and indistinguishable from the earth surrounding it. The face was turned sideways into the mud. The expression was neutrality itself—neither peace nor agony, but instead the face of someone who had plainly ceased to be. Alistair found himself studying the boots. They were good boots. They had been cared for. Someone polished them once, in a different world, in a time when such things mattered. The mud was claiming them now.

A horse lay nearby on its side, massive even in death. The bloated body was swollen to grotesque proportions, suggesting it had been dead for several days. The smell of it reached Alistair even at a distance. It was sweet and rotten, the stench of animal putrefaction. Flies rose from it in a cloud when Tomasz adjusted his course to give the corpse a wider berth. The gesture was instinctive. There was no strategic advantage in it. Tomasz just decided the horse was something they should avoid, and so he avoided it.

Alistair found himself thinking, with a clarity that felt almost obscene, that the horse had seen a better death than most. It had been out of the trenches. It had seen sky, however gray. It had been moving under its own

power until the moment it was not. That was something. That was infinitely better than getting buried alive beneath a beam in the dark.

They continued, but the field seemed endless. How long had they been walking? Hours? The light was failing now. The gray became grayer, the shadows longer and darker. The wind picked up, carrying with it the promise of rain, the cold that suggested a storm was forming. Tomasz's breathing grew deeper and more labored. It was not from weakness. He was carrying a man over rough terrain for an impossibly long distance. Alistair noticed the small tremor in Tomasz's shoulders. It was a slight shake, hinting that even this incredibly strong man had his limits.

The flies grew louder as they approached a section of the field where the bodies were more densely clustered. It was not a mass grave, but a spot where the battle had clearly been intense. Men fell close together, and since then the many deaths started to form a small ecosystem. The buzzing was a living thing, a sound that filled the world. It was impossible to think of anything except the millions of insects engaged in their work of dissolution and consumption.

Alistair thought about his own men. The dependable officers like Wickham, and the constant rotation of younger boys that the war ground up with no pretense or excuse given. They did have names: the Hawthorns and the Cawthorns, the Crawfords, Alfords, and Ashfords. The war had become absurd and senseless, a carousel of death with no meaning. He felt something inside him start to break apart.

The officer's composure, which held strong during the explosion, entrapment, and long ordeal, began to crumble. It occurred gradually, like a dam cracking under too much pressure. Tears filled his eyes. It was the

pain, of course, but also exhaustion and grief. He tried to hide them in the blue haze of Tomasz's coat to maintain what little sense he had left of being in control. But the tremble in his body gave him away. It betrayed the strict discipline that defined him, the military bearing, and the refusal to show emotion in front of others. His shoulders shook, not violently, but noticeably, and the realization began to settle in him that Tomasz would know that the officer he was carrying had finally broken.

Instead of saying anything, instead of giving empty words, Tomasz slowed his pace. Just a little. This slight change eased the jostling. And then one massive hand released its supporting grip, briefly, dangerously, and rose to Alistair's head. His palm, callused, scarred, and warm, covered the officer's skull with an almost unbearable tenderness. And with that, Alistair began to cry, unceasingly.

How long had they stood there? Alistair had no idea. The world reduced itself to Tomasz's heartbeat and his body's warmth. His powerful hand, undoubtedly capable of intense brutality, was now being used to hold and to protect. The officer's breakdown was met not with contempt but with patience.

When Tomasz finally resumed walking, the pace was slower than before. His strides shortened slightly, becoming more of a shuffling progress than a true stride. His massive chest heaved with each breath. But his hand stayed where it was, cradling Alistair's head, and the officer's tears continued to fall. Neither of them tried to pretend that something fundamental had not just shifted between them.

Their surroundings began to change. Ahead of them, the field was giving way to different terrain. Haggard remnants of what had once been an

orchard began to emerge from the devastation. These trees once bore fruit, but now they were simply collateral damage. Their trunks were split and splintered. And beyond the orchard, visible through the growing darkness, the stone walls of what might once have been a farmhouse. A structure. A shelter. A destination that was, impossibly, becoming tangible. Tomasz moved steadily while carrying Alistair. Alistair gripped his neck tightly. For the first time, he let himself believe they might survive.



THE COTTAGE ROSE UP before them like it came from a storybook. Stone, mostly intact despite the obvious violence it survived. One corner of the structure collapsed inward, but the basic architecture was sound. The roof was partially gone, rafters exposed to the cloud-laden sky. The door stood ajar, waiting. Tomasz approached it with the deliberation of a man assessing a position, weighing shelter against risk. After a moment, he shifted Alistair's weight, steadied himself, and ducked sideways through the opening.

Inside, dust floated in the last remnants of murky daylight, stirred by the intrusion. The ambiance was one of disuse and abandonment, but beneath it lingered the ghost of its former peaceful habitation. A chair overturned. A table scarred by use. A bowl and spoon left where someone had once paused, then never returned.

Tomasz carried Alistair through the room and set him down on a stained mattress beside the stone hearth. Ash and old char coated its basin, but the chimney above was still intact despite the broken roof. Alistair's fingers slipped from Tomasz's neck. Once settled, he stretched his broken legs and

leaned back against the wall. Then, his stomach tightened — a hollow ache he had not noticed until now.

Somewhere outside, a chicken clucked.

Tomasz stilled. His head tilted slightly, and he stepped back out into the yard. When he returned, the bird hung limp in his hand, feathers dulled with mud. He set it aside and went to work without ceremony. He added some wood he had gathered to the hearth and coaxed the fire to life inside the stone basin. Heat took hold quickly, contained, purposeful.

Tomasz cleaned the chicken near the doorway, then skewered it on a length of green wood. He set the spit beside the embers rather than over the flame, turning it when the skin tightened and split. Grease hissed then settled. The satisfying smell of cooking food filled the room.

Tomasz tore the meat into pieces, and they ate in silence. The fire crackled beside them. As warmth filled the cottage, its mood changed. Shadows retreated. The cold loosened its grip. What had been a shell became shelter.

Alistair heard him moving through the space. He heard him searching. A thin sound suggested a trickle of water coming from somewhere, a partially blocked pipe or a crack in the stone. Then Tomasz reappeared, carrying the bowl. The chipped ceramic was worn and stained with age, but it held water. Clean water, or clean enough.

He knelt beside Alistair with a gentleness that seemed impossible for a man of his size. His enormous frame folded like a hinge, the muscles in his thighs and calves extending and contracting with the movement. He dipped the edge of a cloth—torn from something, Alistair did not know what—into the water and brought it to the officer's face. The water was cold. When

Tomasz pressed the cloth against Alistair's cheek, the sensation was almost electric.

He began to clean. Methodically. Carefully. The cloth moved across Alistair's face, wiping away the accumulated mud, the dried blood, the salt residue of tears that dried in the cold. Each stroke was gentle. None of the brusqueness of military efficiency. This was a man engaged in the work of restoring dignity through cleanliness.

When he finished with Alistair's face, Tomasz wrung out the cloth and returned to the water. He washed his own massive hands that were stained with blood and dirt and the accumulated filth of the day's journey. He dipped his fingers into the water, gently clearing the dirt from beneath his nails. His dark eyes focused on the task, as if it were vital for his hands to be clean. When he finished, he set the bowl aside and stood.

That was when he unbuttoned his coat and shrugged the heavy fabric from his shoulders. Beneath it was his tunic and then a cotton undershirt, soaked through with sweat, clinging to the massive frame with the adherence of a second skin. For a moment he just stood there, the tunic held in his hands. Then he set it aside and reached for the buttons of the chemise, opening it, and then pulling it off over his head.

The removal of the garment revealed what Alistair had intuited but not seen: the vast and undeniable reality of the man who was carrying him. Tomasz had a huge chest, covered in fine hair. He looked like someone who spent years on a farm, in mining, or doing other tough jobs that shaped and tuned his body into an instrument of pure strength. But the strength was not unmarked. Scars crisscrossed his torso. Some old, pale lines suggested injuries from long ago, others more recent, some still healing. A mark

across his left ribs that looked as though a bullet grazed him, leaving a burn that was slowly fading. A splotch of skin under his ribcage was blossoming in purple and red, where the sling had been drawn taut against his abdomen. Tomasz pressed on the spot with his thumb and exhaled. Carrying Alistair was taking a toll on his body, leaving visible marks.

He moved back to the fire and crouched beside it, adding more wood. His back and shoulder muscles shifted under his skin with each move. He was not putting on a show; it was just the way his body was built. Alistair found himself unable to look away. The bruise beneath his ribcage had deepened since the sling came off. Alistair could see it from here, the dark bloom of it spreading under the skin. Tomasz did not look at it. He added another piece of wood to the fire and watched to make sure it caught.

The man tended the fire with the same meticulous attention he brought to cleaning Alistair's face. He positioned each piece of wood with precision. The arrangement of the flames was adjusted, optimized, made to serve their needs as effectively as possible.

"Repose-toi."

The words were soft: "Rest yourself." Or simply, "Rest." It was both a command and a permission. It meant they could pause, at least for now. Tomasz sat beside the fire. He was not too close to be uncomfortable, but near enough for his warmth to reach Alistair. His stout frame relaxed, releasing the tension of movement. His dark eyes reflected the flames.

Alistair had no words. Language felt irrelevant, inadequate, a tool designed for people in worlds that still made sense. Instead, he rested his head against the stone wall behind him and watched the fire. He watched the way the flames moved, the way they consumed the wood and

transformed it into heat, light, and ash. He watched the way Tomasz's face in profile looked at the fire. The exhaustion that had been threatening for hours finally became impossible to resist. Alistair's eyes grew heavy. His breathing slowed.

The pain in his legs faded away. It felt distant and unreal, like it belonged to someone else. His body felt like a stranger to him, a temporary shell he was inhabiting. The ruined farmhouse stood around them. It offered shelter and small comforts: stone, fire, and human companionship. More so, it maintained the presence of one human being who believed another was worth saving.

Outside, the night was falling. The wind was rising, carrying with it the threat of rain. The devastation continued beyond the walls. It persisted, indifferent to the small spark of human warmth that Tomasz created within them. But inside, there was fire. There was shelter. There was the knowledge that for this night, at least, they would not be alone in the darkness.

Alistair watched the flames, struggling to stay awake as sleep constantly threatened to overtake him. He watched Tomasz tend the fire. He saw the man's tall frame silhouetted by the light. He noticed how carefully he held their small sanctuary together.

Alistair watched Tomasz tend the fire, positioning each log with the same precision he had used on the splints. The wind rose outside. Rain would come soon. But here, now, there was the warmth of the fire, and the silhouette of a man who believed the night was worth surviving.

Alistair's eyes grew heavy. He let them close.

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CHAPTER 3 - THE STRANGERS



Consciousness did not arrive with sight, nor sound, but heat; the immense, breathing warmth of another body. Tomasz was beside him. He had been beside him through the night, Alistair realized. Not merely in proximity, but in contact. The larger man sat next to Alistair on the thin mattress when he fell asleep. But throughout the night, they had naturally drifted closer, drawn together by warmth or instinct.

Tomasz's enormous frame curved slightly toward Alistair's small body. One massive arm extended loosely across the officer's chest. It did not pin him down like the beam but instead held him safe and secure. A caring presence spoke through its gravity. The night was over, and they had both made it through.

The size of it struck Alistair anew. The man's hand, even relaxed in sleep, was larger than his own head, his forearm as thick as the officer's useless leg. The breadth of Tomasz's shoulder, the thickness of his neck, the vast geography of his torso. It was a solid foundation that Alistair had been resting against for hours, and morning consciousness made the fact of it impossible to ignore.

He lay very still, afraid that any movement might wake the other man. His eyes traced the contours of Tomasz's face in the minimal light. The scar along his jaw was even more pronounced now, the skin around it having relaxed into sleep, showing the bone structure beneath. The big man breathed deeply and steadily.

Alistair allowed himself a moment to observe without being observed. The vulnerability of sleep seemed absurd applied to such a man. And yet there it was. Tomasz, in sleep, seemed smaller somehow. Not small, never small, but less imposing. Less a force of nature and more a man who earned his rest. His ruddy beard caught the dim light from the embers. Silver threads were visible, hinting he might be older than Alistair first thought. The scar tissue across his shoulders, visible even now, told stories that Alistair had not asked to hear.

The moment broke when Tomasz's eyes opened. No transition. No gradual emergence into wakefulness. Simply the eyes, dark and observant, opening and immediately becoming aware. He did not move his arm. He looked at Alistair. For a long moment, neither of them moved. The moment stretched in a way that time should not permit. Tomasz's chest rose and fell, and then he withdrew his arm. The loss of that weight was more startling than its presence had been.

Tomasz rose with the economy of motion that characterized all his movements. His massive frame unfolded from the mattress, and he stood looking down at Alistair. Then he moved toward the hearth, kneeling to examine the fire. He fed it new wood. Alistair did not know where he obtained it from. Perhaps he gathered it in the darkness while standing guard. Perhaps it had been readily available, part of the detritus of the farmhouse. The wood ignited, and the embers glowed brighter with new fuel. Within minutes, the fire grew into something strong.

Tomasz returned to the stale mattress where Alistair lay. Without speaking, he knelt, and his hands began to move across the canvas sling that held the officer yesterday afternoon. The work was precise. The knots were

gone over. The seams were looked at closely. The canvas was flattened and the wrinkles from use were smoothed out. Each section of the sling received attention. Each connection point was verified. Only when Tomasz seemed satisfied that everything was secure did he move back to gather new materials.

This surprised Alistair. The sling was functional. It had been enough to hold him yesterday. But Tomasz was reinforcing it. Doubling certain seams. Creating new attachment points. He worked on the floor beside the fire, his massive hands moving with stunning dexterity for fingers that size. Threading. Knotting. Testing each new element by pulling with the kind of strength that would have torn lesser fabric to shreds. But the cloth held. The knots held. Tomasz seemed to nod to himself, satisfied, but the work continued.

Alistair watched from his position on the bedding. He could not have moved if he tried. His legs were locked in their pain. His body was exhausted beyond the point of voluntary motion. His mind operated at a remove from his body. All he was able to do was observe. Tomasz's hands. The deliberation with which he approached each step. He had a knack for sensing what would succeed and what would fail.

The sling, when finished, was more elaborate than its predecessor. It had reinforced shoulders, broader distribution points, and something approaching engineering in its conception. Tomasz tested it by running his arms through it, adjusting straps, ensuring that the geometry worked with his enormous frame. Only then did he turn his attention back to Alistair.

The movement from prone to suspended was something that Alistair did not have time to dread. The worst moment was when Tomasz had to lift him

and reposition his legs. Yet he did it with such care, the agony became almost bearable. The officer found himself situated in the sling. The canvas was beneath his thighs and around his ribs, supporting his back. Tomasz adjusted him, settled him into position, and the reality of the new arrangement became unavoidable.

Chest to chest, that was the difference. The new sling redistributed the balance but still held Alistair close. Their bodies pressed together, leaving no room for doubt. Alistair's face was at the level of Tomasz's pectoral; his slender torso pressed into Tomasz's abdominal muscles. His legs hung suspended in their supports, cradled in canvas across the big man's stomach. The pressure was constant and inescapable. It felt like a bodily manifestation of dependence, the honest truth of one body supporting another.

Alistair instinctively wanted to close his eyes. It felt like a small rebellion, a way to avoid seeing the face so near his own. By shutting his eyes, he could pretend there was space, that this was just transport, denying the close connection it started to become. He focused on other senses instead. He noticed the smell of sweat, dried earth, and something else he dared not name. It felt familiar, something he recognized without knowing why.

They moved into the morning. The farmhouse released them gradually. Tomasz navigated through the rubble of the structure. He stepped past the overturned furniture, and the remains of whatever life had once been lived here. The light was growing as they emerged. Not yet bright, the sky gray, the clouds heavy, but enough to distinguish foreground from distance. The field stretched before them, churned, pocked, and empty. Whatever bodies

had been visible yesterday had either been scavenged or had begun the work of sinking back into the earth. The landscape was beginning its own kind of forgetting.

Each step jolted Alistair's legs. There was no way to avoid it. The new sling had better equilibrium than the old one. Still, it did not stop the basic physics of movement from affecting his injured body. Pain spiked with each impact, bloomed in his thighs and calves and the places where bone fractured and was already attempting the work of healing. He got through it by picturing that heartbeat in his mind. He counted the breaths against his back. He let Tomasz's movements act like a metronome, helping him measure and manage his own pain.

Their surroundings unfolded at a pace that allowed observation. Alistair kept his eyes closed as they walked, maintaining his strategy of not witnessing the face so close to his own. But the sounds of the morning reached him. Wind drifted through what was left of the trees. The call of birds. They might have been crows or some other species that learned to follow the war and feed upon its consequences. The distant sound of artillery, faint now, suggesting the lines had moved, as the immediate geography of danger had shifted.

It was sometime later, perhaps an hour into their movement, when the shell exploded. A distant rumble, somewhere behind them or to the east, spoke of ordinance being fired. Then another crack, this one closer. The sound came a split second before the percussion. Tomasz froze in his tracks and crouched down, the great muscles of his back and shoulders going rigid in an instant. Alistair winced, as this sudden movement sent shockwaves of pain down his spine and into his legs.

They stayed still as their hearts cooled. Then, Tomasz straightened his posture, and Alistair opened his eyes. Instinctively, Tomasz brought his hand across and gently confirmed the presence of Alistair's body by touch, checking for injuries the same way he would have checked himself.

"Vas bien?" the big man exhaled.

"Oui. Bien," Alistair replied.

The artillery exchange, such as it was, did not escalate. One distant crack, and then silence returned. The war was somewhere else this morning. It was being fought in a place that did not include them, by men who were not them. That realization did not offer comfort. Instead, it heightened the feeling of navigating a world that was both shattered and indifferent.

The path began to narrow. The trees grew stronger as they walked, their branches thickening, their canopies knitting together overhead. Life had endured here, or found its way back, where the battle's hand had fallen less heavily.

Tomasz's pace slowed as they approached the first of the low branches. The adjustment was necessary. With his height and burden, he was unable to pass through the forest canopy without ducking or crouching down. He had to navigate carefully. He bent slightly, his broad shoulders angling, while stepping in different directions to avoid obstacles on the ground. Alistair could feel every duck, dodge and bounce reverberate through his own body as well.

The light changed as they moved deeper into the shadows of the woodland. What had been gray and weak became filtered, mottled, a diffuse illumination that seemed to come from nowhere and everywhere. Alistair's eyes were open, watching the branches above. The forest around them grew

thicker. Tomasz navigated with the precision of a man accustomed to moving through tight spaces and difficult terrain. Each step was deliberate. He assessed each branch in their path, and either ducked beneath it or, when possible, avoided it entirely.

They walked further into the forest, and Alistair allowed his eyes to close again. The darkness here was almost peaceful. The sound of birdsong replaced the sound of distant ordnance. The air smelled of growth and decay and the green scent of a landscape that was not actively burning. Behind him, Tomasz's heartbeat continued its steady rhythm. Around them, the forest held them, sheltered them, carried them forward into whatever the day had left.

Then, he saw the tree. It was massive, an oak of such proportions that it seemed to have rooted itself in a different epoch. The canopy was so thick, a man would need several minutes to walk around it. The branches were enormous and ancient, spreading out like the arms of something crucified. And hanging from those branches, as if the tree itself had calmly accepted the burden and waited, were the bodies.

At first, Alistair's mind refused the information. The shapes suspended from the thick branches were context-free, abstract. They were entities that registered visually but held no narrative meaning. It was the boots that provided translation. German boots, the leather still holding its shape, the heels worn, swinging slightly in the breeze that moved through the canopy. Above the boots, the rest became unavoidable.

There were two. No, three. The third was harder to see, tucked back on the branch. The way the rope wrapped around its neck made it hang at an odd angle. It looked like its neck snapped after death. The uniforms were

German, their field gray still visible despite the conditions. The buttons had a dull shine, and Alistair saw the shoulder boards. Those insignia would have indicated rank to someone who knew.

The faces were another story. The war marred them. The crows feasted on them. Exposure had done its damage. What was left were mere suggestions of faces. The skulls were exposed where flesh had been eaten away and empty eye sockets stared out, holding a kind of horrible infinity.

The smell hit Alistair even before they reached the tree. It was a smell of decay but not a fresh one. This was something that had been happening for several days, even longer. It was the scent of rotting tissue and dried-up fluids. They had hardened, a clear sign of the earth attempting to push away what lingered above. The smell was sweet, rotten, and chemical. It coated Alistair's throat, filled his sinuses, and seeped into his mind in a way that visual horror could not.

Tomasz quickened his pace. The realization surrounded Alistair with an almost tangible grip. They were approaching the tree. The branches were becoming obstacles that required ducking, that required navigation. Tomasz continued forward, his stride unaltered, his breathing unchanged.

The massive boots of the hanging bodies were now at his eye level. The soles were worn and caked with mud. The leather was cracking with age. One body lost a boot, or maybe it had been taken. The bare foot left behind was something Alistair did not want to examine closely, but he did anyway. The stocking had been dark blue wool, and it was beginning to disintegrate. The foot itself was skeletal, desiccated, the flesh long since consumed.

The crows took off as they passed beneath. The birds circled, disturbed by the two men invading their space, their feeding ground, their home. One

crow, larger than the rest, stayed on a branch near the closest body. It watched them with intense scrutiny, its bright eye seeming to express offense.

Alistair's eyes fixed themselves on the hanging figures as they moved past. He was unable to look away, even if he tried. The specific horror of the scene demanded witnessing. The fabric of the uniforms, the specific arrangement of the bodies, the way that rope had been looped and tied. It was a knot Alistair recognized from his military training. It was designed to hold tightly and prevent any movement once secured. Someone had taken time with this. Someone had been deliberate. Someone decided not merely that these men would die, but how they would die, and executed that decision with attention to detail.

They were almost past when the words emerged from Alistair's throat.

"What did they do to deserve this?"

The question was barely audible. It came out as something between a whisper and a gasp. He was not entirely certain he wanted an answer. The moral inquiry contained within was one that Alistair himself was unable to resolve. Did these soldiers deserve to hang? Did all enemy soldiers? Did anyone? The question was unanswerable and yet asking it seemed necessary. It was the only response that a human being could make in the face of such deliberate, organized, methodical cruelty.

Tomasz did not respond. His pace stayed the same. His breathing did not change. But his massive arms, cradling Alistair's small body, tightened slightly. It was a small compression, barely noticeable, but it was a response that acknowledged the question's darkness. Through muscle, tendon, and

bone, Tomasz showed he understood, and that understanding was all he was able to offer.

The great oak receded behind them as Tomasz continued forward. The forest began to thin slightly, the density of the canopy decreasing, allowing more light to filter through. Alistair's eyes stayed open, but his mind started to process what he had seen. He filed it away with all the other bloodcurdling images of this war. The three hanged soldiers became another addition to the constant barrage of death, another data point in the accumulated suffering of the region. And yet it felt distinct. The specificity of their execution, the deliberation with which they had been killed, the way the crows had claimed their faces. It stuck in Alistair's mind in a way that many of the other deaths had not.



THE NEXT FIELD OPENED before them like a morning yawn. Alistair's first impression, as Tomasz positioned him against the rough bark of a tree root, was one of profound density. Another battlefield, but the bodies here were not isolated. They had been here longer, out in the open and more exposed to the elements. They were layered, overlapping, accumulated in a way that revealed this piece of ground changed hands more than once. Men fell here in sufficient numbers to constitute their own kind of terrain.

They were half-buried, their uniforms indistinguishable in places from the mud that received them, caked with earth and with darker material that might have been blood or might have been rust. Their faces had been worked on by weather, birds, and time. But the buttons, the belt buckles and the small metal insignia of rank and unit stood out, bright against the dull

ground, as if metal and flesh had struck different arrangements with the sunlight.

Tomasz assessed the field with the eye of a man engaged in a calculation. He moved carefully through the field. He walked over bodies with care. He viewed them not just as obstacles, but as entities worthy of some respect, even while using them. Alistair watched from his position against the tree. The sling held his body in place, stretching his splinted legs before him like the legs of a broken doll. The larger man knelt beside the first of several bodies, his enormous hands moving with intention. He was searching. For what, Alistair could not initially determine. Then he understood: Tomasz was looking for items that were of use, things that might sustain them and would aid in the work of survival.

Three or four corpses gave up their belts and the contents of their pockets. Tomasz replaced the photos and the letters but kept the useful bits: matches, twine, a penknife and a small first aid kit. He moved through the field with a steady focus. He understood the dead could support the living if the right questions were asked.

When Tomasz retrieved a small tin, clearly marked with what had once been a label, Alistair understood the scope of what was being done. Food. Or more likely, tea. Dried tea, sealed in tin, the kind of thing that might be boiled into water and provide warmth and some small measure of comfort. The tin came from a body still in a uniform that looked English. However, the insignia was too worn to read clearly. Tomasz tested the seal, seemed satisfied that it was intact, and added it to his collection.

"I could use a cigarette if you find some!" Alistair tried to call out, his voice thin and strained. It was meant to be a dark bit of humor. The attempt

landed between his intention and Tomasz's incomprehension of English. Tomasz did not pause. He kept working, shifting from one body to the next, his huge hands moving deftly. He returned after thirty minutes, his arms full of materials.

In the meantime, Alistair closed his eyes and dozed off for a while. When he opened them, the big man crouched down on one knee and looked at him, with his hand bunched into a fist. At first, the officer startled, having forgotten where he was, his entire field of vision occupied by a giant in a foreign uniform moving towards him.

Tomasz slowly uncurled his fingers to reveal a peculiar item. A string of wooden beads uncoiled from his palm and dangled down towards Alistair.

“Pour toi. Ils portent chance.”

Alistair's mind adjusted to reality, and he sighed with relief. He cautiously extended his hand. A rosary fell gently into his palm. The string was aged and frayed. The beads felt smooth from years of being handled in times of fear, faith, or both. The small, hand-carved cross at the end was still intact. Without conscious deliberation, Alistair slipped it into his pocket.

Tomasz collected some scarves and other strips of cloth torn from several uniforms. He held up a scarf, examining it, then tore it carefully in half. The action was deliberate, the tearing precise, creating two usable lengths from one piece. He knelt beside Alistair. His large body folded down effortlessly.

"Les Jambes," he said. The words were simple, functional. They were also not a question. Tomasz was making a statement of intention. He was

going to examine the wounds. He was going to attempt to improve the bandages. Alistair knew refusal was not an option.

The removal of the old bandage was careful but efficient. Tomasz's hands traveled along Alistair's left thigh. He carefully unwrapped the cloth that he put on yesterday morning in the ruined camp. As the cloth came off, Tomasz assessed the state of the wound beneath. What he saw was not encouraging.

The wound started to fester, its edges turning pink and swollen with a kind of inflammatory heat, a clear sign that infection had set in. The skin around the injury looked off. Dark purple and sickly yellow showed through the drying blood and gunk. Even looking at it was a struggle for Alistair, as if his mind was trying to process something it was not meant to.

Tomasz simply looked. He did not express sympathy or dismay or any of the emotional responses that Alistair might have expected. Instead, he reached for the canteen, soaked a small patch of thick wool that was once the front pocket of an officer's coat, and began to clean the wounds.

Tomasz washed away the dried blood and pus and the accumulated filth of travel, his massive hands moving delicately. Each touch of the cloth produced pain, sharp, electric pain that made Alistair's jaw clench, but Tomasz did not pause. He worked with precision. Alistair knew the pain was necessary. Cleaning was essential. Infection was the true enemy, one that had to be faced head-on.

Alistair found himself watching Tomasz's face as the man tended to him. The concentration was absolute. The scar along his jaw moved slightly as he worked, the muscle beneath contracting and releasing with the focus required by the task.

Tomasz had nothing to prove. He was just a man attending to a problem with all the resources he had available. He had no personal stake in Alistair's survival, beyond compassion and respect for another human life. He had not yet even asked Alistair for his name. Somehow, that absolute pragmatism and commitment to principle were more moving than any amount of expressed sympathy would have been.

Tomasz rewrapped the thigh with care. He layered several bands to form a compression bandage. This stabilized the wound, offered support, and limited movement around the injury. Next, he tended to the right leg, repeating the same careful process: clean, assess, wrap, and secure. Each step was executed with the authority of someone who had done this before, who knew the importance of stabilizing the wound to buy time.

When he finished, both legs were securely wrapped in fresh cloth, tied with knots that would not come undone. Tomasz straightened, remaining close to Alistair but creating a small distance between them. Their eyes met, and a silent understanding passed between them. The task was done; the officer's wounds had been tended to.

Tomasz collected the materials he gathered from the dead: the matches, tea tin, and various other objects. He tucked them away carefully, ensuring they would not hinder his movement and would be easy to reach. The bodies lay scattered in the field, indifferent to their stolen belongings. Alistair took the rosary beads, hiding them as a personal prayer. The fallen were still unaware of the human survival that went on at their expense.

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CHAPTER 4 - THE BARN



The barn seemed to rise from the earth just as dusk settled. Tomasz had been walking for hours. Alistair felt in every uneven bounce of the hip, every imperceptible slackening of pace, the moment when Tomasz's dark eyes locked onto something ahead. The change in his posture was subtle, but Alistair, attuned to every nuance of his companion, recognized the shift from aimless trudging to purposeful approach.

The long wooden building had once worn bright red paint; now only flecks of it clung to the planks, faded to a dusky brown that blended with the ruined fields around it. The roof sagged in one corner, a jagged hole hinting at past damage and leaking rain. The door swung loose on its hinges, waiting. Tomasz set Alistair's mass, braced himself, and pushed with his shoulder. The door groaned open, revealing a dim interior.

Inside, the air was still and smelled of hay, manure and the organic aroma of bovine breath and musk, a living reminder that this barn was still in use. A lone cow stood in a nearby stall, its dark eyes watching the newcomers with mild curiosity. Tomasz stepped inside, closing the door carefully so it would not creak too loudly. Alistair, supported in the sling, felt a wave of relief at the absence of wind and the presence of something warm and alive.

Tomasz drifted past the cow's stall, leaving the animal undisturbed, and found an empty space at the far end, where old wooden beams framed an unused stall. The floor there was littered with straw, some of it fresh. Tomasz knelt and began gathering handfuls, building a makeshift bed

against the cold boards. He undid the sling and lowered Alistair into the mound of straw, every muscle unclenching as the brittle stems gave way to a softer cradle.

The cow shifted and bellowed again, stamping a hoof but remaining calm. Its steady breathing was oddly comforting. Tomasz worked, piled more straw around Alistair's body to serve as both cushion and insulation. Then he spotted a folded saddle blanket on a high shelf. He retrieved it, its wool still surprisingly supple, and wrapped it around Alistair's broken legs with deliberate care. The blanket's thickness pressed pleasantly against his skin, its warmth immediate.

"You're very good at this," Alistair heard himself say. His voice felt strange in the barn, thin and high compared to the cow's rich baritone. The observation seemed the kind of thing that gratitude required, and yet Alistair immediately regretted having spoken. The barn held the words, reflected them back, and Tomasz did not respond. Unbothered, he continued creating the most comfortable space he was able to.

The sun was low in the sky, plunging the barn into shadow. The cow calmed down, quiet aside from its chewing and shuffling. Tomasz lingered by the stall entrance, listening for any sign of movement outside—the hoofbeat of a patrolling guard, the distant voice of a farmhand. When nothing came, he slipped back inside and crouched beside Alistair, every muscle still taut, ready.

They shared a brief glance: exhaustion in their eyes, but also the hope of a few hours' rest. If they moved before dawn, they might slip away without ever waking the cow or alarming the barn's owner.

The fire came next. Tomasz gathered broken wood from around the barn, pieces of fence, splinters from the damaged roof, scraps that would burn reasonably well without providing excessive smoke. He arranged them in a bare patch of floor, creating a fire pit that was simple but functional. When the flames caught, the warmth of it spread through the space with a kind of generosity. Light followed, pushing back the absolute darkness, allowing Alistair to see the full extent of the barn's interior, the rafters overhead, the way dust particles caught the firelight and seemed to become luminous.

Tomasz filled their tea tin with water from the canteen, positioned it near the fire to heat it, and sat waiting for the moment when steam would rise. The tin was small, intended for soldiers' rations, and the tea would be sparse, but it would be warm, and warmth at this point in the journey was a form of miracle. Alistair watched the larger man as he waited. Tomasz's face was calm, his massive shoulders relaxed for what might have been the first time since Alistair had known him. The exhaustion showed in fine lines around his eyes, in the set of his jaw, but it was exhaustion that could be managed, because it came with a purpose.

The tea that resulted was weak, barely colored, but it was tea. Tomasz poured it into a cup that he found somewhere in the barn's interior—a metal cup, dented but serviceable. He brought it to Alistair first, holding it while the officer drank, his enormous hand steady and protective around the small vessel. The warmth moved through Alistair's body like grace. His throat, raw from days of pain and minimal conversation, responded to the heat and the slight astringency of the leaves. For a moment, the pain in his legs became secondary. The focus became purely the sensation of warmth, of

something on his tongue that was not mud or blood or some other kind of contamination.

Tomasz drank from the cup after, using the same edge Alistair drank from. The gesture was simple but profound. The barn held them as they sat in silence, as the fire gradually consumed the wood Tomasz fed it, as the light began to prepare for the final surrender to darkness.

When Tomasz stood and removed his coat, the action was practical. The garment was damp from sweat and the humidity that accrued from the wet environs. Drying it was a necessity if he was to remain warm through the night. But when he drew his undershirt over his head, the fire's flickering light received him fully. Alistair's breath seized in his throat, a bodily response that he could not have suppressed if he tried.

The scars were extensive. Not just the obvious one across his left ribs that Alistair glimpsed before, but others. A long pale line running down his left side, from armpit to hip, the kind of wound that should have been fatal. Smaller marks scattered across his torso in a pattern that suggested burns. A darker mark on his shoulder blade where something penetrated deeply and healed over.

His musculature was extraordinary, every inch of it earned through physical labor, forged rather than cultivated. His chest was broad enough that Alistair could have hidden himself entirely in its shadow. As Tomasz hung the damp undershirt beside the fire, muscles shifted beneath his skin with an easy, unconscious power. This was a body shaped by years of lifting, carrying, and enduring, until strength itself seemed as ordinary to him as breathing.

Tomasz did not acknowledge being observed. He did not turn to face Alistair. He hung the garment where the heat from the fire would begin to evaporate the moisture, and then he settled near the flames, his massive frame radiating the kind of heat that would have been impossible for a normal man. But Tomasz was not a normal man. He was something larger, something more enduring, something built to thrive under adversity.

The darkness beyond the barn became absolute. Inside, the firelight created a small sphere of existence, a world that contained only the two of them, the flames, the warming tea, the slow accumulation of body heat between them. Alistair's exhaustion was beginning to overcome even the pain. His eyes were growing heavy, his focus drifting. When he spoke, his voice barely rose above the sound of the fire.

"Merci."

The word hung in the air. It contained everything Alistair could not articulate. Merci for lifting the beam. Merci for carrying. Merci for the water, for the bandaging, for the tea, for the shelter, for the decision to save a life that had no strategic value and no claim on the larger man's attention. Merci for the simple fact of presence, of not being alone in a landscape designed to isolate and destroy.

Tomasz did not acknowledge the gratitude with words. He grunted and poked at the fire, then continued pacing around the stall. Outside, the night was falling. The wind picked up slightly, testing the barn's structure, suggesting that weather was arriving. But inside, there was warmth. There was shelter. There was the slow, patient pulse of continued existence.

Behind him, Alistair drifted through shallow, fractured sleep. A crack from the fire, the rustle of wind through the ruined farmhouse, or the

relentless ache in his broken legs kept dragging him back into the cold. When he opened his eyes, Tomasz was always standing at the door, constant and vigilant. His constant presence offered a unique comfort. Alistair could slip in and out of restless sleep, trusting he would be safe when he awoke.

In one moment of relative clarity, Alistair found himself thinking of the trench. The morning, he stood on the ladder, binoculars pressed to his eye sockets, watching the gray and darker gray of the devastated vista. The men had been moving through their routines.

What were their names? He attempted to recall them, and the names came, but they were disconnected from the men themselves. Cawthorne. Or Hawthorne. Corporal someone, whose face had been in his memory one moment and was fading the next, becoming abstract. The others had been more distinct at one point, but time was doing its work erasing them, making them less real as each moment passed.

Wickham. Yes, Wickham was clearer. Wickham had been competent. Wickham had been nervous. Wickham felt uneasy about the silence. He glanced toward no-man's-land, sensing the quiet often came before violence. And Wickham was dead, lying in a field with his face twisted into a permanent yet silent scream. The certainty of death was the only thing that was clear.

Alistair had been their lieutenant. He had been responsible for them. It was what the uniform meant, what the rank meant. Responsibility. And he survived when they had not. The logic of it was inescapable. The guilt sat heavy with his broken legs. It combined with his exhaustion and all the other burdens he now carried. He failed them, not by his actions or neglect under military law, but by the simple fact he survived when they had not.

He lived when their expectation, at some level he was only beginning to understand, was that officers were supposed to die first. Officers were supposed to be courageous in a way that gave meaning to the sacrifice of those below them in the hierarchy. And he broke the compact. He broke it by being small enough to slip under the beam and not get crushed. By allowing this incredible man to rescue him. Despite feeling that breathing was a privilege earned through greater suffering, he kept going.

The memory of the moment when Tomasz lifted the beam was surfacing repeatedly. In Alistair's fragmented consciousness, it took on a mythic quality. The strength required was beyond what the geometry of human architecture would normally produce. It was the strength of stories, of scripture, of giants, titans, and beings that existed in a category separate from normal men.

He tried to reconcile the man standing at the barn door with all the other men he had ever known; the lads from the rugby team at Marlborough, the sturdiest of London labor men, the soldiers he met at the front. None could compare, not even by half. It was impossible. This giant of a man was impossible, as if his presence were somehow not accidental.

His name. Alistair felt a jolt in his mind, like ice water. The man carrying him, the one standing guard, was the center of Alistair's world. Yet, he remained unnamed. He did not know his name. Not his first name, not his surname, not anything beyond the fact of his presence.

Such a revelation should have seemed significant at any other time in Alistair's life. It should have been a source of shame, a violation of the basic courtesy that officers were supposed to extend to enlistees. But here, in this

barn, in this situation, the absence of a name seemed almost proper. The man was beyond naming. The man was pure presence and care.

What was a name next to such a thing? What was linguistic identity next to the urgent reality of survival? And yet Alistair wanted to know. Some part of him that was not entirely consumed by pain and exhaustion and the guilt wanted to say the name aloud. To call it out to the figure standing at the barn door. To make him real in some category beyond the corporeal. But the words would not come. They seemed impossibly complex. They called for a vulnerability that the current arrangement of their relationship had not yet demanded.

Alistair stirred again, finding Tomasz kneeling next to him now. His expression was difficult to read in that moment. His dark eyes caught the last of the firelight, making them seem to glow. The scar on his jaw stood out in the weak light, telling a story of violence, pain, and a body that had been broken but continued on. His huge hand lifted heavy objects and healed wounds gently. It moved slowly above Alistair's sleeping form, but it did not touch him.

Tomasz held his hand suspended over the officer's chest, as if making a calculation. His lips stirred gently, whispering words too faint to catch and too intimate to share, even if he knew the language. The hand withdrew, and Tomasz straightened up. He returned to the door, resuming his position, his massive frame a silhouette against the night. His breath continued to form clouds in the frigid air.

Alistair's eyes closed again. The drift into deeper sleep came this time. He was worn out from just surviving in a broken body, moving through a setting meant to kill him. The pain did not diminish. It simply became the

baseline—the ground against which other sensations could be measured. The fire was dying. The barn was cooling. Alistair's small frame radiated warmth, while the hay under him kept the night's chill at bay. He did not notice when Tomasz finally moved from his position at the door. He was unaware of the soft approach. Alistair did not see Tomasz quietly checking if he was asleep or just drifting in and out. He did not feel the moment when Tomasz knelt beside the sleeping officer and looked at him.

The barn held them both. The small officer slept fitfully in the hay, dreaming of lost names and fading memories. The enormous soldier stood guard, watchful over the setting that still posed a threat. He was alert to dangers the sleeping man would never notice. Their survival depended on both his vigilance and his commitment.

Outside, darkness fell. The wind strengthened, probing the barn's walls, hinting at snow by dawn. Inside, the fire's warmth ebbed, its light fading, leaving the barn a dim, chilly space. Yet the body heat of the two men lingered, a subtle but stubborn resistance to the cold that waited beyond the door.



A SHARP CREAK SHATTERED the morning stillness. Alistair's eyes snapped open, consciousness rushing back with alarming clarity. Light streamed through gaps in the barn walls, painting thin golden lines across the hay-strewn floor. The barn door swung inward on protesting hinges.

A girl stood silhouetted in the doorway, perhaps sixteen or seventeen. A wooden milk bucket dangled from slender fingers. She wore a simple dress, patched at the elbows, with an apron tied at her waist. Her blonde hair was pulled back under a faded kerchief. When she saw them—Tomasz's

enormous frame rising from beside the dying embers, Alistair propped against the wall in his bloodied uniform—the bucket slipped from her grasp, clattering against the wooden floor, rolling in a half-circle before settling on its side.

She did not scream. Alistair noted this with a surge of desperate gratitude. Instead, she stood perfectly still, one hand flying to her mouth, eyes darting between them and the path behind her. She was calculating her chances of escape.

"Mademoiselle," Alistair said, his voice rasping from disuse. He raised one hand slowly, palm outward, a gesture meant to convey harmlessness despite his uniform. "S'il vous plaît. Nous ne sommes pas dangereux."

Please. We are not dangerous.

The girl's face was narrow, eyes huge and jumpy in the gray-lit barn. She stared at Tomasz and then at Alistair—first his uniform, then the blood-darkened blankets, then the way his legs stuck out stiff and useless, like a broken tool left on a workbench. French, Alistair guessed. Maybe Walloon or Alsace. It did not matter; the staring was universal.

He realized suddenly how he must look. Lying in a bed of straw, stinking of sweat and old blood, propped upright like a child's discarded doll. Tomasz, shirtless, arms thick as fence posts, moved slowly and deliberately as he straightened from the fire. He looked less like a soldier and more like some ancient reaver out of a fairy story. The tableau felt fictional. He almost laughed.

She took a step back, her shoes scuffing on the dirt floor.

"Je suis un officier blessé, voici mon ami." Alistair tried, pitching his voice softer, more crumpled. "Nous ne sommes pas des ennemis, nous ne

sommes pas dangereux." He touched the split rope of his dog tags as if to prove something.

I am a wounded officer; this is my friend. We are not the enemy. We are not dangerous.

He studied her as precisely as he studied his own men in morning formation. Alistair noted the burn mark on her apron hem, the small tear in the sleeve, the bare, brick-dry ankles above her shoes. She was local, likely the farmer's daughter. She set her jaw and did not flinch. Behind her strong, weary eyes he saw a spark of compassion, a chance.

The girl's gaze flicked from Alistair's ruined legs to his face, then to Tomasz, then back again. Her breathing, fast and shallow, gradually steadied. She drew herself up, shoulders squared in a motion that seemed older than her body, and with a controlled voice said, "Attendez." Wait. The word was a command, not a plea.

She retreated through the open barn door, boots scuffing in the mud outside. Light shifted as she left, the rectangle of morning widening, drawing in the chill from the yard. For a moment, Alistair lay feverish in his nest of straw and wool, unsure if she would return at all, or if the next to arrive would be a farmer with a pitchfork, or a gendarme, or some local militia eager to win favor by delivering up a pair of vagrants in uniform.

He looked at Tomasz, who was busy dressing himself and gathering their belongings. Even now, Tomasz's profile was indecipherable. Only the tension in his neck betrayed that he braced for violence or flight.

"She won't bring help," Alistair whispered, not sure if it was hope or a curse. His voice surprised him in its steadiness.

Tomasz nodded but said nothing. He stood, stretching to his full, impossible height, and went to the window, a jagged hole in the barn wall. He peered out for several seconds, then turned back and crossed the space in three strides. He knelt beside Alistair, hands hovering over the sling—not touching but close enough that Alistair could feel heat radiating from his skin.

They waited. Time slowed, each heartbeat louder than the distant morning birds. Alistair imagined the girl running to the house, imagined voices rising in argument, imagined a father or an older brother with a hunting rifle arguing that they should turn the men in to the nearest authority. He imagined the cold logic of rural France in wartime: survival was not a theory, it was a daily, unglamorous calculation. But the girl's eyes had not been calculating. They had been something else.

After three minutes, long enough for the barn to begin to feel abandoned again, the girl returned. She entered with her arms full, clutching a bundle wrapped in a blue and white striped towel. Her approach was slower this time, her steps careful, as if she, too, were learning the barn's geography anew. She set it down just inside the door, knees popping with the suddenness of the movement. She pushed it toward them with the toe of her boot, then stepped back, arms folded.

Alistair opened the cloth and saw the contents: some dried apples, a heavy, yeasty loaf of bread and, wrapped in waxed paper, a wedge of cheese, already sweating in the growing warmth of the barn.

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CHAPTER 5 - THE VILLAGE



The odor came first, a bitter chemical aroma of something still smoldering despite the dampness surrounding them. Alistair's eyes, still heavy with fever, tried to grasp the ruined village before them. Buildings lay in rubble, reduced to stone and twisted metal. Windows smashed, and walls collapsed inward, as if the earth surrendered its duty to hold them up.

Tomasz's stride changed slightly over the past hour. The officer, held close in the sling against the larger man, felt it. It started as a tightness in his shoulders and soon his breathing became a bit shallower. By the time they reached the village's perimeter, the tension manifested into something visible. Tomasz's eyes scanned left and right, never pausing. They jumped from one spot to another, briefly checking for any threats. He did not linger on anything for long.

A faint haze lingered over the village's bombed-out center, suggesting the burning had ended hours, perhaps days, before. Alistair watched it dissolve into the gray sky. Something cold settled in his chest, below the ache in his legs. The village lay still, like a corpse. No smoke rose from the chimneys. No birds circled the steeple. The stillness had a substance all its own. They threaded their way through it, unwelcome survivors in a place that seemed to belong only to the dead.

A pram lay in the street. It was turned over, one wheel lazily spinning in the air. It seemed as if someone had just walked away from it. This tiny movement stood out in a milieu fallen silent. The fabric beneath the wheel frame was dark, whether from dirt or from something Alistair did not want

to contemplate. The buggy was blue or had been blue. The paint was peeling, showing wood beneath, and the metal frame had begun to rust.

A twisted stove lay in a field beside the remains of a house. Its metal frame was bent and contorted, the oven door hanging open like a silent scream to the sky. The cooking surface scarred from the impact. The whole structure had been crushed or thrown with such force that it was barely recognizable. As Alistair passed by, he wondered what kind of violence could destroy something so thoroughly. Had there been an explosion? Multiple blasts? Ordnance had likely landed nearby, warping the structure into a twisted, abstract shape.

Crows perched on the skeletal rafters of the buildings. They were large birds, slate-colored, their heads cocked at angles that suggested curiosity or hunger or both. Several of them scattered as Tomasz and Alistair passed. The sound of wings came across as rowdy in the relative quiet, the flapping unsettling in a way that silence would not have been.

One crow stayed, however. Its attention fixed on something in the debris below the rafter from which it had been watching. The bird did not move. It calmly waited, sure that Tomasz and Alistair would pass by. The village would soon be empty again, and time would return them to their feeding.

Paper fluttered in the breeze. Pages or fragments of pages. Charred and disintegrating, the text on them had been rendered illegible by fire and exposure. They drifted across the street in small eddies of wind, settling against walls and in the hollows of shell craters. Words that someone had written, which had meant something, were now indecipherable ash waiting to return to the earth.

"What is this place?" Alistair whispered.

Beside him, above him, Tomasz made no response. The silence after the question was not the easy kind they were used to. It was a different quality. It was the silence of refusal. Of knowledge unable to be shared.

They moved deeper into the village. The street, such as it existed, was littered with debris. Fragments of brick. A wooden chair, one leg splintered, lying on its side. A tin cup, dented beyond use. Just one shoe, the partner lost or separated or claimed by someone in the aftermath.

The Earth itself was scarred and pocked. Scattered cobblestones created a surface that demanded attention. It was then that Alistair became aware of the absence. There were no bodies. No corpses lying in the street, no signs of casualties beyond the architectural collapse and the burned structures. The village had been destroyed, certainly, but where were the people? Had they evacuated? Had they been herded away? Or had something else occurred, something that removed them entirely from this place?

The gunshot, when it came, was distant. At first, Alistair thought it was just some distant background noise from the war elsewhere. But Tomasz reacted differently. His body went stiff, and his step halted mid-stride. He stood frozen in the middle of the village street, immobilized by the single shot that echoed off the buildings and faded into the gray sky.

Alistair's heart began to hammer, and, in turn, he could feel the way Tomasz's breathing shifted. It became quicker, shallower, more frequent. The larger man's head turned slightly, assessing the direction from which the sound originated. East. Northeast. Distance impossible to determine. A hundred yards? Fifty? Closer?

The ensuing silence was total, not merely quiet, the utter absence of sound. The birds scattered. The wind stilled. Even the drift of paper seemed

to have paused, as if the entire village were holding its breath, waiting to determine what the gunshot signified.

His movements became slower now, more cautious. Each step was placed as if the noise of boot on stone could be softened through precision and intention. His head turned, following the sound of approaching voices. He tried to gauge their distance, number, and direction of movement.

Then came the other sound. Boots. Crunching on debris. More than one person. More than two. Several voices spoke in fast, clipped German. It felt more tense, which only made it worse.

They were exposed. There was no cover nearby, and no place to hide if the German soldiers turned the corner. The street offered nothing. No wall to press against, no doorway to duck into. They were two figures in an empty corridor, visible from every angle. Alistair's stomach dropped with fear, a visceral heave that crawled up his throat.

The boots grew louder. They were coming in their direction, or at least not moving away. The voices continued their rapid German, orders or some type of coordination. Alistair did not have the skill to parse it. His French was serviceable, his Latin adequate, but German was beyond him.

Tomasz's pace increased. His hesitant, quiet steps became more frequent and deliberate. He was still trying to maintain composure if seen, so he could not break out into a full run, but his strides were long and urgent, and his breath quickened.

The building ahead had once been substantial, some sort of shop or commercial enterprise. The rubble hinted at a two-story building, originally, but the upper level had completely collapsed, leaving just the foundation and the first-floor walls. The shop windows had been blown out, and the

shattered glass still littered the ground. Inside was some sort of long counter that looked like it belonged to a pharmacy or general store. The shop had been looted, with every fixture removed or destroyed.

Beneath the foundation, visible as darker shadow half-concealed in the accumulated debris, Alistair noticed what might have been a cellar entrance. He tugged on Tomasz's tunic to get his attention. "Look... Regard là!"

Wooden doors, warped with age and fire, set at an angle into the ground. The possibility of concealment. Tomasz's focus shifted entirely as he darted toward it. Alistair's legs, cradled in the sling, jolted with each step. The pain was immediate and specific, but he did not cry out. He clenched his teeth against the scream that built up inside him.

The voices of the German soldiers were growing louder. They were two streets over, moving perpendicular to the path that Tomasz and Alistair were taking. The distance was narrowing. The probability of visual contact was increasing with each moment that passed.

Tomasz reached the cellar. He did not pause. He did not assess. Without fanfare, he drove his boot heel into the bulkhead doors, breaking the hasp that secured them. The sound was loud. Alarmingly loud.

Behind them, the German voices stopped. The pause lasted for two seconds. Then they resumed, but with a different quality. They were faster now. No longer conversational. They heard something.

The cellar doors swallowed them as they slipped underground. The last thing Alistair noticed before they shut was the gray sky.



ALISTAIR'S EYES WERE open, but it made no difference. The darkness was complete and unbroken. All he could take in of the space that surrounded him was the texture of the air, a kind of thick, cold soup. It tasted of mold, age, and the harsh scent of decay sped up by fire and violence from above. The sound of broken glass breaking under his protector's boots. But somehow, Tomasz navigated by instinct.

Finding a spot in the darkness, his large hands adjusted Alistair with care, pulling the officer close—closer than they had been even during the nights of sharing warmth. Chest to chest, Alistair's small frame compressed against the larger man's torso in an embrace that felt both protective and suffocating.

Above them, the boots continued to crunch. They moved across the ruins of the village street with what sounded like casual certainty. The voices continued, speaking German. Alistair failed to make out the words, but from the tone and cadence it sounded like they were planning something. Someone could have heard the crack of the cellar doors break and they would come to investigate. It was only a matter of time before they figured out the location of the sound.

Tomasz's hand rose and covered the lower half of Alistair's face. The palm pressed gently against his mouth. The fingers curved along his jaw. The other arm stayed around him, cradling him tightly.

Alistair's instinct was to resist. His mind wanted to recoil from the sensation of being covered, of being silenced, of being held so tightly that movement was impossible. But his body understood what his mind was slower to accept. The hand over his mouth was necessary. The absolute

compression of himself into the larger man's embrace was the only strategy available to them.

The boots above stopped. They were directly above the cellar now. Alistair was certain of it. He heard them and tracked their position by the sound on the wooden planks just inches over Tomasz's head. The conversation in German grew more animated. An argument, perhaps. A debate.

Alistair's heart was destroying itself in his chest. He was certain that the pounding of it was audible, that the sound of his panic would betray them. The soldiers above did not hear it. They could not have heard it. They spoke casually, in German. But the pulse kept coming, loud as artillery.

Tomasz's hand stayed over his mouth, so Alistair forced himself to breathe through his nose. The air moved across the callused palm of the larger man's hand, cold and then warm, cold, and then warm.

The boots moved. Away from the immediate position above them. Alistair felt something in his chest unknot fractionally. They were moving on. They decided that the sound was not worth investigating or decided to investigate elsewhere first. But the pressure of Tomasz's body was unchanged, the hand over his mouth stayed where it was.

Time passed differently in the dark: minutes blurred into seconds. Alistair had no idea if they had been stuck there for five minutes or fifty. All he felt was Tomasz's chest against his. He noticed the rhythm of his breathing and the firm grip of that large hand, even with the adrenaline rushing through him.

Then the cellar hatch started to open.

The light that penetrated was minimal. Gray daylight filtered through kicked-up dust. But after the absolute darkness, it was startling. Alistair's eyes teared at the change.

A silhouette appeared in the hatch opening: a man, German. That much was obvious from the shape of the helmet, the cut of the uniform visible against the grayness. He was looking down, squinting, adjusting his eyes to the transition from the brightness above to the darkness below. His rifle was slung loosely over his shoulder, not an immediate threat but there. The posture of a trained soldier moving through conquered territory where resistance was not to be expected.

Alistair understood, in that moment, what it meant to be prey. To be in a world where discovery meant death was dangerous. Staying hidden was the way to survive. A single gesture could unravel everything he knew.

The soldier descended. He came down into the darkness with a lack of caution, suggesting he did not believe anything in the cellar was a threat. This was just a routine part of the sweep. His boots hit the cellar floor with a jarring thump. His eyes were beginning to adjust, to understand the shape of the underground space. He repositioned his rifle in readiness. But it was too late.

Tomasz moved like a bolt of lightning. There was no warning. There was no escalation. The massive hand that had been covering Alistair's mouth slipped away. It reached into the dark, fast as a striking animal.

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There was no scream, only a muffled grunt that died in the German's throat as Tomasz's thumbs crushed his windpipe. The soldier's body convulsed violently against the wall in a desperate animal thrashing. His boots kicked wildly, scraping stone, dislodging dirt that rained down like judgment. Blood vessels burst in his eyes as they bulged, turning the whites to crimson pools. A wet, rattling syllable escaped him, not quite a cough, not quite a plea, spraying a fine mist that caught the dim light like suspended rubies before splattering across Alistair's face, hot and metallic, marking them with murder.

Alistair's eyes adjusted enough to watch the horror in fragments. Tomasz's silhouette hunched and powerful, muscles corded beneath his uniform, arms rigid as iron bars. His massive hands crushed the windpipe between them, thumbs driving deep into a human form that bucked and convulsed before going slack as a puppet with cut strings. When it ended, the silence crashed down like it had substance, broken only by Alistair's own pulse pounding in his ears.

Tomasz released the soldier's neck, and he collapsed in the dirt. He made a final noise, a grunt, something beyond language as he was falling. His rifle clattered against the hard dirt floor. Eyes frozen in eternal surprise. Pupils wide and dark. His mouth was dripping with a foam of blood and spit. The German pissed himself. The smell of urine and blood and death mingled with scent of the mold, the rot, and the dampness. It was hot. The droplets that hit his face felt warm against his skin. Even in the cold cellar, it was unsettling.

The open hatch attenuated the darkness. Alistair's ears developed a ringing that would not stop, so complete that he was uncertain he could hear

anything else. The world outside the sound was entirely subsumed. But he felt Tomasz moving. He felt the larger man's body relax. His breath sawed in and out. He sensed a tremor starting in the big muscles that still pressed against him.

The larger man was shaking. Not with violence, but with noticeable discomfort. The tremor ran through his torso and into his arms, into his hands. It was the tremor of someone who crossed a line. He had done something that could not be taken back.

Above them, the hatch hung open. The light penetrated the darkness, illuminating the body of the German soldier crumpled on the earthen floor of the cellar. His arm was extended. His hand was still partially curled around the barrel of his weapon, in a reflex that persisted beyond the moment of death. Blood, dark and spreading, pooled beneath him, seeping into a fissure in the soil.

Tomasz's hand found Alistair again. Not to cover his mouth this time, but just to hold him. To grip him with a gentleness that was almost unbearable given what had just occurred. Alistair pressed his face against the larger man's chest. The uniform was far from clean, marked by stains of survival. It had always been this way. His small body convulsed slightly with something that was not quite crying but was not quite breathing. The body responded to the overwhelming sight it had just witnessed. A human life had been erased. The decision to do so was made in the space between one heartbeat and the next.

The cellar held them captive. The body on the floor had them frozen in place. The realization of what they had just created in that instant—its irreversibility, the sheer commitment it entailed—kept them rooted.

Meanwhile, in the village streets, other German soldiers swept through the ruins. They were unaware one of their own had just entered a darkness from where there is no return.



TOMASZ RELEASED ALISTAIR carefully, setting the officer down on the dirt floor, and then he went over and knelt beside the body of the German soldier. His enormous hands hung at his sides. Even in the dark, Alistair noticed Tomasz's fingers tightly clenching and then relaxing.

The cellar around them continued to hold the residue of what happened. The air was still charged and thick with nervous energy. Dust swirled around them, refusing to settle. The infernal sound was still ringing in Alistair's ears, a high-pitched tone originating from somewhere inside his own skull. His vision was fragmented, his sense of spatial positioning confused. He hardly heard Tomasz's breathing. The ringing in his ears made it difficult to process anything. The continuous, shifting tone overwhelmed every other sense.

Tomasz was not looking at the body. He was looking at his hands. The blood began to cool and thicken. As the light from the hatch above shone on it, its darkness became more visible. His palms and fingers were covered in it. The blood splattered up his wrists, and he stared at his hands in disbelief, as if they belonged to someone else.

His lips moved. He made the sign of the cross several times over. He looked up at the ceiling. Sound came out, but it was not directed at Alistair. It was something spoken toward the body, toward the earth, toward the darkness. Words in a language that was not French, that Alistair did not recognize. Polish. The vowels were different from what Alistair was used to

hearing. The consonants clustered in a way that the Romance languages did not allow. Whatever the words were, they seemed to be an incantation, a prayer, a statement of fact that needed articulation even though no one was present to hear it.

The ringing in Alistair's ears began, gradually, to diminish. Not disappear but recede from the immediate center of his consciousness to something that could be backgrounded. The sounds of the cellar began to reemerge. The drip of water somewhere in the deeper darkness. The slight movement of air through gaps in the structure above, the wind finding its way through cracks and openings. Tomasz's breathing was calm, but it felt unnatural. It did not match his real panic or what his body was going through.

It was this that precipitated the moment. It was the understanding, arriving with the force of revelation, that Tomasz was grieving. Not for the soldier who lay on the earthen floor. But for something else. For the part of himself that died along with the man's last breath. For the line that had been crossed, that could not be uncrossed, that placed him in a new category of being. He was now a killer, not merely a soldier. He had taken a life with his bare hands, with the intention and precision and the absolute understanding of what was being done. A quivering began in his shoulders and gradually spread through his body, slow and inexorable, as though something heavy had settled inside him and every muscle strained to hold it in.

Alistair did not let himself think. Thinking would bring doubt, and doubt would freeze him. So, he pushed his small frame to move. The pain in his legs was immediate and searing, but he compressed it, contained it,

forced his body to follow his will. His right hand, the one that could move, extended from his position in the earth. It was shaking. But he reached out, and he placed his hand on Tomasz's arm.

It was barely more than the brush of fingertips. But it was the first time since Tomasz lifted the beam that Alistair initiated contact. Alistair's hand, still slick with the German's blood, moved to Tomasz's arm before he could think to stop it. The wool of the overcoat was matted and stiff, caked with mud and something darker beneath. His fingers found the bare skin underneath the sleeve's edge, just above the wrist where the pulse fluttered, bright and furious. Tomasz's bicep flexed, but he did not pull away. He only looked at Alistair, eyes bloodshot and wet, and for a moment neither of them breathed.

The corpse between them was already cooling, the pool of blood soaking into the dirt and straw, but Alistair could feel Tomasz's heat through his sleeve, the tremor that ran the length of his arm. He tightened his grip in a silent testimony: Yes, I am here. Yes, I am still alive.

Tomasz's other hand hovered, uncertain, then settled over Alistair's. His palm was enormous, callused, and raw, and it engulfed Alistair's hand as if offering shelter from the horror. They knelt like that amid the ruin, surrounded by the stench of cordite and the hush of snow melting and dripping through the broken rafters.

Alistair did not speak. He did not need to. The feeling of Tomasz's hand pressing on him was enough. A gravity held him in place and refused to let him drift away from this moment, or from the man who had carried him across half of France. The world outside the ruined cellar was still at war,

but here, in the stillness after violence, there was only the shared thrum of blood and the knowledge that neither would let go first.

Then Tomasz moved. Deliberately. His massive hands rose, and they reached for something in the shadows. He found a piece of fabric that lay discarded in the corner of the cellar. It was threadbare, once white, now gray, a canning rag or piece of cheesecloth. He moved to the body of the German soldier with a gentleness that seemed impossible for hands that size, for hands that had just done the unthinkable.

He lifted the soldier's head with great care and closed the dead man's eyes. He acted with similar reverence as before, when he was checking the bodies and gathering the supplies for the sling at his own destroyed encampment.

Tomasz arranged the fabric over the face, but the German's twisted features were only partially covered by the lacy cloth. The act itself created a different atmosphere. The soldier was no longer a specific human being with a specific face and specific attributes. Instead, it became a body, a thing, just a motionless object that could be considered without the constant implication of its humanity.

When Tomasz finished, he stayed kneeling. His massive shoulders rose and fell with his breathing. His hands, still dark with blood, rested on his thighs. Then, slowly, he turned his head. His dark eyes found Alistair in the dimness. He watched the officer, quiet and unmoving. In that moment, he was just there, completely present. Alistair looked back. The ringing in his ears diminished further, and now he heard nothing but the sound of their breathing. Tomasz's was deep and controlled, his own shallow and fragmented.

Tomasz's eyes found his. They held there, across the cooling body, across the blood darkening on the dirt floor. Alistair did not look away. Neither did Tomasz. A wordless understanding passed between them, beyond language and deeper than gesture. More than a look, it carried the essence of being seen. They both realized that the violence altered them in a fundamental way. There was no going back to who they were before the moment in the cellar changed everything.

Then Tomasz straightened. He moved back toward Alistair. His enormous frame rose up from the kneeling position with the lethargy of someone who was very tired, who was operating on the edge of exhaustion. Yet he continued anyway because the work required it. He gathered Alistair as he gathered him before. His blood-stained hands moved the smaller man with the same care he used for every action.

The sling received Alistair's body. Tomasz arranged the fabric with great care. It felt almost meditative. Securing the officer in the sling was all that mattered. When he was finished, Alistair rested against his chest once more. Chest to chest. The blood on Tomasz's hands was drying, cracking, and flaking off, settling on the sling's fabric and Alistair's clothes.

Neither man moved. The cellar held them in its grip. Tomasz was crying, not weeping. There was no delicacy or restraint in it, no childhood memory of grief, nothing that suggested this was something he had ever been taught to do. It was as if the body had to invent it, as if the body had been storing up this reaction for years and now, finding itself in darkness with no audience except Alistair, the corpse, and the earth, it decided to let go. The sound that came out of Tomasz was as ugly and violent as birth.

The trembling in his arms became unmanageable. He pressed Alistair against his own chest, then doubled over as if he might vomit. The huge frame convulsed, and the air around them filled with the desperate, pulling gasps of a man whose soul was trying to escape his ribs. His mouth was open, pressed to Alistair's hair or the top of his head. Alistair was not sure. He could barely orient himself within the violence of the trembling. There was a long moment in which Alistair was convinced Tomasz would unleash a scream that could alert the entire village. Something that would get them both killed in the simplest and most idiotic way possible: by making noise.

Above, boots began to return. Alistair heard them as a distant vibration at first, then crisp and distinct as they crossed the boards of the ruined floor above. Multiple pairs. The Germans were coming back. They called out for their missing comrade, following a routine. The words were indistinct, but the tone was enough. They noticed the absence. The boots stopped immediately overhead. The shadow of movement crossed the open gap of the hatch, briefly blocking the gray light, then passed on. There was a shout, a name, closer now, then the sound of two or three more soldiers gathering. The scrape of rifle butts on wood.

Tomasz was still out of mind. The gasping became a kind of hiccuping sob, an animal's helpless sound. Alistair put his hand up between their bodies and pressed it hard against Tomasz's sternum, the way you might press down on a spooked horse, trying to convince it of the safety of stillness. He found the edge of the greatcoat, the fabric, and bunched it in his fist.

"Shh," he whispered, or tried to. There was almost no air in his own lungs now; he could only hope the shape of the word was enough, that

Tomasz would remember the meaning from some other life before this one. He pressed his palm more forcefully, feeling the wild gallop of the man's heart, the heat of it beneath the layers of uniform and sling, and their shared sweat.

"Tomasz, you must—" He could not finish.

The boot steps overhead made the blood in his skull roar, a white noise that threatened to drown out everything else. He pressed his face into Tomasz's neck, smelling the salt and iron that worked its way into the man's skin.

For a moment nothing happened. The shuddering continued, the great trembling, and then it began to slow, fractionally at first, then more so. Alistair dug his fingernails into the fabric. He wanted to hurt, to remind, to anchor. He began to hum, tunelessly, a vibration more than a melody, barely audible. He could feel the vibration in his own mouth, in the point of contact between his jaw and Tomasz's throat. He hummed the old school song, the one they were made to sing every morning at Saint Bartholomew's. He hummed it until it was almost a growl.

The shuddering slowed further. Tomasz's arms, so powerful a moment ago, became heavy, almost limp. He was squeezing Alistair, but not as if to crush; more as if to keep him from floating away. Alistair thought of the hands that killed, the same hands holding him now. He wanted to be sick, but there was no time, no room for it.

There was a distant command, and the boots above receded. There was a final exchange, loud and percussive, and then the sound of them moving away. Alistair did not release his grip on the coat, even as the trembling in Tomasz's body stilled entirely.

Alistair felt the man's heart slow beneath his palm, felt the way the breathing returned to something approaching normal. He did not let go. He could not have let go, even if he wanted to. If he released the handful of coat, if he relaxed the tension in his own knuckles, he was certain the world would collapse on them both.

So, he held. He hummed, and he held, and he listened to the nothingness. Alistair pressed his palm harder against Tomasz's chest. The heart beneath galloped, wild, trapped. He kept his hand there, feeling each beat, holding it in place until the boots above began to move away.

They stayed this way until the light from the hatch began to shift; until it was clear the soldiers had left, or at least lost interest. Only then did Alistair release his grip. He let his hand fall away, one finger at a time, as if peeling bark from a tree, careful not to break the surface beneath. He felt Tomasz's breath on his cheek, hot and ragged, and for a long time neither of them moved.

"Dziękuję, dzięki Bogu," Tomasz whispered. Thank you, thank God, in Polish this time. The first words anyone spoke in hours. It was so quiet that Alistair almost thought he had imagined it.

He raised his head, finally, and met the larger man's eyes in the half-light. They were red, wet, but clear. Alistair nodded, a gesture so small it barely counted, but the meaning was mutual. His own heart slowed. His own breath evened.

The body in the cellar would be found, eventually. But for now, they survived. The world above moved on, indifferent, and the darkness below held them secret, the only witnesses to what happened.

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CHAPTER 6 - THE FEVER



As soon as the coast was clear, they made their break from the cellar. The flat light washed over them. Tomasz pulled on the sling one time, adjusting its position as he inhaled deeply. They only had a few minutes at most before the German patrol would realize someone had gone missing. If escape was possible, their window was closing fast. They would have to move quickly.

“Prêt, Lieutenant?” Ready?

“Oui.”

Tomasz broke into a full run, or as full as possible with another grown man strapped to his chest. Alistair had no other choice but to endure the jostling and bouncing that accompanied each stride, each footfall. Every step was a new swell of agony. His Jaw tightened, teeth grinding together like millstones. He felt himself moan, but the sound of it got lost in Tomasz’s heavy breathing.

He fully expected someone to give chase. He anticipated the sounds of German voices and the crunch of boots behind them, the crack of a warning shot, or worse, at any moment. But nothing happened, no one followed them. They reached the edge of the village, where the hard packed street gave way to softer ground and gravel, then left the main road entirely. They walked for hours, taking cover when they could, heading due west towards the sinking sun.

They reached the farm shed along with the advancing shades of early evening. It stuck out from the surrounding field like a broken tooth. It was

not abandoned, but it had not been attended to recently, either. It was small, no more than ten or twelve square meters, made of slatted wood planks that were once whitewashed, although several seasons of exposure had taken their toll. There were no windows, and the roof was made of corrugated metal spotted with rust.

The door was padlocked, but the frame was damp and rotten. Tomasz grabbed the lock, yanked just once and the entire hasp pulled away in his hand. Another casual display of this man's remarkable strength. The door swung outward.

The inside of the shed felt smaller than the outside, and Tomasz occupied most of the space with his body alone. Even at its peak, the roof hovered only an inch or two above his head, and if he extended his arms fully, he might have been able to touch both walls at the same time. Gaps between the boards were stuffed with burlap and newspaper, corners already receding into shadow. A small oil drum had been repurposed into a stove, a crude pipe extending to a gap in the roof. A work bench occupied one side, and various tools and baskets were set up against the boards or hung from hooks.

Tomasz removed Alistair from the sling, grabbing him firmly around his ribs, and laid him out flat on the worktable.

“Arrêtons pour ce soir.” he said before leaving. “We stop here tonight.”

Alistair lay still, looking up at the tin roof as the room continued to darken. His new position meant the blood could flow differently, and his legs began to throb. The pain no longer came in jolts when Tomasz moved, but rather it settled into a steady, unrelenting ache. He could hear Tomasz moving around outside. After a while the big man returned with an armload

of firewood and a full pail of fresh water that he managed to coax out of the hand pump nearby.



THE FEVER CAME ON LIKE an assault, a collapse of the systems that had been holding Alistair's consciousness intact. His entire body was foreign territory. His teeth were chattering so violently that he was certain they would crack. His skin erupted in a sweat that was both ice-cold and burning hot at the same time. It was a contradiction that his mind refused to comprehend, that his body would never reconcile. The officer began to convulse. The tremors seemed to originate somewhere beneath flesh and bone, as though his own body had lost control of its most fundamental functions.

Tomasz pressed his large hands against Alistair's forehead and neck. Through touch, he sensed what he was unable to see in the firelight. The temperature was impossible. The fever climbed to something that suggested the body was boiling from the inside.

Alistair began to speak. The words were nonsensical. A mixture of languages—Latin from Marlborough, French from his summers abroad, English from his childhood. The words tumbled over one another, and his eyes, when they opened, were not seeing the room, were not seeing Tomasz. They were seeing something else. Something internal. Images that his fractured consciousness were attempting to comprehend.

"The trench," Alistair whispered. "The beam. They're still there. Wickham. Where's Wickham? He was reaching. His hand was—" The words dissolved into silence. His body tensed. Convulsed. Released.

Tomasz moved swiftly. His massive hands moved to Alistair's uniform. Buttons came free and he peeled off the smaller man's jacket like he was a limp rag doll. The undershirt followed. Alistair's small, pale frame revealed itself. His skin was marked with the accumulated filth of days of travel and years of violence. His body was trembling, shaking with the force of the fever that was consuming him.

Then Tomasz stood. He removed his own coat, hanging it aside. His undershirt came off next, exposing the vast landscape of his torso. He paused for a moment, bare-chested in the darkness, and then he pulled the officer's feverish body against his own. Chest to chest. Skin to skin. The contrast was immediate and overwhelming. Alistair's body burned with intense heat, while Tomasz's skin stayed cool and steady. The larger man wrapped his arms around the smaller man in a powerful embrace. He held him close, using his body mass as an anchor and a means of thermal exchange to combat the fever consuming the officer.

Alistair screamed. It was something beyond pain, though pain existed. It was a scream of pure chaos. His mind struggled to make sense of the tingling that flooded his nervous system. Imaginary bugs were crawling under his skin. He clawed at Tomasz's chest with the desperation, with the animal instinct of something drowning rather than fighting. His fingers explored the scars, pressing into them as if they were something real. He wanted them to be strong, to withstand his rising panic.

Tomasz held him tight, letting the clawing and thrashing go on. He allowed the officer's body to express its panic against the vessel of his own form. His large hands glided over Alistair's back, stroking and soothing.

Water came next. Tomasz reached for the bucket without releasing his grip on Alistair, his large hand holding it like a cup. He brought the metal rim to the officer's lips, but only after soaking a cloth in the cold liquid. When he pressed the wet fabric to Alistair's forehead, the officer's eyes flew open. He gasped as if the cold was a violation.

"No." Alistair tried to push the cloth away. "No, please. The water. It's rising. Putrid trench water smells like shit. It's everywhere. I can't—"

"Shhh." The word was barely more than breath. Tomasz continued to apply the cloth. He moved it along Alistair's forehead, then to his temples and the back of his neck. He aimed for spots where the surface vessels were close to the skin, to be cooled by the contact. "You are safe. Je suis ici, je suis ici."

The words were French, and they were simple. I am here. I am here. Tomasz repeated them like a litany, his voice rough against Alistair's ear. He wanted to break through Alistair's delirium, to reach the part of his mind that could still hear and understand.

"Je suis ici, je suis ici."

Alistair's eyes rolled back as his body convulsed once more. It was a full-body reaction to the fever, rising from a deep, instinctual part of his nervous system, somewhere beyond his control. Tomasz held him, his bulky frame a stabilizing force, absorbing and calming the violent tremors wracking the officer's body.

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This time Tomasz began to hum. The sound was low, rough, something from deep in his chest. It was not a melody in any conventional sense. It was almost atonal, more rhythm than pitch, more presence than form. It had no melody Alistair could follow, but the vibration in Tomasz's chest was steady, unchanging, as if exhaustion and war did not exist. It was a lullaby, a song from Poland, from childhood, from some deep well of personal history that Tomasz carried within him.

Alistair's body began to calm. Not completely. The fever continued to rage through him, continued to make his muscles jerk, his skin burn, and his consciousness fragment. But the humming and caring embrace created a space. It could hold the panic, making the delirium's terror easier to manage. His thrashing ceased. His eyes were open but slowly focused on the sound. He sensed the vibration in Tomasz's chest. Another human was there, holding him and offering comfort.

Tomasz reached for the bucket again. He soaked the cloth and pressed it to Alistair's forehead. The officer's eyes flew open, but instead of recoiling, this time he accepted it. The cloth came again. Cool water against his burning skin. Tomasz continued to bathe his face, his neck, his chest. After each application of the cloth, the hum continued with a steady, rhythmic quality, devoid of any pretense.

Hours passed, but Alistair lost track of how many. In his fevered state, time meant nothing. All he knew was the burning and cold, Tomasz's hands

on his skin, and the steady hum that did not wane or vary. But slowly, imperceptibly, the fever started to subside.



MORNING LIGHT WAS NOT kind. It was harsh, revealing, unforgiving in the way daylight always was when one had been conscious all night. The cobwebs in the corner of the shack became distinct. Each strand was visible. Each intersection of the web showed where dust accumulated, where small insects had been caught and abandoned.

Alistair's eyes, opening slowly to this invasion of illumination, took a moment to adjust, to understand what they were seeing. He was not on the table where Tomasz had laid him. He was elevated. He was cradled. His head lay on something massive, solid, and warm, not wood, but flesh.

Alistair curled up in Tomasz's lap, the larger man's back against the wall, his legs extended before him. A blanket—Alistair could not fathom where from—tucked around the officer's small frame. More than a blanket, Tomasz's arms.

The larger man was asleep. His head rested against the stone wall, tilted back. He breathed deeply and steadily, suggesting he had only recently surrendered to unconsciousness. Even in sleep, his arms stayed wrapped around Alistair, protective and vigilant. Even his subconscious refused to let its guard down.

Alistair studied his face in the brutal daylight. His beard was a bit longer than it had been when he had first seen him in the trench. The scratches across Tomasz's left cheek were fresh. They were not there yesterday. Where had those come from? The officer could not recall. His eyes, closed now, were shadowed, the skin beneath them dark with the

telltale staining that came from days without sleep. His jawline was tighter and more defined. It seemed like exhaustion stripped away any excess, revealing only the essential structure beneath.

Tomasz surfaced from sleep gradually, as though climbing through layers of exhaustion. His dark eyes opened slowly, found Alistair immediately, and assessed the officer's condition in a single glance. Then he moved heedfully, slowly. He shifted Alistair's body slightly and reached for the canteen.

The water was cooler than it had been during the night. Tomasz had found more, or at some point, he must have refilled it from the pump. He lifted the canteen to Alistair's lips and the water slid down his throat like medicine.

Alistair's hands trembled as he accepted the canteen. His entire body was weak. Fever consumed more than his consciousness. It consumed his resources, reducing him to a bare state of existence. As he sipped the cool water, it settled in his stomach. His body began to restore itself. Soon, he noticed a new clarity. His mind, freed from the delirium, was able to process thought in a linear fashion. It was able to construct language, able to form intention.

"Combien de temps?" His voice emerged as barely more than a whisper. How long had he slept? The words required effort that seemed disproportionate to their length.

"Toute la nuit," Tomasz responded. All night. His voice was rough from disuse, from the hours of humming, from the night spent speaking to someone who did not have the capacity to understand him. "Dors..."

Alistair knew he was lying. The truth was that he had hardly slept at all. The realization came with a specificity that was almost overwhelming. While Alistair burned with fever, thrashing and screaming in delirium, Tomasz stayed awake. He held him. He applied cool water to his burning skin. He hummed his rough, wordless song. He used his body as a vessel and an anchor. It was the only tool that prevented the officer from dissolving completely into the chaos of his own illness. Alistair's eyes burned. He looked away, toward the cobwebs in the corner, and breathed until his chest loosened. Then, he considered the dark stains beneath Tomasz's eyes, the fresh cuts on his cheek, and, for a while, said nothing.

"Quel est ton nom?" The question broke the silence with more force than the officer's weak voice could properly support. What is your name?

Tomasz paused before responding, as if determining whether the question was sincere, whether the officer could handle the answer, whether their exchange would create an obligation beyond their current arrangement.

"Tomasz," he said finally.

Alistair mouthed the word: Tomasz. Not Thomas, Tom-ash. Not sergeant, not soldier, not the man who carried him. Tomasz. This mythic giant had a name. He had a name that carried history and origin; it alluded to a person who existed before the war and who would continue to exist after it.

"Et toi?" Tomasz asked.

The question was remarkable in its simplicity, and in its reversal. That Tomasz had been carrying him, holding him, tending to him, without ever having asked what he should call the officer. He accepted the role, did the

work, and continued. He did not even need the word to make the relationship official.

"Alistair," the officer answered. "My name is Alistair."

Neither man repeated the other's name aloud. They simply stayed where they were. Alistair and Tomasz. Alistair cradled in Tomasz's lap. Tomasz's thumb moved once, slowly, across Alistair's shoulder. The bucket of cool water sat on the floor nearby. Above them, a bird made a sound in the eaves, then went quiet. They stayed where they were.

Outside, the war continued. Somewhere in the distance, engines. The rumble of artillery, far enough away to feel almost theoretical. The village remained quiet, dead, committed to its destruction. But inside the shed, the silence had changed.

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CHAPTER 7 - THE SANCTUARY



The rain pelted them like gravel. Each drop carried ice in its core, and where it hit exposed skin, it left numb patches that burned only after the fact. Tomasz's collar was soaked through, the wool heavy against his neck. The mud beneath them existed in its own state of matter, a cold plasma that was neither liquid nor solid. It felt alive, like a throng of desperate mouths pulling at Tomasz's boots, ready to swallow them whole.

The sling held Alistair. It held him as Tomasz pushed forward through the morass. Each step extracted a cost the larger man's face did not betray, but his shoulders communicated their fatigue with every increment of movement. Water ran down his neck in rivulets, soaking his uniform, turning the fabric dark and heavy. His breath came in controlled bursts despite the labor. The mud seemed to grab at his boots as if attempting to root him, to keep him in place, to prevent any forward motion. Cradled against Tomasz's chest, Alistair felt a fine tremor running through the larger man's arms. It came with every step, subtle but inescapable.

"Lá." Tomasz's voice cut through the rain. A single word. Pointing with his chin toward something in the distance.

A structure rose from the devastation with an improbability that seemed like a hallucination. Stone. Dark stone, weathered, ancient-looking despite the relative modernity of its construction. A church.

The approach took longer than it should have. Distance was a fluid concept in the mud. What appeared to be fifty yards might have been twice as much. Tomasz slowed as they neared the spot. The churned earth

demanded careful footing, and he adjusted his pace accordingly. His breathing was controlled, but Alistair felt the increase in heart rate, felt the way his stout frame was marshaling resources for the final push.

The door hung from a single hinge. Or what was left of the door. The wood splintered, charred at the edges, suggesting fire or ordnance attempted violence on it at one point. Tomasz pushed through without pause, his broad shoulders dipped as he navigated the narrow opening.

The sanctuary received them in silence. The rain continued beyond the threshold, but inside, there was a reprieve from its horizontal assault. Alistair's eyes adjusted gradually to the interior dimness. Most of the stone arches above were still intact, but one section was compromised. A hole in the roof let in a single gray beam of light, revealing dust suspended in the air like a living, conscious thing. Puddles formed on the limestone floor beneath the hole, with concentric circles where drops of water were already beginning their quiet work of erosion.

Most of the pews survived. Fractured, some of them. Splinters where a bomb's shrapnel may have grazed them. Overturned in places, as if the violence had been enough to uproot even stone-bolted furniture. The remains of candles melted into abstract shapes, wax pools that ran and hardened and began to melt again. The smell struck Alistair with full force: ash, damp wood, and something else. It might have been incense or the burnt almond scent of TNT.

A pigeon erupted from the rafters. It was sudden, violent, wings beating with an urgency that seemed designed to startle. The bird's cry—a guttural sound that belonged to this place, to this ruin—echoed through the sanctuary. Tomasz's body went rigid for a moment; his arms tightening

fractionally around Alistair. Then the tension released. The bird disappeared back into the shadows above, having completed its protest at the intrusion.

They walked further into the space, the sound of Tomasz's heavy boots on stone echoing through it. As he walked past the last pews, he was careful. He assessed his surroundings, looking for shelter, resources, and any potential threats. When he reached the center of the sanctuary, he adjusted the sling, allowing him to shift Alistair's mass without removing it. The officer supported himself by wrapping an arm around Tomasz's neck.

"Such a pity," Alistair whispered. The words came unbidden, pulled from him by the sensory assault of the place.

Tomasz did not respond. He carried on with his assessment. His dark eyes scanned the sanctuary's layout, noting the damage and figuring out what may be salvaged. He carefully carried Alistair to a less-damaged pew. He placed the officer down, making sure he was stable, and his legs were positioned to minimize pain. Once Alistair was settled, Tomasz let go and Alistair's body settled into an uncomfortable but stationary position, a welcome relief from being carried.

Tomasz turned and began dismantling the splintered pews. His work was methodical; his remarkable strength applied with brutal efficiency as he snapped long boards into manageable pieces. He broke wood at joints, extracted cross-pieces, gathered the fragments into a pile. The crack of splintering oak echoed through the space, competing with the continued flutter of pigeon wings and the patter of rain through the hole in the roof.

Alistair watched. Tomasz's shoulders tightened as he wrenched a board free. He broke each piece with the same economy of motion, discarding what would smoke too much, keeping what would burn clean. Alistair

tracked Tomasz's hands: selecting, tracing, testing, and gathering. The pile of burnable wood grew at the center of the floor. Tomasz cleared an area near the wall where the damage was least severe. He used some loose bricks to create a crude fire-pit.

He arranged the kindling with care. Small pieces formed the center, while larger boards encircled them. This layout allowed air to flow and gave the flame room to expand. Tomasz knew his way around a fire.

“Crois-tu en Dieu?” Do you believe in God? The question tumbled from Alistair's throat before he had the chance to suppress it.

Here, in this place, with the rain falling through the hole in the roof and the altar visible in the distance, pale against the shadows, the question felt necessary. It felt like the only possible thing to ask. Tomasz did not pause. He did not turn to look at Alistair. He kept on arranging wood, his massive frame folded slightly as he worked. Alistair waited for some acknowledgment—words or a gesture. Even a hesitation in the rhythm of his labor would do. None came. Tomasz continued: placing kindling, building a structure of flame in a space designed for prayer. The fire would be his answer.

Tomasz straightened, his enormous frame unfolding from the crouch. He reached for something in his pocket—matches, from the tin of tea they carried since the field of bodies. He struck one, the small spark sudden and bright in the dimness. For a moment, nothing. The kindling seemed indifferent to the introduction of flame. It absorbed the heat with the neutrality of stone absorbing rain. Then a spark caught. A single thread of orange appeared, grew, and spread.

The wood began to smoke. Then, gradually, fire arrived. It began small, tentative, a flame uncertain whether it deserved to exist in this place. But Tomasz fed it carefully, introducing larger pieces of wood as the fire grew stronger. His hands moved with the exactitude he brought to the gathering, to the arrangement. He avoided overwhelming it, allowing heat to build and spread effectively.

The warmth, when it reached Alistair, was almost shocking. It came across the stone floor in waves, tangible, material, the embodiment of survival extracted from ruin. The shadows in the sanctuary shifted as the fire grew. The altar, which had been invisible in the dimness, began to materialize; pale stone, stained but intact, watching everything.

The arches above caught the firelight and threw it back, creating visions of shifting illumination and shadow. Tomasz settled beside the fire, his enormous frame casting its own shadow on the wall behind him. He did not move to comfort Alistair, did not try to speak. He plainly existed in the space, a silent presence breathing in the changed air as they both watched flames devour the sacred wood.

"C'était l'église de quelqu'un." Alistair's voice was barely more than a whisper. This was someone's church. The statement emerged as an observation, but also as a kind of prayer itself. His eyes fixed themselves on the altar, on the marble that absorbed light in a way the rest of the sanctuary did not.

Tomasz shifted beside him. Not to move away, but to settle more deeply into the position they assumed. His broad chest rose and fell with each breath. Alistair sensed the movement and its steady rhythm. It matched the rain falling above them.

"C'est toujours," Tomasz said. The two words hung in the air between them, precise and absolute. Not "was." consigning the space to memory, but "is." The present tense of persistence in the face of destruction.

Alistair's eyes closed. For a moment he allowed the meaning of that statement to settle into his consciousness. *Still*. It was a form of faith, though the word felt too small for what Tomasz had just communicated.

When his eyes opened again, he was looking at the altar once more. And in that moment, something changed in his perception. The altar was not simply an object. It was a presence. It was watching over them. The space between the two men and the marble surface had bearing. It was filled with something: attention, maybe, or intention. It felt like the accumulation of ten thousand genuflections, the stone worn smooth in the spots where countless knees had pressed against it.

Then Tomasz's hand moved. It was a simple gesture. His palm, enormous and scarred, settled against Alistair's back. The fabric of the officer's shirt was still damp from the journey through rain, from the fever and from the accumulated moisture of their travel. The warmth of Tomasz's hand penetrated through the material.

His huge hand began to move in slow circles on Alistair's back. It followed the width of his shoulders, which were slowly regaining their composure as the fever faded. His fingers glided over the bruises, reminders of the trench. It was the kind of touch neither of them had known for a long time.

Alistair's body responded to the contact in ways he dared not name and was unable to suppress. His breath, which had been shallow, deepened. The circles on his back continued, patient and steady. With each rotation, his

shoulders dropped by a fraction, muscles releasing from the perpetual tension that had become part of survival. The warmth of Tomasz's hand penetrated the damp wool of his shirt. Alistair felt his own heartbeat in his throat, then lower, spreading through his chest with the same rhythm as the hand that moved across his back.

He gazed at the altar again. The marble caught the firelight and held it, pale against the shadows. His body began to tremble. He was not cold. The fire warmed the sanctuary, and Tomasz's body beside him radiated heat. Nor was it pain. That had been a constant, measurable, separate from this. This tremor came from elsewhere. It started in his shoulders, then his hands. Weeks of war. The trench. Wickham. The beam. The fever. The simple, brutal fact that he was here and so many of his men were not.

Tomasz's hand kept moving, slow circles on his back. His breath ruffled Alistair's hair, bringing warmth and the scent of dust and smoke. With his ear against Tomasz's chest, Alistair felt the steady beat of his heart: boom, boom, boom, a constant rhythm that would not stop.

The rain continued its soft percussion above them. The fire continued its slow work of consuming what was left of the wood that had been pews, which held humans in moments of prayer and contemplation. The altar continued its silent watching. Alistair trembled from something deeper than fear. His mind could not grasp the reason, but his body understood. This was what it meant to be held, to be witnessed, as if the life inside him was honestly precious.

The circles on his back continued into the evening, through the night's deepening darkness, and for as long as they stayed in this sanctuary. Alistair's eyes fixed on the altar. His body leaned into Tomasz's side. His

ears tuned to the heartbeat that seemed to synchronize with the rain falling above them. The world outside continued to be savage. Yet this sanctuary offered them shelter. In that space, between heartbeats and raindrops, between tremor and stillness, something fractured began the infinitesimal work of mending.

Another wave of misery swelled up gradually within him, then broke all at once. Alistair's breath quickened first, each exhale snagging on something deep in his chest before releasing, then snagging again. The tightness built from a place the war's physical damage could not reach, fed by every hour since the trench, every night of fever, every morning of waking to find himself still alive.

He turned his face toward the altar—the instinct of a man who had learned to keep himself hidden— but the splints held him flush against Tomasz's side. His hand rose and pressed flat against his own cheek, a small and useless gesture.

The first tear ran down the side of his face, soaking into his palm. And then another. And then, his body suddenly began to shake. His shoulders trembled. He gasped for breath. Though illness and pain weakened him, his small frame shook with a surprising intensity.

Tomasz did not hesitate. Without asking questions or offering words of reassurance, his massive arms moved with a fluidity that seemed tailor-made for this moment, for holding the unravelling man. One hand rose to the back of Alistair's neck, cupping it with a gentle touch that belied the size of his palm, the calluses, and the strength in his fingers. His other arm slid under Alistair's hips, cradling him, pulling him into his body, creating a protective shield that nothing could penetrate.

The officer's face pressed against Tomasz's chest. Not because Alistair willed it, but because the positioning offered by the larger man's embrace made it inevitable. His gaping mouth pressed against the fabric of the uniform, against the chest beneath it, and the tears began their work of soaking into the horizon-blue material. What had been a trickle became a torrent. What had been contained became exposed.

Alistair's vocal cords produced the wordless sounds of something breaking at a level that language could not express. The sobs came from a place deep inside he did not know, and with them came a struggle for air, each breath a fight against a throat that was tightening and seizing, losing control.

In the hours that followed, everything that he had been holding became manifest. The faces of the men in the trench. Wickham. The others whose names were beginning to fade, whose identities were being consumed by the simple fact of their absence. The moment of the beam falling, the heft of it, the understanding that death was occurring, was immediate, was inevitable. The fever-bright mindscape of delirium. Tomasz's hands on his face, cold cloths that felt like a violation but had been salvation. Surviving felt like a theft, a betrayal of something basic, a price too high to pay.

The pain in his legs was now supplemented by pain in his chest, by a tightness that felt like his ribs were trying to compress his heart into nothing. His hands, which had been covering his face, fell away. They clutched at the wool of Tomasz's uniform, trying to find something permanent. They sought something that would not slip away, something that withstood the most difficult moments. Tomasz's hand moved on the back of his neck. Holding him.

The rain fell. Alistair heard his own breathing change. Sharp gasps gave way to deep, shuddering sobs, then a deep and weary stillness. His throat burned, raw from crying. He felt the wetness where his face pressed against Tomasz's chest, the fabric of the uniform soaked through. His hands still gripped the wool; fingers cramped from holding on. The tremors slowed, then stopped. What persisted was a heaviness, something that would never be expelled but would always have to be carried.

As his body was reaching its limits, the tears began to fade. His breathing began to stabilize slightly. His grip on Tomasz's uniform loosened. His face, soaked with the evidence of his breaking, pressed harder against the larger man's chest.

"I'm so sorry," Alistair whispered.

The words were difficult to hear, whispered into the empty air of the sanctuary. They were meant for no one in particular. They drifted to the dead who were not present, to the fading faces in his memory, and to all that had been lost. The apology was not directed at Tomasz. It was not an apology for weeping. It was an apology for surviving. It was an apology for being here. The apology contained no hope of forgiveness because it was intended for those who would no longer hear it.

Tomasz's hand shifted, and the massive palm that had been cradling the back of Alistair's neck moved. One finger extended, its touch impossibly gentle, tracing the line of the officer's jaw. It swept away the wetness from his cheek, not to erase what happened, but to acknowledge the tears, to bear witness to them through touch.

Alistair's eyes stayed closed. The sanctuary held them both. The altar loomed as a faint shape in the deepening darkness. It remained watchful,

aware of two men in this space, one holding, the other held.

The rain continued. It fell through the hole in the roof, creating puddles that caught the last of the firelight. It fell beyond the sanctuary walls, fell on the landscape that was still deadly, that was still dangerous, that was still trying to kill them both. But here, inside this space, inside this arrangement of arms and proximity and absolute acceptance, the rain was just a sound, muffled notes in the background. It was the world continuing on outside while this single moment between them refused to be rushed, a thing not to be solved but lived through.

Hours passed in stillness. Alistair's breath gradually became less ragged. His tears gradually ceased their flow and exhausted themselves. His body pressed against Tomasz's, held in the cage of protective arms. It was supported by the absolute refusal of the larger man to release him, to move, to break the geometry of comfort they created.

The sanctuary moved deeper into darkness. And still, they endured. Two men sat together in a ruined church. One had broken open and was bleeding emotion in a way that refused to be contained. The other held him close, as if his existence were the most important thing in a world designed around the destruction of such significance.

Alistair did not know if he had been forgiven for surviving. He did not know if there was a mechanism by which such forgiveness may even be granted. He only knew he was being held, was being witnessed, was being accepted in a state of complete dissolution. This, somehow, was enough because it had to be.



THE FIRE BURNED DOWN to amber. It filled the sanctuary with a glow that was neither day nor night. It was something in between, unique to this space and moment, shared only by the two of them. The shadows on the stone floor were long and dark. They stretched toward the altar, along the walls, and into corners where nothing was visible, but anything might be imagined. Alistair's face stayed against Tomasz's chest for a long time after the tears stopped. But then, gradually, he lifted it.

The movement was a slow, deliberate motion, one that asked permission through the act itself. Tomasz's arms stayed where they were, cradling, supporting, but they did not resist the shift in position. Alistair's eyes opened. They found Tomasz's face in the amber light. They saw the scar along his jaw and the dark eyes that had been quietly watching since the larger man pulled him from beneath the beam in the trench.

Alistair's hand rose. It was trembling. His hands had been trembling for what seemed like forever. They had been trembling since the fever, since the trench and the moment his small frame understood it was broken and needed rescue. But this tremor was different. His fingers extended toward Tomasz's face. They found his jaw first; the angle of it, the line of bone beneath the skin, the geography that only proximity would fully reveal.

Tomasz stayed perfectly still. His stillness conveyed total acceptance and a readiness to be explored. Alistair's fingers traced the contours of his face, mapping the bone and skin, learning a truth that sight alone could not provide.

They moved slowly, with intention, as if discovering something sacred. Then they moved higher. Toward the scar. Toward the side of his neck. Toward the place where pulse beat steady—boom, boom, boom. It was the

same rhythm that Alistair learned through nights and days of proximity, the same rhythm that was as familiar as his own heartbeat.

Tomasz's hand moved but did not stop the touch. Instead, he pressed down on Alistair's back. The touch was welcome, and the exploration allowed. The larger man's breathing became more rapid now.

Their faces drew closer, but it was unclear who was making the first move. Was it Alistair leaning in, seeking a closeness that was almost skin-to-skin? Or Tomasz bending down, drawn in by the moment's gravity and the human need to bridge the gap? Their lips were just inches apart, near enough to share breath.

Alistair's hand moved to the back of Tomasz's neck, gently pulling him in. The officer's breath caught. Tomasz's eyes stayed open, fixed on Alistair's face. His gaze was so intense it felt like an attempt to memorize the moment, to store it away as proof that this connection, this possibility, was real.

And then Tomasz stopped. His forehead moved away from Alistair's. His eyes closed. The hand on the officer's back tightened briefly, without thinking, then relaxed. His head turned slightly. His jaw worked. And Alistair watched as Tomasz swallowed. It was a simple gesture, an act of physiology that most people would have no cause to notice.

To Alistair, who had spent days studying the larger man's every posture, it communicated everything. The difficulty of restraint. The shape of a desire held back for something more important than a moment's pleasure.

Alistair's hand fell from Tomasz's neck. It settled back against his chest, resting over his heart, feeling the rapid percussion of it, feeling the evidence of the cost of restraint. The officer did not feel rejected. That word did not

portray the reality of what had just occurred. Instead, he felt recognized. He felt acknowledged. He felt held by the very act of refusal.

They looked at each other in the amber light. The sling was there. It still bound them. It was still the concrete evidence of their connection. Alistair depended on Tomasz, and Tomasz was determined by duty to see them through. The altar was still visible in the shadows, still watching, still holding space for whatever was occurring between them. Alistair's lips moved. He spoke softly in French. English felt too vulgar for what he needed to express.

"J'ai besoin de toi."

I need you.

Tomasz exhaled slowly, like he had been holding his breath for hours or even days while traveling through the shattered scenery. His eyes stayed fixed on Alistair's face, holding the officer's gaze as firmly as his arms held him since pulling him from under the beam. He did not repeat the words. There was no need; the exchange was complete. The boundary had been set, and in respecting it, they created something more sacred than any physical act could have achieved.

Tomasz slowly got up and gathered Alistair's weight with care. He found a section of stone floor away from the worst of the puddles and, after a moment's consideration, unfolded some canvas from the sling. It was a meager layer against the cold floor, but it was something. Once it was arranged, he laid Alistair down upon it.

Then Tomasz lay down. He had to adjust his tall frame to fit on the makeshift bed. This left space for the officer. His bigger body wrapped protectively around the smaller one. Chest to chest. There was no sling, the

embrace itself was sufficient. Tomasz wrapped his arms around Alistair. One arm supported him, while the other crossed his chest.

Alistair's head settled beneath Tomasz's chin. His ear pressed against the larger man's chest. He found the heartbeat right away. The familiar percussion came through the hours spent close together. Boom. Boom. Boom. The rhythm was slower now than it had been in moments of crisis or fear.

Tomasz pulled his huge blue overcoat across them both. The heavy wool, lined with whatever insulation the war had not yet destroyed, settled over their bodies like a benediction. It was the coat that had been sweat-soaked and mud-stained, that had been the uniform of survival. It had been draped around Alistair's shoulders on nights when the cold threatened to freeze him beyond recovery. Now it was their shelter, their covering, and their boundary against the cruel world outside the sanctuary walls.

The rain continued its work. It fell through the hole in the roof like long silver ribbons. The steady patter grew almost comforting. It turned into a rhythm of safety, not danger. Water pooled on the stone floor, rippling with each new drop, catching the faint glow of the dying embers, and throwing it back into the darkness. The sound of the falling drops created a strange melody. It was almost beautiful—a meditation, a rhythm, an external heartbeat beyond the two men resting on the sanctuary floor.

Above them, the rafters held their shadows. The altar, now only visible as a pale shape in the darkness, continued its silent watch. The rose window, its colored glass now dark, was invisible but still present, still holding the memory of the light it cast earlier. Its testimony continued, its beauty persisted.

Neither man slept immediately. Alistair's breathing gradually deepened. His muscles, which had been in a state of perpetual tension since the moment of the trench's collapse, began to release. Tomasz's breathing fell into alignment with the officer's, slow, deep, synchronized. Alistair became aware of the other man's heartbeat or imagined it, a soft percussion beneath the silence.

For the first time since the trench, Alistair felt the complete absence of immediate fear. The danger had not ceased. The war still lingered beyond these walls. But in this space, with Tomasz's arms around him and his heartbeat in his ear, fear was a distant thing he could choose not to answer.

Alistair's consciousness began to fray at the edges. Discrete thought became less possible. Language began to dissolve. What lingered was sensation: the heartbeat, the warmth, the coat's thickness, the arms around him, and Tomasz's warm steady breath through his hair. The feeling of his massive hand shifting slightly on Alistair's back, neither stroking nor comforting, maintaining contact. It was a silent promise that he was still there, that he would stay vigilant through the night, committed to carrying the burden in whatever form it took. Then sleep finally took him too. It came not as surrender, but as a blessing, his body recognizing it was safe to rest, knowing another presence was watching over them.

They slept on the sanctuary floor, no longer officer and soldier, but two men held together by promise and purpose. Through the gap in the roof the rain came down in pale threads, and where they struck the last of the coals they hissed and vanished. The pooled water on the floor had gone still enough to hold a faint reflection of the window above—dark now, its reds and blues surrendered to the night. A cold draft moved through the nave and

stirred the hem of the great overcoat where it lay across them both. Tomasz's hand had not moved from Alistair's back. His fingers rested open against the officer's spine, neither gripping nor releasing, simply there. Two men lay chest to chest on the sanctuary floor, bound not by canvas straps or knots but by the simple, revolutionary choice to remain-to hold on, to persist, to carry each other through whatever came after dawn.

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CHAPTER 8 - THE CROSSING



They passed through abandoned villages, less ruined than the others; being farther from the front lines spared them some damage. As he walked, their surroundings changed. Flat, damaged fields gave way to gentle hills and dips. War had not completely reshaped the earth. And then they came to the river.

They walked all morning to reach it. Tomasz carried him in the sling as he always did now. He was prepared to carry him indefinitely into whatever their journey had waiting. The officer's legs were beginning to heal. The splints held, and beneath them the bones were knitting, or so he allowed himself to believe, but walking was still impossible. So, Tomasz carried.

Now, the river loomed in front of them as a testament to impossibility. Gray-green and unrelenting, it etched its way through the landscape like an epitaph carved in stone. It manifested no sense of concern, having cut through the earth long before the war and undoubtedly continuing long after. The water was swollen with the violence of early spring snowmelt. Debris tumbled in the current: branches stripped of bark, what might have been a helmet, something that Alistair did not focus on and did not want to. The midday light was flat and without mercy, revealing every detail of the water's hostility.

Tomasz set him down on the muddy bank. The gesture had become a ritual. Fingers unwound from the sling. Body lowered with absolute care. The slight jostle as Tomasz settled his own frame, preparing for whatever

came next. Alistair's small form was released, and for the first time in hours, he was not being held.

But Tomasz did not stop. He did not stand back to allow Alistair to rest. Instead, he began to move with deliberate purpose, his massive hands working at the sling. The canvas was filthy now; stained with mud, sweat, and blood, the accumulated evidence of four days' travel. But the fabric held, and Tomasz's fingers worked at the knots with methodical attention.

He was reconfiguring it. He was altering their apparatus into an updated design that would hold Alistair's body differently. Belts came off. Canvas straps were rewound. He transformed the sling into a harness. Alistair saw the logic behind it taking shape. He grasped the geometry and its implications. It was a back-harness. This new position would make movement in the water easier. He would have to cling to Tomasz's neck, wrap himself around the larger man's torso, and trust completely that he would not slip, that he would not be released into the water and lost.

"No," he said as Tomasz began wrapping the straps around his own chest. "This is suicide. We won't make it."

Tomasz did not pause. He would not have stopped even if he understood the officer's language. His eyes flicked towards the water, gauging the river's current. He tested a strap, adjusted the angle, and tugged on it again.

"Tu tiens bon," Tomasz said. You hold tight.

The words were flat and factual. It was already decided and barely even needed Alistair's agreement to happen.

The officer opened his mouth to protest, but no words came. What could he say? They should turn back? To what? They should wait? For how long?

They should find another way? There was no other way. There was only the river, and Tomasz edging closer, step by tentative step.

Tomasz finished the configuration of the harness and after some last tests, he shrugged. The gesture was economical, a tilt of his head and a shift in his weight, the smallest sign that Alistair should prepare himself.

The officer moved as much as he could, which was not far. Tomasz hoisted him easily, his enormous hands finding purchase beneath Alistair's armpits. Alistair's arms shot up and wrapped around Tomasz's neck. He would need a secure grip to make it through the water, the current, and whatever lay ahead.

The officer pulled himself closer in, his face nearly touching Tomasz's shoulder muscles. His ear almost brushed against the scarred skin of the larger man's upper arm. He felt the pulse nearby, steady against his cheek. He sensed the blood moving through the tissue. This man's heart was steady. Fear had not quickened it.

The straps wound over Tomasz's shoulders, over his chest, across his back. The harness took shape around them both, binding them into a unit. The larger man tightened a strap around them both. He made sure Alistair's body stayed secure, would not shift, slip, or separate from Tomasz's frame. Alistair's face rested against Tomasz's shoulder blade. It pressed into the strong muscle that would help them move through the water. He felt every breath the larger man took, sensed the rise and fall of the chest beneath him. Above him, above them both, the flat afternoon light continued its work of revealing without mercy.

"Teins," Tomasz said again, dead serious. Hold.

Tomasz pulled off his boots and tied them together, then folded the heavy tunic and greatcoat around them, and slung them across his chest. Only then did he step into the river. When his bare foot touched the icy water, he gasped. The sound was involuntary, an almost primitive response to the numbing cold that seized his legs immediately, climbing with vicious speed up his calves and thighs. They had crossed water before—streams, drainage ditches, flooded fields—but this was different. It pounded against them with a fury of a creature released from its winter prison, something frozen for months that had finally recognized its purpose.

Dark clouds of silt swirled up around Tomasz's ankles like a living thing that wanted to consume them. It swirled and resettled with each footfall, obscuring the riverbed so that every step required him to feel downward through the murk for ground that might or might not hold. His enormous frame moved tentatively. The river did not know his size and did not care about it. Each foot descended slowly, testing, before accepting his weight.

Behind him, pressed flat against his back, Alistair went rigid, bracing himself for an unknown impact, every muscle locked. His arms cinched around Tomasz's neck with a force that was breathless, the physical shape of a terror so complete it had become indistinguishable from devotion.

The water rose. It reached Tomasz's knees. It continued past them, climbing his thighs. With each increment of rise, the current grew stronger, began to pull at him with increasing force. The river pulled him away from the ground. It pushed not just down but also sideways, trying to carry him downstream. Tomasz staggered slightly. His foot slipped on something smooth under the silt—a rock or a piece of wood. He caught himself with

his big hand, pushing forward into the water. He regained his footing and prevented both of them from being swept downstream.

Alistair made a sound, like a scream if it was inhaled rather than exhaled. The vocalization was one of pure animal terror at feeling the moment of potential catastrophe. His legs, now useless, wrapped around Tomasz's hips, striving to gain a better grip and increase the contact between their bodies. His breaths came quick and shallow against the back of Tomasz's neck. It was like hyperventilation, as if his body were preparing for the drowning that felt inevitable.

The water rose to Tomasz's waist, and it was ice cold. His muscles were already slowing down, losing their efficiency, and starting to give in. But he kept moving forward. Each step was physically agonizing. Alistair could feel the tension, as Tomasz's muscles worked hard against the water's resistance. The current was stronger now, pulling him with real force. More than once, Tomasz's feet slipped, as if the river were trying to sweep them away.

"Teins," he yelled. His strained voice barely rose above the sound of the rushing water, coming out as little more than a rasp. "Ne lâche pas." Do not let go.

The larger man reached behind him until his palm found Alistair's hair. He rubbed it once, then gently squeezed the back of the smaller man's skull. The gesture was impossible to read. It might have been practical, making certain Alistair was ready before stepping into the current. It might have been reassurance. Whatever Tomasz had intended, Alistair closed his eyes and accepted it.

Alistair's arms stayed where they were, locked around the big man's trapezius muscles. His face was pressed against the nape of his thick, corded neck. He could have kissed him there. The officer's quick, shallow breaths matched Tomasz's. They inhaled together and exhaled together, becoming a single organism, one breathing unit.

The water was at Tomasz's chest now. It was climbing toward his collarbone. Alistair was now drenched in the river's fury, as well. The unyielding current pummeled his back and shoulders, carrying away any trace of warmth or equilibrium. The cold moved past the point of mere discomfort and into the realm of genuine threat. His fingers were beginning to lose sensation and grip. The pain in his legs had even started to go numb. But Tomasz's skin was hot. It retained heat from the labor of carrying, from the exertion, from the work of moving through the thrashing water.

This was all a mistake. He knew it before they had even stepped into the water; he knew it even as his mouth failed to form the words. It was too late now.

He was aware, in a strange, abstract way, of his own uselessness. He was strapped like a child or a burden to the back of a man who should never have been required to carry any weight but his own. He had once been the officer—responsible, accountable. Now he was ballast, his arms tightened around Tomasz's neck like a child clinging to his father's back in the village pond. He tried to shift his grip; to ease the strangling pressure he was creating with his panic, but the harness cinched him tight. The canvas cut into his armpits. The straps pulled across the healing break in his thigh, a pain so sharp that it cleaved the cold for a moment, only to be swallowed again.

Alistair was almost entirely submerged now. His head barely stayed above water thanks to Tomasz's wide shoulders. The officer was able to balance on them while keeping his head above water. But it was close. Remarkably close. Any further rise in the river level or any added pressure from the current, and Alistair would go under. He was completely dependent on Tomasz's ability to keep them afloat.

They reached the middle of the river. Alistair understood this not by any landmark, but by what the current did to his body. It stopped pulling in one direction and began pulling in all of them at once, a force that had no single axis, that came from everywhere and nowhere, that made forward progress feel less like walking and more like an argument. Tomasz's feet, when he pressed them downward, found nothing reliable. The riverbed was there and then it was not. The water was beginning to lift them, was beginning to make the case that the ground was a fiction, that there was no longer any surface to stand on. The only honest way forward was to swim.

Tomasz spoke. The words came out in Polish, automatically, older than the war. A woman's name, a mother's name. The he pushed off the rock and into the river's churning torrent.

His bearing shifted. The harness supporting Alistair's lower half stayed in place, but Tomasz's arms began to move in a new way. They reached forward into the water, began to move in strokes. His body went from vertical to horizontal as he began to use his legs to propel himself instead of keeping his equilibrium. He was swimming.

The buoyancy of water began to do some of the work of supporting the smaller man's frame. The harness loosened a bit with the change in gravity. Alistair adjusted his body to this new position. He could feel Tomasz's lats

extend and his deltoids rotate underneath him with each powerful stroke. He clasped his hands together and tried to slide himself higher onto Tomasz's neck. He tried, as much as he could, to find the rhythm in Tomasz's movements and shift his own weight accordingly.

The current was relentless. It pushed at them with a force that was almost conscious, almost malevolent. Alistair's breath was ragged once more. It sounded like someone drowning, full of pure terror. The officer's face was pushed hard against Tomasz's neck. He felt like he was choking on his own hair. He was almost buried in the larger man's shoulder, struggling just to stay connected.

Each stroke of Tomasz's arms pulled them forward. The motion was slow but required an enormous amount of effort. The water posed a resistance that one could not overcome, only negotiate with. The river was not an obstacle to conquer but instead a force to accept. They had to move through it with the understanding that it would always be stronger. Their survival depended not on overcoming it but on outlasting it.

Tomasz's teeth clenched with effort. His muscles were burning now. The muscles of his arms, the muscles of his chest, his shoulders, his back, all of them needed to work together, moving them through the water. The cold progressed past pain and into a kind of numbness. His fingers, when he tried to curl them to direct the strokes, were less elastic, and his legs lost a degree of strength.

Alistair's breath rasped against his neck. The officer's body went stiff with cold and fear. He realized they were no longer on solid ground, no longer in a stable position, and survival was now just a distant idea that might not be within reach.

Every reflex in his body screamed let go, to scramble, but the harness held him firm. He was dead weight. He could only cling on like a parasite. Tomasz's arms churned in the water, seeking purchase, but Alistair could feel the drag he was creating, the way his own small mass multiplied with every sodden inch of wool, every ounce of river water absorbed into canvas, cotton, and flesh. The straps cut into his chest and thighs. Where his hands gripped at Tomasz's collar, the man's skin was clammy, slick with river and cold. There was no sound but the river and Tomasz's breath, and the river was winning.

For a single, glassy instant, air, water, flesh, and harness all blurred. An eddy seized them and drew both bodies underwater. The river's surface snapped overhead, cold light replaced by green-black murk. Alistair's senses compressed to a pinhole. Tomasz's bellow muffled to a bass vibration, the knife-cold of the river, the frantic pulse in his ears, the taste of silt and river-brine.

Alistair's left leg slipped free of the harness. He felt it go. At first, it was a slackening, then a sudden, total absence, his boot spinning weightlessly behind them. He could end it here. The thought arrived, unbidden and perfect, like the sharpest flash of artillery: If he let go, if he just uncoiled his arms, Tomasz might have a chance.

All his life Alistair prided himself on his discipline, his powers of refusal. But the urge now, to surrender—so easily done, just a slow opening of his fists, a slackening around Tomasz's neck—came with crystalline clarity. They would list in different directions, the two bodies. Tomasz, all muscle and mass, would claw upwards, find air, find shore, and Alistair would slide down into soft dark, a burden released, a promise kept.

But the body had its own arguments. His mouth, despite every rational impulse, opened for air and filled with river. His hands, traitors, dug harder into Tomasz's collarbone. The world contracted to a chaos of limbs and straps and blinding cold. He thought, for a moment, of every man he failed, every boy he sent over the top, all of it converging in the animal fight to live.

Tomasz, with a violence that was almost beautiful, wrenched them both toward the surface. His shoulders flexed, the great chest expanding, as if the man could inhale the river itself. Alistair's head broke water. He coughed, spat, howled. Tomasz's voice answered with a string of curses, French and Polish braided together, a blasphemy and a prayer. The harness slipped further, but Tomasz's right hand gripped Alistair's thigh, pinning him against his flank.

For a moment, they floated, neither sinking nor swimming. Like a two-headed beast, each man struggled against the current and the other's weakness. Then, inch by inch, they made progress. Tomasz kicked and lunged, while Alistair's weight dangled, still somehow attached. The world narrowed to water, sky, and the next breath.

The bank was visible now. It was visible as a shape in his peripheral vision. It was visible as the destination that his consciousness began to focus on with increasingly desperate intensity. The opposite shore. Safety. The end of the current and the cold and the impossible labor of moving through water. It was still more than fifty meters away. The distance was indeterminate.

The current dragged them downstream. He felt it, felt the way the river was beginning to have its way with them despite the effort, despite the sheer

commitment of muscle and will. They were no longer making a straight line to the opposite shore but were instead describing a long arc. They were being moved downstream even as they were being moved forward. Any progress they made came at a cost.

Another thirty meters. The bank was becoming more defined, real in a way that had not been true moments before. Tomasz's arms continued their work. The motion felt automatic now. His body learned it well. Alistair could tell he was pushing his limits, struggling to stay coherent, nearing his own breaking point.

Alistair made a different sound, one that was not like the terror-filled cries from earlier. This sound was almost unintelligible, beyond words. It was the sound of someone barely hanging on. They both seemed unaware of their bodies or what was around them. The cold and water were overwhelming. There was a desperate hope for it to end, for freedom, for the river to finally let them go.

Twenty meters now. The bank was real. The reeds were visible at the edge, a tangled mass that signaled stability. Still, the approach required enormous effort. It taunted them, demanding everything that Tomasz had remaining in his reserves of strength and will. His arms moved in the stroking pattern, slower now, more focused. Each stroke was agony. Each stroke required a deliberate decision to continue.

Alistair saw the individual reeds now, the texture of the opposite bank. He sensed the moment coming. Soon, the riverbed would rise again. They would be able to stand. The water would loosen its hold, letting them return to normal.

Ten meters. The current was still pulling at them, trying to sweep them away, providing resistance to every movement forward. Tomasz's swimming became almost mechanical now, something that his body was doing independent of his will, the only possibility available to a consciousness that was beginning to fragment at the edges.

Then Tomasz's foot touched bottom. Alistair felt it just the same. It was sudden, unexpected, the most profound relief that he experienced since entering the water. The riverbed was there, real. It was solid, or comparatively solid. It provided at least some purchase, a point of contact other than the raging water. Tomasz stood. His legs had a tough time following the command. Moving from horizontal to vertical was a challenge. He used his massive, screaming thighs to pull himself back onto his feet, somehow keeping his balance.

The water still reached Tomasz's chest, leaving Alistair half-submerged, though the riverbed had begun to solidify beneath them. With each step, the current loosened its grip and the depth receded. Tomasz staggered forward, his rubbery legs on the verge of failure; his muscles slow to answer. Feeling returned by degrees as he climbed out of the water and onto solid ground.



THE RIVERBANK BECAME earth. Tomasz clawed his way up it with the desperation of a creature that had nearly been claimed by the depths. His knees slipped in the mud. His elbows drove forward into gravel that tore through skin and drew blood that was immediately washed away by the water still beading off him. His breath came in ragged gasps. Each one split his chest, pulling air from his lungs with a violent force.

Behind him, above him, Alistair stayed secure in the harness. The officer's body was limp now. His psyche had surrendered its consciousness or hovered on the edge of it. Now he hung in the straps with the passivity of an inanimate object.

Tomasz's massive frame pulled itself across the mud and gravel. His muscles were operating now on something beyond will, on pure survival instinct. They moved with the singular purpose of getting away from the water, from the deadly current. Soon, the ground leveled out. The grass beneath him felt real, solid, and still.

Tomasz fell face-first, Alistair still strapped into the harness on his back. He used his body to support the officer's mass, even as he reached his limit. A deep, animal groan burst from him, a sound between a scream and a laugh. It came from a place inside him that went beyond words and conscious thought, his body's response to having endured the unbearable.

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They lay like that for a moment. Or longer than a moment. Time lost all meaning, becoming impossible to measure. What mattered was the simple act of breathing—that they both were doing it. The miracle lay in the continuation of each breath, in the persistence of their breathing, and in the fact that they were both still alive.

After what might have been a minute or might have been an eternity, Tomasz rolled over. The motion required a level of effort that seemed impossible given the exhaustion that consumed him. But he rolled gently to his side, bringing Alistair with him, keeping the officer's body supported even as he attempted to shift position. He extracted a small knife from a pocket—how it had not been lost to the river, was something that Alistair did not examine. His fingers fumbled with the blade. They were struggling to maintain grip, struggling to perform the fine motor tasks that cutting required. But he managed it. He positioned the blade at the first belt and drew it across the leather.

Alistair slid off his back. The motion was gentle. Tomasz held him in one arm while he cut through the straps with his other hand, preventing the officer from falling to the ground. The smaller man's body settled onto the grass beside him, and a spasm of coughing convulsed his small frame.

With a sudden burst of strength, Tomasz tore off his soaked undershirt. He used it to wipe the water from Alistair's chest. He cast the garment aside, then gathered the officer against his bare skin and folded both arms around him, sharing what little body heat he had left. Alistair coughed again.

They lay embracing in the reeds, their clothes damp, the earth beneath them damp, everything soaked through. Their breath mingled in the chilly air, rising in pale clouds with each slow exhalation. The sound was almost musical, almost gentle: two bodies drawing breath, sharing warmth, and continuing stubbornly to live.

Alistair's small body lay on the grass, his splinted legs stretched out before him. The fog of his breath was visible, a sign he was still alive. His

eyes stayed closed, whether from exhaustion or unconsciousness. What mattered most was that Alistair was breathing. Tomasz lay beside him, his massive frame shaking from the cold and exertion. His dark eyes were open, fixed on the horizon, tracking the sun's position and the direction they would need to head when they moved again.

The river continued its work behind them. It continued to flow, to carry its debris downstream. It continued its indifference to the two human bodies that managed to escape its grasp. The sound of it was distant now, a background element rather than an immediate threat.

Time was moving irregularly. Alistair became aware of this as his consciousness gradually materialized from the gray place where it had been suspended. He was returning from the realm where drowning seemed both imminent and almost acceptable. His breath steadied. The violent coughing gave way to a normal breathing rhythm. His body was still icy cold, but the chill was no longer a piercing assault like it had been in the water. Instead, he found it to be a manageable sensation, one that he could absorb into the mix of feelings that made up his awareness.

Beside him, Tomasz's body remained a source of heat. The larger man squeezed the smaller man into his massive frame. The motion was almost unconscious. Tomasz's eyes were wide open, locked on the view ahead. Yet, his body moved on subconscious drive, following a deeper need to confirm Alistair's presence, to hold him close.

Alistair's eyes opened. The view beyond the reeds came into focus bit by bit. First, the opposite bank of the river appeared, and the trees behind it. Then the sky. Golden afternoon sunlight had broken through the clouds and

the tall grass along the bank swayed gently in the breeze. Somehow, despite so much death and devastation, beauty could still exist.

His fingers began to move, faintly and without purpose. Still trembling, they found Tomasz's face and traced the rough stubble along his jaw. The sensation was extraordinary. The beard beneath his fingertips was rough and thick. It was the masculine texture of strength and endurance, a somatic reminder of their arduous journey through a devastated country. It was a testament to survival, written on the body of the hero who pulled them both from the water.

Tomasz turned his head. The motion was slow and deliberate, bringing his dark eyes to meet Alistair's gaze. The moment they locked eyes charged the air with tension. It captured everything: the sling, the fever, the nights together, and that moment in the sanctuary when restraint mattered more than action. No words passed between them. Their breathing filled the silence, uneven and close.

Tomasz lifted one massive hand and cradled the back of Alistair's head. He drew him closer with a care that made the gesture feel inevitable. For one suspended instant, their faces hovered inches apart.

Then Alistair closed his eyes, and Tomasz kissed him.

Both men's lips were soft but also cracked and rough from exposure to sun and wind. When they touched, it felt almost painful. The texture of that caress embodied the struggles they faced. Tomasz's larger mouth enclosed the smaller. Alistair knew the strength of Tomasz's arms, the safety of being carried against his chest. This kiss transformed that familiar closeness into something else entirely. He was being claimed in a way he had never

known before. Warmth passed between them while the cold pressed in from every side.

The kiss only lasted twenty seconds, but it felt like an eternity. In that moment of complete stillness, with only the river and their breathing audible, time seemed to freeze. When Tomasz pulled back, his hand still cupped Alistair's head, Alistair's fingers lingered on his jaw.

Tomasz took his time letting Alistair go. Their embrace softened into a gentle, hesitant touch, like a memory of a kiss rather than the kiss itself. Then his mouth moved away from Alistair's, toward his ear. He leaned in to whisper, his voice gentle: "Je te porte," he said. His voice was barely audible, barely more than a breath. "Toujours." I carry you always.

Alistair's response was not words. His fingers tightened slightly against Tomasz's jaw. His small body pressed slightly closer to the larger man's. He wanted to know if this moment was real. He hoped it was not a fever dream or a hallucination from a mind giving in to cold and exhaustion.

The cold returned as a palpable presence, a harsh reminder of the evening air's chill, their wet clothes, and the limited warmth of their bodies. They drifted back to a space where their mouths were apart, breathing the same air but no longer sharing each other's breath. Yet its truth persisted.

They lay in the reeds as the light continued its descent toward evening. Neither man spoke again. The moment was whole and clear. Tomasz kept his arm around Alistair's body. The officer's head turned toward the larger man, his face visible in profile against the fading light. And around them both, nature carried on. The river continued its work, the trees held their silence, the evening sky began its transformation toward night.

Tomasz sat with his arms around Alistair, his eyes fixed on the horizon and his heart maintaining its steady percussion against the officer's ear, holding the commitment that had been made and would be sustained: one more mile, two. And then another mile. And then another.

As long as there was breath to draw and a will to persist, as long as there was the possibility of carrying and being carried, they could endure. They could remain bound to each other through all that life placed in their path: the war and its senseless hostility, this arduous trek, and the absolute brutality of existence.



THE NEXT MORNING'S fog was the color of something that died and was returning to the earth. It clung to Tomasz's body as he emerged from the reeds, from the space where the river released them into the pale morning. It clung to Alistair too, wrapping around them both like a shroud, like a benediction, like the last remaining privacy they would be allowed.

The Polish soldier's feet left deep impressions in the mud of the roadside. Tomasz cradled Alistair's small frame close in his arms, as if he were made of glass. He feared that even a moment's distraction would break him into a thousand tiny pieces. His coat hung open despite the cold. The officer's left arm drooped at his side. He draped his right arm across Tomasz's shoulder. His fingers curled gently against the fabric of the undershirt that lay beneath the open coat.

The fever's grip returned overnight. It caused Alistair's mind to splinter into a state close to delirium, but not full unconsciousness. The officer's lips moved in a continuous stream of French that resembled music more than language, more impulse than intention.

"Les cloches," Alistair whispered. "Elles sonnent. Elles sonnent toujours. Pourquoi ne s'arrêtent-elles pas?" The bells. They ring. They always ring. Why don't they stop? His words spilled out in a jumble. His eyes, when they opened, showed no recognition. They were not seeing the fog and not seeing Tomasz. They were not seeing anything that existed in the present reality.

Tomasz stopped speaking hours ago. There was nothing more to say. It had all been shown through carrying and refusing to set the officer down over the endless hours of movement that began at dawn and never stopped. His breathing was loud in the foggy silence. It was the sound of a man at his limit, with muscles pushed beyond any reasonable breaking point. Will and determination were the only things remaining that had not been consumed by exhaustion.

The tunic, still damp, was wrapped around Alistair's legs and tucked carefully around the splinted limbs. It served as insulation and as a final gesture of protection even now. In this threshold space the war seemed to have paused, seemed to be holding its breath, seemed to be waiting to see what would happen next.

They had not stopped since leaving the riverbank. The fire burned down to ash. Alistair's brief sleep, three hours, had been just enough to let his body recover the bare minimum to be moved. When Tomasz tried to stand to see if they might keep moving, his legs had surprisingly cooperated. But the officer was too frail to stay in the open any longer. The cold was a threat that did not need weapons to take its toll. Alistair's wet clothes and fever left him shivering. His exposed skin was pale and sallow, corpse like, revealing

how weak he had become. He needed shelter, medicine, and care, things Tomasz was ill equipped to provide.

So, they kept moving. Tomasz had fashioned a crude pack from the remnants of the harness and filled it with their meager supplies. He secured it across his back. He held Alistair in his arms now. He slung his boots over his shoulder. His feet, still prickling from the river cold, had not yet recovered enough to tolerate the pressure of the leather. Walking barefoot on the mud road was easier than trying to force numb feet into an external constraint. His body understood this wordlessly.

Pain was irrelevant now. Tomasz drove himself forward, step by faltering step. Somewhere ahead, there had to be shelter, medicine, hands capable of doing more than simply holding Alistair together. Until he found them, he would keep carrying him. He had forgotten how to do anything else.

The road appeared slowly from the fog. It was not a main route. Authorities monitored the main roads, making travel on them risky and difficult to negotiate. This secondary road, a track connecting one ruined village to another, was more passable. Tomasz's instinct for geography and reading his surroundings served him well. Despite his exhaustion and the fever spreading from Alistair's body to his own mind, his sense of direction kept intact.

The sound came before the sight. It was the sound of an engine cutting through the fog. The mechanical rumble was unexpected. Tomasz's pace did not quicken. There was nowhere to run. The ascending sun was beginning to burn away the fog. To turn and flee would be to confirm himself as hostile and expose himself to fire. He made a slight adjustment to Alistair's

weight. The officer's head tilted against his chest. Tomasz's hands trembled after hours of carrying. He shifted his grip just enough to keep it secure and maintain support. His breath came in controlled patterns. The fog continued its work of dissolving.

The jeep emerged as a cluster of darker shapes within the grayness. First, the outline of the grille came into view, followed by the windshield, and finally the entire angular shape of the military vehicle. It was slowing down. The driver spotted them.

With no place to hide, Tomasz stood firm, his massive frame a pillar in the middle of the road. He cradled the small body of the officer in his arms; his bare feet planted in the mud as he resolved to carry out his duty.

The jeep stopped twenty meters away, its engine still rumbling as the doors opened. Four soldiers dismounted in quick succession and spread into position. Rifles rose to their shoulders. One man moved toward the flank while another took cover behind the open door, using it as cover. Their attention fixed on Tomasz and the unconscious officer in his arms.

"Halt!" The command came in French. "Posez l'officier! Mains en l'air!"

Tomasz stopped where he stood. He did not raise his hands as they commanded. He kept both arms locked around Alistair, holding him close against his chest. His eyes moved from one rifle to the next as the soldiers spread around him. He watched the man at the flank, the one behind the open door, the fingers tightening near the triggers. Still, he did not move.

One of the soldiers shouted something to the others in French. The voice was young, uncertain, that of a man who had been trained in protocols but had not yet learned to trust his own judgment. The guns stayed leveled at him. Tomasz saw the tiny shake in the fingers clutching the triggers. They

were afraid of him. The size of him. The way his massive frame filled the entire road, seemed to dwarf the jeep, seemed to suggest he was something more than human.

Alistair finally made a sound. It was not a word, but close. The officer's eyes did not open fully, but enough to show he was regaining consciousness. The shouting broke through his delirium, and he realized he had to respond. A faint croak came out, barely above a whisper. The effort it took was clear: his whole body tensed as he gathered all his strength to produce the word.

"Don't." His voice was destroyed, barely audible above the rumble of the jeep's engine. It was the sound of someone speaking from the absolute depths of exhaustion and fever. "Don't shoot. Please. I am Lieutenant Alistair Harrow, Thirty-Fourth Division. He's...with me."

The assertion hung in the fog. The English words, spoken by an officer, introduced a variable that had not been there moments before. The soldiers exchanged glances. They held their weapons steady, but the angle shifted. It appeared less aggressive and more cautious, lessening the threat of immediate execution.

One of the soldiers, older than the others, bearing the insignia of a sergeant, stepped forward. His face was visible now as the fog continued to thin. He studied Tomasz. His expression shifted from suspicion to something closer to recognition. He studied Alistair, whose head fell back against Tomasz's chest after the effort of speaking. His eyes were beginning to close again. The French trooper looked back at Tomasz. A change flickered on his face. Maybe it was understanding or a memory, or the

stories and rumors he heard from his men, the legends born from the impossible.

“Et Toi, As-tu un nom, soldat?” he asked.

“Tomasz. Tomasz Nowak, Mon Sergent,”

“Très Bien, alors.”

One of the soldiers, wide-eyed, whispered a question to the lieutenant, "Est-ce le géant polonais?" Is this the Polish giant?

The lieutenant nodded.

"Laisse tomber les armes," the lieutenant commanded. His French was crisp, carried the authority of someone accustomed to being obeyed. The guns descended in a synchronized motion. The posture of the soldiers shifted, their demeanor changed from suspicious to helpful.

"Help me, au secours," the sergeant said. He approached Tomasz with a care that suggested he understood the delicacy of the situation. He understood that the larger man would not release his burden, and that any attempt at force would be met with absolute resistance. The French soldier tugged at Tomasz's elbow, and the larger man instinctively pulled away, pulling Alistair closer into his body.

“NON!”

“C'est bon, tu peux le garder, viens juste avec nous.” The French lieutenant signaled towards the waiting Jeep. Okay, you can keep him, just come with us.

The men started moving towards the vehicle. The stretcher that had been prepared was quickly folded back up and put away. The lieutenant

gestured to Tomasz, telling him to get in. Tomasz obeyed, his bulky frame squeezing into the back seat. He made sure to keep Alistair in his lap.

Tomasz sat with his hand on Alistair's chest. His dark eyes were steady, and his body finally rested. Yet his mind was still going in circles. He was only capable of engaging through presence and touch, unable to look away from the officer's face.

The jeep ride took more time than they thought it should have. The roads were neither safe nor direct. They required navigation around obstacles that Tomasz did not fully discern from his seat. Alistair stayed unconscious for the entire journey. His small body vibrated along with the motion of the vehicle and even though he was unconscious, his lips kept moving. They produced soft sounds, almost lost under the roar of the engine.

Tomasz checked Alistair's heartbeat and followed the rhythm of his breath. His eyes fixed on the officer's face. After the first few minutes, the soldiers in the jeep stopped talking, sensing that Tomasz's attention to the smaller man was absolute. They knew he would not let small talk or explanations distract him, that he would not relinquish his focus from the unconscious officer for any reason.

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CHAPTER 9 - THE HOSPITAL



The morning light shone through the holes in the tent's worn canvas. It fell across Alistair's face in soft, pale beams. They gave the impression of having substance, even though they were just light and dust floating in the air. The rain continued its gentle patter against the fabric. Its soft percussion became the underlying rhythm of this space, against which all other sounds fell into place.

Alistair's eyes opened slowly, as if drawn back by an external force rather than his own consciousness. The tent's ceiling came into focus bit by bit. Alistair's eyes fixated on the details. He saw the moisture stain on the canvas. He noticed where someone repaired a small tear with twine and wax.

His mind was still not completely engaged. There was a gap between awareness and clear thought. The fever blurred the line between seeing and understanding. He lay under the blankets, his body feeling strange. His limbs were arranged in ways he did not recognize. The pain was present but scattered. It did not hurt in specific spots; it felt like it came from everywhere at once. His throat was dry. His mouth had a metallic taste, the uncertain flavor of being close to death, where survival felt fragile. His body was still fighting infection and fever, struggling against a harsh reality.

Other cots surrounded him, but they were mostly empty. The tent was quieter now than it had been during the fever-bright nights when his consciousness had been fragmenting and reforming, when the sound of other men's suffering had been a constant background against which his

own pain had been measured. One soldier snored in the corner; his head wrapped in gauze with a dark stain near his temple, soaking through.

The rain continued. Diffused light worked its way through the canvas. Slowly, with the glacial progress of a mind that had been severely compromised, Alistair began to orient himself to the present moment. He recognized that he was no longer moving through the countryside. The carrying had ended, and the transfer had been completed. He was in a safe place now, just as promised.

He was alone. This was the first thing he understood. Not alone in the absolute, not in the sense that no one else inhabited the tent—the far end boasted a pair of cots, each occupied by a soldier who looked to have been assembled from leftover parts and then forgotten—but alone in the sense that the massive presence that had been constant, the gravitational pull around which his existence orbited, was gone.

Tomasz was not here. Alistair tried to summon anger, or relief, or any feeling at all, but there was only a blankness, a new kind of silence that did not vibrate with the expectation of being touched or lifted or told to “tiens bon.” Just silence, and the slow, artificial drip of water in a metal basin nearby.

He tried to sit up. His body resisted, muscles feeble and insubordinate. He tried again, this time using his elbows, and managed to lever himself to a sitting position. The world spun, then slowly resolved into the familiar chaos of a field hospital: a veritable maze of cots and stretchers, a makeshift partition at the far end, two men in blue aprons tending to instruments in a washbasin; the dull glint of metal trays, the stench of sweat, blood and disinfectant.

He scanned the tent. No sign of the Polish giant. Not even a shadow in the periphery, not even a mass displaced in the air. Alistair expected to feel lighter, as if the absence would allow him to reacquire some measure of his own gravity. Instead, he felt untethered, unmoored. Not even the pain in his leg could anchor him.

His eyes moved down his body, tracing his figure beneath the blankets. He tried to see what he had left after the war's machinery had had its way. His right leg was fully visible, wrapped in plaster from hip to ankle. It showed the evidence of a break set to heal. His toes peeked out at the end, pale but with signs of life. Blood still flowed and healing was possible.

His eyes landed on his left leg—or where it should have been. The lump under the blanket should have been larger. Instead, around mid-thigh, there was only the flattened blanket, and the brutal realization of a missing limb. A terrible emptiness marked where his left leg once was. His gaze lingered for a long moment, fixed on that void. He tracked the geography of absence, taking in what his mind refused to accept.

An extra blanket lay folded neatly under the stump to elevate it. He was laid in a position that tried to make the truth look better. But no arrangement would change the stark reality that his eyes conveyed to his mind. Nothing would alter the simple, devastating fact of what happened.

He did not cry out or thrash. He lay still, eyes on the absence of limb. His mind began to take in what happened. He realized his body had changed in ways that were impossible to fix. His hand rose languidly, moving as if through thick water. It felt like his nervous system did not know where his left leg had been. As he approached, he hesitated. His

fingers hovered over the emptiness, the part of him that was now gone. After a moment, he pulled them back to his chest.

A nurse entered. She was different from the nurse who checked on him during the night. The nurses in this place seemed to blend, variations on a single theme of competence and detachment. She smiled. The smile was kind and professional. It was the smile of someone who had delivered news of amputation countless times before and learned to smile anyway. She knew how to deliver the cold facts with kindness. She moved to his cot, checked the bandages, and assessed the wounds.

"Good morning," she said. Her accent revealed she was French. It tied her to the system that removed him from his world and placed him here. "You made it. You have survived the operation. The infection in your leg wound was severe, but you were strong enough. Stronger than most men would have been in your condition."

Alistair did not reply. His eyes followed her as she checked the bandages on his stump. He watched her write notes on the clipboard, the main tool that turned human pain and suffering into manageable data.

"The man," he said. He struggled to speak, his throat protesting the effort of producing sound. "The man... who brought me in. Is he—"

The nurse shook her head before he finished.

"He's gone back to his unit," she said softly. "Left in the morning before dawn. The officer in charge said he'd been given orders to return, that his presence here was irregular. Proper protocol had to be observed."

She paused.

"He was asking about you. Every hour, he was asking if you had stabilized. Every time we returned from the operating theatre, he was waiting for confirmation."

Alistair closed his eyes. He did not ask for more details or seek clarification about when Tomasz left. He did not want to know the specifics of their final goodbye. What she told him was enough. The man who carried him across no man's land, who had been his shelter and survival with his massive frame, released him into this institutional space and returned to where duty called him. They carried out the crossing. The transfer was complete. The physical part of their commitment was over.

The nurse finished her assessment. She stepped away from the cot, away from the officer's devastation, and moved toward the other beds and tents that needed her attention. She did not speak.

Alistair's hand moved, slipping beneath his shirt toward the small object secured against his chest. This artifact was the only concrete proof left of the man who carried him. It was the only tangible evidence his experience was not just a fever dream or a product of a damaged mind unable to tell fantasy from reality.

The rosary was still there, secure beneath the fabric, resting against his skin. The small weight proved that Tomasz was real. It proved that he had been present and made the decision at some point during their journey to entrust it to him. His fingers wrapped around the small beads. He felt the rough, wooden texture beneath his fingertips. It was handmade, not manufactured, and its value went beyond the price of its materials. He held it against his chest and inhaled deeply.

As Alistair lay in the hospital tent, his left leg gone, his right leg in plaster, he held the rosary close and realized the journey was not over. The carrying continued, the sense of duty lingered. It persisted in the realm of faith, prayer, and the spiritual commitment that one could embed in a precious object worn close to the heart.



THE NURSE RETURNED later with a mug of water, which Alistair sipped in cautious increments, discovering that his mouth did not quite remember how to swallow. She sat on the edge of the cot then, and for a long minute regarded him as if weighing how much of her own time he could afford to occupy. She placed one hand on the thin blanket near his right knee, her fingers pressing gently on the wool, as though she were trying to anchor him there.

"You don't remember... the arrival?" she asked in French. Her English dissolved in the light of morning, replaced by her native tongue, which sounded softer, more private, as if a secret she was offering only to him.

He shook his head slowly. Memory was a filmstrip with frames missing. The last thing he could recall was lying in the jeep, cradled in Tomasz's lap, an immense yet gentle hand caressing his forehead. Then he awoke here, disfigured in this hospital.

"It took four of us to get you from his arms." Her voice was matter of fact. "And then, he still would not leave you. Even when you were already inside, and the doctors were cutting away the splints and boots. We asked three times, then four. The last time, we had to bring in the matron. She threatened to call the gendarmes." A small smile, a private amusement. "It

made no difference. He kept both hands on your chest, as if he were holding your heart inside your body.”

He could see it, the immense shape of Tomasz, looming and immovable, his hands still unwilling to let go of him while the doctors cut away the splints. He could almost feel them still on his skin. The memory was not his, but it played behind his eyelids anyway, a theater of the absurd in which he was both audience and central prop.

"He collapsed," the nurse said after a pause. "Just outside the operating tent. The long trek ruined his feet. I think he was walking on the bones alone. He had a fever too, though not as bad as yours. They are calling it trench-foot, but it is more than that. He would not let us cut the uniform from his body, either. He kept asking for you. In broken French, in bad German, in something else I couldn't understand."

Alistair closed his hand tighter around the rosary beads. He tried to summon a picture of Tomasz not as the unshakable pillar, but as a man undone, as a body with its own limits, its own capacity for breaking. It was difficult. The myth of the man threatened to overwrite the memory of the real.

"They put him here," the nurse said, tapping the cot with her fingers, "right beside you. He looked ridiculous, with his feet hanging out over the bed. He would wake every hour and check if you were breathing. He would not let them sedate him, even when the pain was..." She gestured, her hand rising and falling like a wave. "I don't know if he slept, but he sat there for three days and three nights. He watched you almost as if he were afraid you would vanish if he looked away."

She looked away herself then, wiping at her brow with the back of her hand as if she could brush away the residue of the story along with the sweat. "He left this morning before the sun rose, is what I heard. There was a man in an officer's cap, and long words about policy and procedure. He almost broke the door. But in the end, he went."

The light shifted on the ceiling of the tent. It slid from the patched seams to the pale line of canvas above his head, and Alistair watched it as if he were expecting the world itself to change shape and accommodate the new knowledge.

The nurse stood, smoothing her skirt over her hips. She was sympathetic, but she had other patients. She hesitated at the foot of the cot, as if she were wishing for some small sign that he understood; perhaps that he might even survive. In her pause, he found the courage to force his voice into the air.

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"Tu étais si fort, mon ami."

After she left, the tent returned to its quiet rhythm of rain. Alistair lay still; his hand pressed to the beads beneath his shirt as if they were a wound. The world was smaller than before; it was the size of the tent, the size of the cot, the size of a body that was no longer whole. He listened to the rain, and to the distant, indistinct sounds beyond the tent—boots in mud, the clatter

of metal, a voice calling a single syllable before it was swallowed by the morning.

Sleep still eluded him. He drifted in and out, circling the perimeter of consciousness, tracing the edges of his loss and the shape of the life he had left. Once, he thought he heard the voice of the nurse again, or perhaps a different nurse, or even the memory of her voice echoing through the fabric of the tent. He imagined Tomasz at the threshold, enormous and spectral, unable to enter but refusing to leave. In the logic of fever and recovery, anything was possible. In that logic, anything could return.

The next morning the pain had receded enough that he could sit up, supported by pillows and the rigid geometry of his new anatomy. The nurse brought him a cup of broth that tasted of onions and bone; it was the best thing he had tasted in his memory.

Later, she returned with a pair of crutches. They were heavy, wooden, and scarred from earlier users. She set them beside the cot without comment. For hours he looked at them. There was no drama to it. They were there, and he was here, and the space between them measured the distance between past and future.

Since the trench, every mile had belonged to someone else's strength. Tomasz had lifted him, carried him, borne his body across ruined fields and through the raging river. He stood guard over him night after night, protecting him from every danger, and even took a life to keep him safe. Now, for the first time, there was something waiting beside the officer's bed that asked something else of him: to carry himself again.

Later, when the evening light was slanting in through the patched tent wall, he tried to stand. It was a process that required aid, both from the

nurse and from the architecture of the cot itself. His right leg, encased in plaster, could bear little weight, so he propped himself on the crutches and wobbled precariously, balancing on the edge of collapse. The world tilted beneath him; every muscle in his arms and chest trembled with the strain of supporting this new and unfamiliar balance.

But he did not fall. He stood, swaying in the center of the tent, and for the first time since waking, he found it imaginable to admit the possibility of continuity, of persistence, to consider a future that was not just a cadence of loss.

The nurse watched him from the entrance to the tent. Her arms were crossed, and her smile was the smallest thing, but it was there. He looked at her, and then past her, at the shape of the tents beyond, at the sliver of sky that was neither gray nor blue but some hybrid that admitted the existence of both. He thought of Tomasz, somewhere beyond the horizon, moving through mud and rain and the machinery of war, enduring the endless labor of carrying forward.

He did not know if he would see him again. That was not a story the present moment was prepared to offer. But he knew that Tomasz carried him all the way to the edge of this space, to the border between survival and something like living. He knew that his absence was not an erasure, but a persistence, a kind of echo that vibrated in the hollows of his new body and in the rough-hewn beads pressed against his heart.

He took a step. The crutches were heavy, but they provided support. The world did not end with the movement, it rearranged itself, as if to accommodate the possibility that someone could exist in this new configuration.

He closed his eyes and, for a moment, imagined the pressure of enormous hands on either side of his chest, bracing him, holding him upright, refusing to let him collapse. He took another step, and then another, moving forward into the aisle of the tent, toward the rectangle of gray light that promised the world beyond.

He walked as far as he could, just a few wobbly steps. When he could go no further, he stood at the tent flap and listened to the sound of rain, thinking of their sanctuary, and strained his ears for the sound of footsteps that might follow.



THE BRITISH DOCTOR arrived with an air of expectation, as if nothing would disrupt his daily routine. He moved through the hospital tents with a detached attitude, switching between patients with such regularity he allocated them each a precise amount of time. He clutched his clipboard in his left hand and held his pencil in his right, ready to make his notes and record his observations, human suffering translated into standardized charts.

Approaching Alistair's cot, he kept his eyes fixed on the papers, not the officer's face. He did not start with a greeting. Instead, he announced his role. This made it clear he was there in a professional capacity, not a human one.

"Lieutenant Harrow," he said, flipping through pages. "I'm Dr. Mitchell. I performed the amputation. How are you tolerating the postoperative period?"

The question came in a tone like he was asking about the weather, and he did not seem to wait for an answer before examining the stump. He

checked the bandages but did not look at Alistair's face. He ignored everything except the material proof of his surgery.

The bandages were clean. The site was healing appropriately. The color of the surrounding tissue suggested the infection had not taken hold. The body's internal chemistry was accepting the amputation. It was beginning the work of adjusting to the absence of the limb.

Dr. Mitchell made notes on his clipboard. The scratch of the pencil was audible in the relative quiet of the tent. The officer's entire experience—carrying, fever, crossing, and rescue—were reduced to simple items on a checklist.

"The right leg is healing satisfactorily," he continued, his eyes tracking down the page as if reading from a script. "The plaster is doing its work. We expect that you'll keep function in that leg, though you'll be mobile only with the aid of a prosthetic device for the left. It's not ideal, but you're fortunate that you survived at all. Many would not have made it this far."

There was something in his tone that suggested that Alistair should be grateful. He should feel satisfied with this assessment. He must accept the amputation as a cost of survival. He should not expect more than just the technical care for his wounds.

Alistair gathered his voice. He still struggled to speak, but he assembled the strength to say what he needed. The question arrived quietly, but it was clear enough that the doctor heard it.

"What was his name?" Alistair asked. "The man who brought me in. Do you know what his name was?"

Dr. Mitchell paused, looking up from his clipboard for the first time since entering the tent. He gave Alistair a perplexed glance, as if deciding

whether the question was relevant to the hospital's records. His expression indicated that he did not think it was. He did not see the point of asking about something unrelated to the postoperative care plan or the patient's healing progress.

"Ah," he said, as if he had suddenly recalled something that he filed away in some less important compartment of his memory. "The man who carried you in. Yes. Large fellow. Polish, I believe. Volunteer with the Blue Army contingent. Thomas...Novak? Novick? Something like that. We're recommending a military medal for his actions. Extraordinary strength. He didn't stick around, though. Returned to his unit yesterday. Probably received orders."

The name floated in the tent, mispronounced and strange, "TOM-ash," he said softly. "His name was Tomasz."

The doctor did not hear him. He had already turned his attention back to his clipboard and was moving on to the next patient. He organized the officer's recovery details into the categories the military required for their forms. He did not acknowledge the correction.

Alistair lay back against the thin pillow. His right hand again found the rosary beneath his shirt, the small beads that Tomasz had entrusted to him. The object now endured as the tangible proof of everything. Tomasz had been real. The crossing had occurred, as had the sanctuary and the kiss.

Alistair held the beads between his fingers. They were rough, real, nothing like the smooth glass rosary his grandmother kept in her desk. They were now the entirety of what he had left. They were the link that connected him across distance and time. They were the only way that he would continue to maintain the presence of the man who carried him.

The rain continued to fall outside the tent. The gray light in the canvas space ignored human suffering and the personal revolutions taking place inside it. It merely provided a backdrop. The war machine and the medical machine would continue their parallel work of transforming human bodies into something they were able to understand and manage.

But in that indifferent space, Alistair clutched the rosary and whispered the name Tomasz. He knew that what he had been given would stay with him. It would outlast the amputation. It would rise above the system that was actively trying to reduce his experience to documented and filed categories.

Je le porte, he thought. Now I carry him. The burden shifted.

The rosary rested against his torso. The rain drummed steadily against the canvas. He closed his eyes and, for a moment, felt Tomasz's incredible presence wash over him one more time. Chest to chest, skin to skin, body to body, man to man.

He lay in the hospital tent, his left leg ending in bandages and amputation, his right leg encased in plaster. His small frame felt diminished and incomplete. Alistair understood that the crossing had not ended but had transformed.

Pale columns of light filtered through the tent, seeming almost solid. If only they might support the weight of all that they endured, lost, and found in the liminal space between darkness and survival. Wherever Tomasz was headed, whatever the war had in store for him, he carried with him the knowledge that he was remembered, cherished. His actions mattered in a way that went beyond war, geography, history, death, and even love.

The rain continued. Somewhere, the distant purr of engines. Alistair held the rosary and closed his eyes.

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CHAPTER 10 - THE NOTE



November 1959, Oxford, England

The quad outside was soaked in the damp aftertaste of November rain, a haze suspended just above the ancient stones and the lawn cropped as closely as an English childhood. From his office, tucked in the eastern wing of St. John's, Alistair watched the quad from three mullioned windows that never quite managed to keep out the weather. The thin light made everything seem smaller and more precise—each stack of books, each cup and paperweight on the battered oak desk, the blue-edged cracks in the plaster above the door. He preferred it this way. Even now, so many years after the war had ended, he found that clarity was best measured in cold units.

There were three essays left to mark before the next supervisions, and he intended to dispatch them in a single hour's burst. The essays were a siege of predictable analysis on the metaphysical poets, each one making the same clumsy argument about Donne's compass. Alistair could have written the comments without reading, but that would have been a surrender, and he had promised himself he was finished with that. He picked up his pen, a Parker with the initials A.H. incised on its side and set about the work of shoring up other people's arguments.

The left leg, the prosthetic, rested at an angle against the chair's spindle. He shifted it occasionally, not from pain but to relieve the odd, persistent phantom itch. The new model, aluminum and leather, worked better than the old wooden brute, but after nearly half a century, he had long since

come to terms with its peculiarities. The cane, heavier than necessary, hung over the desk edge, its silver cap scored with a hundred micro-scratches. He used it less these days, but he liked having it in reach. As a symbol, it did good service.

The office was airless and close; the scent of old pipe tobacco braided through with the more acid bite of ink and ancient paper. He had never smoked, but the college porter did, and the habit had woven itself into the very walls. It was, Alistair thought, the only form of immortality the man would ever know.

At two forty-six, a knock sounded. It was a brisk, confident tap as opposed to the hesitating flutter of a student unsure of the office protocol. Alistair did not glance up from the essay; he marked the margin, set his pen down precisely parallel to the paper, and let the silence stretch for a deliberate four-count before speaking.

“Yes?”

The door opened. The young man who entered was not familiar—not one of his own, and not from a neighboring tutor’s flock either. He was tall, the kind of tall that seemed awkward when standing still, though the frame suggested he might one day own the space he moved through. His hair, a tangle of copper and auburn, had been combed for the occasion but failed to obey. He wore a dark jacket, a touch formal for the college, and carried a notebook under his arm. His eyes were the first thing Alistair noticed: deep-set, dark, and surprisingly still, as if they had learned the uses of silence early.

“Good afternoon,” the boy said. His English was careful, each word enunciated as if it had been practiced, but the vowels slipped sideways into

French on the longer syllables. "I am sorry to intrude."

"You're not expected, and I don't believe we're scheduled for any appointments," Alistair replied. His tone was considerate, but it was also final. He had cultivated a habit of courtesy in the years since, as if politeness might atone for other forms of cruelty. "Office hours are posted on the door. If you're seeking your supervisor, you'll want to check the senior tutor's corridor."

The boy nodded, absorbing the rebuff without any sign of offense. "I am not a student, sir. I've come to see you." He advanced a step, still standing, the notebook pressed tight to his ribs. "It is about the war."

The word settled between them like a lit match on tissue. Alistair felt a tension ripple through his hands, the old muscle memory of reaching for a service revolver or the sling of a trench periscope, but he did not move. Instead, he watched the boy's face, the way the expression stayed open, as if ready for whatever answer might come. In the silence, the clock on the windowsill ticked loudly.

"I see," Alistair said, at last. "I suppose you'd better sit."

The visitor did not hesitate. He crossed to the armchair that faced the desk, placed his book on his lap, and folded his hands atop it. The light from the window etched shadows under his jaw and cheekbones, lending his face a severity that was belied by the uncertain line of his mouth.

Alistair's own face stayed composed, but inside, a cold reconnaissance was already underway. The boy was not military, not in bearing or speech; nor did he possess the loose, slouched posture of the usual pacifist lecture-crasher. He looked, in fact, like someone performing the role of a supplicant without knowing the script.

The war, he thought. So, it has come for me again, just when I was feeling safe behind these battlements of Latin verse and undergraduate incompetence.

“Do you take tea?” Alistair asked, and gestured toward the second cup, which had cooled during the hour of its abandonment.

The boy shook his head. “Thank you, but I will not stay long.”

“Your name?” Alistair prompted. His own had circulated in the faculty long enough to require no introduction, but this—this was a formality, a maneuver, and he wanted the boy to be the first to lay a card on the table.

The boy hesitated, then said, “Peter. Peter Nowak.” The surname was crisp, pronounced with the Polish ‘v’ that erased any doubt. “My grandfather was with Haller’s Army. He spoke of you.”

Alistair’s left hand, which had been tracing the rim of his teacup, stopped. The name was a grenade, tossed into the quiet logic of the room, and for a moment he felt the shudder of old shrapnel in his lungs. He allowed himself the smallest of exhalations, then nodded.

“You’ve come a long way,” he said. “But I suspect you already knew that.”

The boy’s eyes were unflinching. “Yes.”

Outside, a group of students crossed the quad, their laughter muffled by the rain and the glass. The college bell began its slow toll for three o’clock. Alistair looked past the boy to the clouded pane and found his own reflection: hair gone to dust, the ruined leg stretched out at an angle, the cane glinting on the desk like a command baton. He wondered if Tomasz

had ever looked this old, or if the years had made him softer, or harder, or neither.

He brought his attention back to the visitor. “You have questions, I take it.”

“Yes,” said Peter Nowak. He laid his hands on the desk, fingers interlaced and waited for permission to proceed.

Alistair nodded once, the gesture so slight as to be almost a tic. “Ask them, then.”

He did not smile, and he did not blink. It was a lesson from the war: the best way to survive an interrogation was to act as if you had nothing to hide.



FOR A MOMENT, NEITHER man spoke. The light shifted in the window, painting long bars across the rug and desk, so that Peter’s face was bisected by shadow. He seemed to brace himself, then began, “My grandfather remembers the Thirty-Fourth Division. He says you were attached to them, near St. Quentin. Is that correct?”

Alistair did not flinch. “It is.”

“He said there was a collapse in the trench. That the British line broke in the early morning, and most were lost.”

“Most were lost, yes.” Alistair said, and the words fell with an odd, precise gravity.

“He said your legs—” Peter stopped, as if remembering that the evidence was visible in front of him, “—that you were pinned. He said you would have died.”

Alistair's hand moved from the teacup to the desktop, flattening there.
"Correct."

"He said he carried you." The sentence came out quietly, but Peter kept his eyes fixed on Alistair's. "He said he carried you for three days. And that you survived because of this."

Alistair found himself nodding before the sentence finished. The old pain was there, deep in the marrow, but what surprised him was the clarity of the memory. The rain and mud, the embrace of another man's arms, the taste of river water, the feel of a body pressed close in the dark as the sound of artillery rolled overhead. He had never spoken of it, not even to the men at his club, who preferred their war stories less complicated and more palatable.

"He saved my life. Yes." The voice that emerged was less his own, and more the clipped, frozen thing that had gotten him through those years.

Peter seemed to sense the break. He continued with a care that was almost tender: "My grandfather told me that you would remember the church. The broken roof, the fire. He said you would know the sanctuary."

For a long time, Alistair did not answer. The office receded, and for a moment he was elsewhere, seeing again the ruined nave, the arching vault broken open to sky, the chilly air heavy with the ghost of incense. The memory arrived so sharply it felt like a slap.

"Yes," he said. "I remember the church."

Peter nodded. "He remembers it also. He said—" and here the boy's voice lost its practiced fluency, slipping back to something raw, "—that he had never slept in such a place, before or since."

Alistair's hands pressed into the desk. His voice was quiet, stripped of its academic authority.

"Is he alive, then? Tomasz."

A quick smile, almost shy, flickered on Peter's lips. "Yes. Very much alive. He does not speak of the war to anyone. Only to me. But when he learned I would be here, he gave me this." Peter reached into his jacket and set a folded note on the desk. The paper was thick, worn at the creases. "He told me: 'Find this man. Tell him that I remember.'"

The note sat between them, a small rectangle of paper on the dark wood. The office was quiet now, the sound of rain a low hum against the glass. Alistair looked at the folded paper but did not reach for it.

He cleared his throat. "It is a strange thing, to have the past arrive at your door."

Peter nodded again, gravely. "For him as well. He wanted you to have it. He does not expect a reply. Only for you to know."

The room seemed to contract around the desk. Alistair's vision tunneled, so that all he could see was the boy, the pale fingers curled around the spine of the book, the softening around the eyes. He remembered Tomasz's hands—so much larger than his own, the way they had steadied him, lifted him, refused to let go even when every rational calculation said to do so. He remembered the nights in the barn, the trembling, the fever-bright fragments of language, and the comfort of being held.

Peter sat very still. Alistair looked at the boy's hands on the notebook and tried to imagine what Tomasz had said, what words he had found.

After a long minute, he said, "How old are you, Peter?"

“Twenty-four,” said the boy.

“And you study?”

Peter hesitated, then smiled, almost sheepishly. “Classics. My grandfather says it is the language of survivors.”

Alistair found himself smiling, too. It was a ghost of a smile, but it was genuine, and he had not realized until that moment how rare it had become. “Your grandfather is a wise man.”

“Yes,” said Peter, softly, “he is.”

They sat in silence, the clock on the windowsill dividing the time into measurable, manageable increments. Outside, the rain quickened, drawing new patterns down the glass.

At length, Alistair said, “Tell him I remember, too. If he should ever wish to see the gardens here, or—” he paused, voice nearly breaking, “—or to sit for a cup of tea, he would be most welcome.”

Peter rose, smoothing the line of his jacket, and gathered his book under one arm. “I will tell him. He will be happy to hear it.”

He extended his hand, and after a heartbeat’s hesitation, Alistair took it. The grip was firm and warm; the skin calloused like a workingman’s. The pressure was kind, and the memory of another, larger hand came rushing back.

Peter looked at him, really looked, and for the first time Alistair saw not the echo of Tomasz, but the possibility of something new: a future built not on memory, but on the act of remembering together.

“Thank you, sir,” said Peter. “For everything.”

When the door closed behind him, the office felt emptier, but also lighter. Alistair sat very still, his hands folded on the desk. The note Peter had left sat beside them, a pale square against the dark wood. He did not touch it yet. He looked at it, listening to the silence fill the room, a silence that felt different now than it had an hour before.



PROFESSOR HARROW STOOD at the window, the note from Tomasz folded in his hand. The quad below was a patchwork of damp stone and brittle grass, the students crossing it in loose patterns—some hurrying in twos and threes, some with their heads down against the cold, others trailing scarves that seemed to signal indifference to the season. From this height, their voices were indistinct, a kind of low tide against the drone of the city beyond the walls.

He watched them for a long time, longer than he meant to, until the light on the glass grew thin, and the shadows deepened at the corners of the room. The bell in the college chapel rang out the hour, and Alistair listened to its vibration as if it were striking a tuning fork inside his bones.

The note felt heavier than it should have. He ran his thumb along its creases, feeling the texture of the ink and paper, the imprint of hands that had once borne him across a ruin. He remembered the barn, the river, the cellar, the sanctuary—a sequence of places made sacred only by survival. He remembered the face of Tomasz, not as it had been in the fever of rescue, but as it must be now: lined with years, softened by the habits of peace.

He wondered if the man thought of him often, or if the carrying had been only one of many impossible burdens. He wondered if Tomasz still

looked up at the same sky, or if, like him, he preferred to keep his eyes fixed on what could be managed, what could be controlled.

The window glass began to fog with his breath. He turned from it, his left thigh complaining at the angle, and made his way back to the desk. The cane tapped out a slow, deliberate rhythm, each contact with the wood a small act of intention. He paused at the chair but did not sit.

Instead, he bent and opened the desk's bottom drawer. The mechanism was stiff, the wood swollen by years of humidity, but he had learned the trick of it. Inside, pushed to the very back, was the rosary he had carried since the hospital. The beads were dark with oil and age, the string frayed where it looped through the cross. He touched it, not to pray but to confirm its reality.

He set the note from Tomasz beside it. For a moment he regarded them together: the beads and the paper, the wood, and the ink.

He closed the drawer, but not before saying the name aloud. He spoke it softly, so that only the books and papers and dust could bear witness.

"Tom-ash. Now-ack."

The name was enough. He closed the drawer and listened to the rain.

THE END

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Brian Dunleavy comes to the North Woods to write a serious novel. Instead, he falls in love with a kitschy paper towel mascot.

It begins with a whistle in the trees and the unmistakable sense of being watched. A footprint the size of a bathtub. Then a muscular, 43-foot-tall lumberjack steps out of the forest.

Mighty Max is handsome. He is kind. Broad-shouldered and blue-eyed, he lives in permanent flannel. He claims he was born from tall tales and campfire legends—back when giants were needed, and believed in. But giants fade when they are mocked. Legends disappear when they're forgotten.

As solitude turns to intimacy, myth turns warm and very, very tangible. Brian finds himself lifted in the careful palm of the colossal man whose shadow stretches across the meadow like dusk itself. Beneath cold stars and

beside impossible bonfires, he discovers that loving a giant means choosing to believe in him even when belief bends reality.

Reality is definitely bending. And when Max is reclaimed by the forest, Brian may be the only one who can write him back into being. If stories invent their tellers, who is keeping whom alive?

Strange, tender, playful, and proudly queer, *The Strange and Unbelievable Tall Tale of Mighty Max* is a mythic romance about loneliness, longing, and the radical act of loving something larger than life.

For readers who cherish the mythic queer devotion of *The Song of Achilles*, the tender whimsy of *The House in the Cerulean Sea*, and the wistful magic of *Puff the Magic Dragon*.

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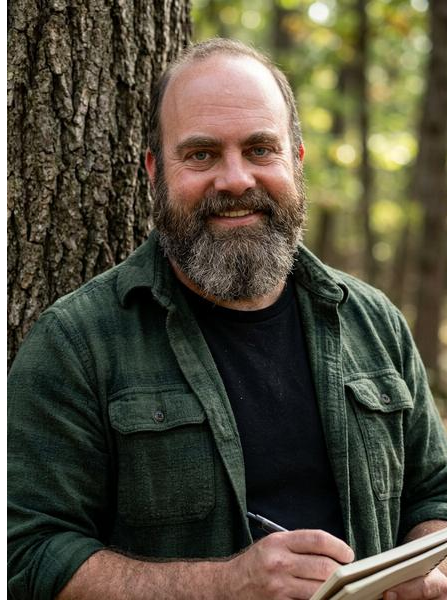
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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Duncan Gaye writes queer fiction where history, folklore, and everyday life intersect. His novels are populated by gentle giants, lonely dreamers, impossible romances, and ordinary people searching for a place to belong. Whether grounded in realism or touched by a hint of magic, his stories share an abiding belief that compassion is its own kind of strength.

He lives in River Forest, Illinois, where he enjoys composing electronic music, reading, traveling, and relaxing with his two senior dogs.

About The Long Shadow Series: The novels in The Long Shadow Series are not direct sequels, but they share a deep connection in spirit.

Each story is a standalone tale with its own characters, settings, and time periods. Some are historical romances, while others fall under literary fiction, magical realism, noir, or myth. They all share similar emotions: longing, masculinity, tenderness, and isolation. They also touch on memory, identity, and resilience.

I often found myself writing about similar characters—outsiders, drifters, laborers, soldiers, and lonely men trying to survive in harsh environments, both physically and emotionally. Many of these stories feature strength paired with gentleness, or gentleness underlying strength.

The settings may vary, from a remote village in Nova Scotia to a battlefield, a dockside pub, or a cabin in the forest. However, these books all share a common atmosphere and emotional core. They complement each other, casting a long shadow across different worlds and eras.

This connection is why I've brought them together under The Long Shadow Series.

Thank you for reading.

— Duncan Gaye

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