The Song of Alexander

by CiceroProFacto

Summary

"We were like gods at the dawning of the world, and our joy was so bright we could see nothing else but each other."

Notes

Written in the style of “The Song of Achilles”, from the perspective of John Laurens. All nonexistent royalties go to Madeline Miller for her amazing novel. This fic will be historically accurate to the best of my research, but of course, it is still a work of fiction. Fanart for this fic is posted on my blog [here](#).

For more Song of Alexander content, follow me on Tumblr [Ciceroprofacto](#).

Special thanks to beta readers: [madtomedgar](#), [denialandavoidance](#), and [john-laurens](#).
Prologue

I am a part of all that I have met.

...  

MY FATHER WAS a wealthy man and the son of wealthy men. Huguenots, my forefathers had escaped persecution of the Protestant faith, gone first to England, later to New York, and eventually settled in South Carolina. My grandfather, for whom I am named, had dealt in many trades, saddling, carving carriages, but real-estate ultimately rooted the Laurens name across the city of Charlestown—where I was born and my father before me. He married my mother when she was nineteen, and to him at least, the marriage was conceived in heaven. She was tender and watchful as a mother and he was aloof and strict as a father. Ideal.

Before me, they had three children. These did not survive. After me, nine more, six of which died. When I was delivered premature, my father plucked me from my mother’s arms and handed me to a nurse. I was not expected to live. In pity, a midwife gave my mother a pillow to hold instead of me.

As I lived on despite his rational expectations, my father’s pragmatism gave way to some degree of fatherly pride...perhaps affection. At two, he saw me clothed in real apparel rather than blankets of cotton—plain and decent clothes, unmixed with foppery and doilies. At three, he taught me to swim, carrying me into the ocean and dipping me under until I agreed to hold myself above the tide. At four, he taught me to read and recite Bible passages, to fear God, and to ride a horse.

I remember very little of those happy years. Much of what I know, I retrieved only as my father later recounted me the efforts he placed in raising me. I recall life in Charleston as a structured, but pleasant, muddle, heavy warmth like spring heat. I was tutored at home every morning until noon, then released to play with boys my own age. I recall the beach, running with my toes in the sand, fashioning games with the other children and jogging home bare-footed under the canopy of Spanish-haired oak trees—always home in time for evening prayers.

The sailors that came to the port would tell me and my little playmates of Jolly Rogers they’d sighted at sea, and I would devise games to match their stories, brandishing a stick as my sword and announcing that I would fight the pirates. None of my playmates ever joined my solemn vow. Most ran off giggling. The sailors would pat my head, claiming they’d never met such a bold child.

I AM FIVE when my father introduces me to his trade. It is my first vivid memory. There are bundles of deerskins, bales of cotton, barrels of molasses, indigo and rice—so much rice—, creaks of ropes, and tar…tar bubbling in the seams of its barrels under the blazing sun. And the sweating crew lifts those barrels into place, arms straining under the weight. The men sing together in hauntingly sweet voices particular to their race, voices deep and beautiful.

Though I didn’t understand the implications of the practice just yet, my father traded in people.

He shuffles me to a small podium, orders me to stand beside and stay put while he worked and I watch. A small crowd of rich men from town gather and talk among themselves; some offer me friendly nods in greeting. I know these men from church.

Then the work begins. The ship docks, my father disappears…then he returns with them…

I remember the younger boys best, brown bodies slicked with sweat, arms stretching under ropes
beneath the sun. Their short legs fumble to keep up with the line that moves, pulling them among the adults of their race. They mix together, husbands, wives, beardless youths and boys, all dressed in tatters, their calves all defined without fat.

And my father follows their parade from the rear...he hits them with a riding whip when they slack behind. He hits them harder than he has ever hit me, and I hear adults cry out to plead for them. And, I am so confused. And, I fear my father.

He suddenly towers over me at the podium as he sells away these people. I feel like a criminal, standing beside him.

With the familiar white men above and around me, yelling out prices and jeers, the dark people being shoved onto the stand and marked by my father, I lose my sense of location. This no longer feels like my happy muddled Charlestown. I do not recognize the beach, the view of the coastline.

So much has changed since then.
Now learn from your mother or else spend your days biting your own neck

...MY DISILLUSIONMENT with my father has always been rivaled by my respect for him, and I do not have the heart to disappoint him again. So, I have not responded to his letter but to thank him. I have not told him this- my most recent blunder.

Since I'd traveled abroad to study after my mother's death, I'd done nothing but cause the family more grief and frustration.

I immediately overspent my allowances during my romps with liberal boys in Switzerland, and my father's talent for instilling guilt without demanding it could make a son feel dishonorable without insult- though, perhaps my guilt also rose from the knowledge of how I had spent my time with those boys. I felt weak to my base desires, adrift from God after my mother's death, free from my father's watchful eyes. I overstepped propriety and overspent my pockets.

My shame and grief only grew ten-fold when my charge, my sweet little brother, Jemmy, fell while jumping over a fence outside my apartment in England. Father had entrusted Jemmy to my care, and he died of my neglect. No amount of consolation through my father's letters could comfort me. I considered changing my course of study to theology. I knew Jemmy's death was punishment for my sin.

But, now…this…unchristian begetting…

MARTHA RISES EARLY as I do. She’s naked but for a loose nightgown, though I did not touch her last night. Her stomach rises just slightly under her breast, showing some manifestation I put a child within her. Though her back doesn't arch from the weight yet, I feel she's as burdened by it as I am...surely more.

I gather my coat and find the sleeves, sheathing my arms and fastening buttons. She reaches to touch my chest, to grab my arm. She’s been reading the letters I share with my father, which- I would forbid, but…as she is my wife, I allow her the right.

Father tells me of the outrageous taxes in America, of disenfranchisement and the growing unrest in the cities. He knows my interest in the affairs of liberty. When I was eleven, a mob came to Mepkin, looking for my father in protest of his neutrality when Britain taxed our stamps. They torched our bushes and broke glass bottles across the yard- many were drunk. When he opened the door and let them search the house, they put a sword to my father's chest, and I cowered behind the railing of the stairs as my mother wailed and cried in early contractions of her thirteenth pregnancy.

I've been studying organized warfare; I've been studying the God-given rights of man. I cannot cower and wail in a passionless marriage while the contractions of an unborn nation wrack my body.

Martha knows why I'm dressing. She cannot make me stay. I promise to write. She pleads to come to America after our child is born- we haven't chosen a name. I smile and kiss her cheek, remind her a dangerous revolution is stirring in the colonies, but she does not care. My brave dear girl.
I stand on the starboard bow of a merchant ship, one of the Mannings’ personal crafts that does business with my father. I haven't told him of my marriage into their family. He would not agree to allow me passage home if he knew I had an expectant wife in England. While his sentiments are patriotic, he would value my family over the nation’s freedom.

I would not.

Leaving for America from France to avoid a British search, I had the pleasure of meeting Mister Franklin as he wooed the aristocratic influence in court. Bringing him letters had the distinct reward of hearing his vague half-babbles of French officers in the Continental Army. It had the distinct punishment of walking in on his more...intimate diplomatic maneuverings- I have since heard such intrusions were common among all his visitors. The trauma was well-worth the morsels of knowledge I could scrape from him, though it was still a secret, whether French naval power would involve itself in our Revolution. It appeared to me that France was already providing special succors, and so long as she could do that to support us, she would see no need to declare herself openly at war with England.

The voyage across the Atlantic was long as ever. We sighted no albatross and the childhood bemusement I felt for sailing had left me. Last I sailed, a youth of sixteen, I had been the eldest of three Laurens boys on a journey to Europe, grieving my mother, but delighted to travel and full of authority, teasing my little brothers of Jolly Rogers on the horizon. Harry never believed me, but Jem’s eyes grew wide and he’d run below deck with boyish shrieks. He was too young to truly know our mother when she passed, and his indomitable optimism had carried me through mourning. Now, Jemmy was dead as well.

I don’t remember much of the trip, through tides and weeks that left no impression. Despite every precaution, our vessel was apprehended by a British ship just long enough for myself and my dear traveling companion, John White, to be recognized as Americans. We were searched and released, and after that ordeal, the sailors left me to my own devices.

I sketched in my journal rather than writing letters as I should. A handsome face and square jaw of a man my age, rendered over and over again in longing lines and meticulous shading. I left the length of his neck bare...though I could not bring myself to finish drawing his body. I could imagine it nonetheless. I also brought reading material for pleasure, extra books I had not had time to read while in college. Earning a degree in the study of warfare had expedited my graduation and reinvigorated my interest in heroic figures such as Caesar and Alexander the Great. So, I read Livy's account of the conquest of Persia and found satisfaction in the labor of translation.

I arrive in Charleston just long enough to conceive the damage the British fleet has done on the harbor. There are cannon holes in our docks, stains of gunpowder and ash along the sands on shore. My fears are confirmed and my journey vindicated, and I waste no time in traveling to the courthouse to collect my commission...and to approach my father with some news...

Philadelphia in the summer has a smell to it. The city has been established for nearly a century, yet the bricks heat in the sun and waft the scent of new clay into the wind. All cities smell of something rank- Charleston of fish and tar, Geneva of human defalcation, London of cynicism. Philadelphia smells of men at work- parchment and shoe polish, sweat and horses and gun powder, all masculine scents. I don't mind this odor.

I find the General's quarters as ordered and walk up the cobble path to the door.

Father arrived in Philadelphia shortly after my transfer to the Washington's army, after he prepared
the property in Mepkin for our long absence. We hadn't spoken since I spoke to him of my Martha, and our conversation had been short and tense and, as I walk, I watch the cobbles to avoid stumbling on the uneven paving, still trying to shake the image of father's brow set in that ever-present disappointment. I should have reported directly to the General rather than pay him my visit...

As if ripped from my reverie, a voice loudly jolts my attention, "What's your name?"

My gaze lifts and I have to stop myself abruptly to avoid walking into the man. I gape at the cold shock of beauty. He had nearly let me walk straight into him. Deep-blue eyes, features fine as a girl, edged hard and piercing. His face all at once matches and alters all my worst day-dreams. It strikes me with a sudden, springing dislike.

He laughs and I realize I have not spoken. He begins to repeat himself and I interrupt, "John Laurens."

His grin falters and he suddenly turns from me. For a moment, I think he's dismissed me, and I'm ready to start after him, but then I realize what he's outside for. A carriage of personal trunks and boxes is by the steps to the General's Philadelphia headquarters, the City Tavern. He walks to it, gathers a massive, heavy-looking trunk into both arms, and returns. He doesn't appear to struggle with it. "John Laurens- son of President of Congress, Henry Laurens- John Laurens?" he clarifies, leaning back a little with barely enough weight on his body to counter that trunk.

"Yes."

"Well, good," he says simply, and I'm not sure what I anticipated, but that was not it. "We've been expecting you-" he says, "you're not without your recommendations."

I baulk. This must be one of General Washington's aides. "Really?"

"Of course! Don't be modest," he chastises me. "I transcribed your father's letter myself, synthesized all his best praises of you to deliver the General."

Both my brows lurch. I had not asked my father to write when I was offered a position by General Washington. Praises?

He takes a quick look at my face and goes on, "Your eagerness to serve- he impressed it urgently-, fluency in French, formal education on warfare- quite useful-, good work ethic and meticulous nature, a patient and forgiving temper, lovely eyes- to which I would agree, and of course, strong arms..."

My mouth gapes again, and I think he's flirting with me strangely, then I grunt as the heavy trunk he was holding is shoved into my chest. My arms raise instinctively to catch it and I am shocked by the weight as he leaves me with it.

"...which I am sure you will use to carry the General's items with the utmost care." Those awful cupid's bowed lips quirk in self-satisfaction and the young aide turns away from me back to the carriage to grab more items.

I nearly drop the trunk to spite him, but another man walks from the open door out the General's quarters and joins him at the cart to help carry the luggage inside. I realize it would look childish to damage General Washington's belongings. This second man wears a wig up in curls like a Frenchman and he stops beside the aide, picking up two bags and muttering something short. The aide responds in French and nods and the second man straightens with his bags, jogging to me. I've already begun my slow ascent back up the walk towards the building.
"You are the juvénile Monsieur Laurens," he exclaimed.

Mister Franklin mentioned such French officers in America, and I wonder briefly of his education, his training. His coat notably lacks medallions. I don't stop walking to respond- the strain in my arms doesn't allow it, "I am."

"Monsieur Hamilton says me, you just come from France."

I incline my head in confirmation, thinking I have heard the name Hamilton before in my father's letters as the man who would receive me...Washington's best aide. He was some sort of prodigy of King's College, a military hero- and not even a man yet, hard-working and steady. Everything a son should be. That was the aide I'd just met? That frustrating young man?

"I as well!"

We walk through the doorway and turn down a hallway, around a flight of stairs and find a pile of luggage. I drop the trunk with a heavy thud and rise to find a hand thrust toward my chest.

"My...name is Marie-Joseph Paul Yves Roch Gilbert du Motier Marquis de Lafayette," the man says, tongue curling easily around the French. He looks down at his hand uneasily, as if he isn't sure it's the customary greeting- as if he's made a mistake of it before. "And I am...pleased...to meet you."

I take the hand and shake it warmly and the Frenchman smiles with uncanny luminosity. "Enchanté, Marie-Joseph Paul Yves Roch Gilbert du Montier Marq."

"-The trunk must go upstairs." Standing on the stairs and rudely interrupting, the pretty aide from outside is leaning back and carrying an obnoxious load of bags in both arms. He glares at the trunk I dropped then back to me, turns away, "This way," and he disappears behind the landing, feet stomping heavily on each step.

I turn to the Marquis who just shakes his head merrily. "Well, you 'ave met Hamilton."

And so it was confirmed. "I don't think he likes me," I muse, moving to pick the trunk up again.

The Marquis steps around me and lifts one side, so I shift to accept his assistance. "I 'ave heard he likes no one."

"I don't like him," I say bluntly.

And that earns a laugh as the Marquis shifts the weight of the trunk on his side to one arm, stretching the other out to take the handle on my side. I don't have a choice in the matter but to relinquish my hold to the Frenchman. "Ah, he won't allow that!" he says, laughing as he takes the trunk from me.

The Marquis is already mounting the steps with my trunk as I question, "What do you mean?" But, he continues upward as if his English has alluded him, "Why do you say that?" I pushed.

The Frenchman ignores me and I huff in disdain before collecting myself against saying something childish. I turn instead for the door to find something heavier than that trunk. Something heavier than all Hamilton could carry.
Priests in black gowns, were walking their rounds,
And binding with briars, my joys & desires.

I SPEND MY FIRST DAY at the General’s headquarters, guided diligently by the Marquis de Lafayette. Warm-hearted and lovely, he’s already my dearest friend among the General’s staff who he goes through pains to introduce to me in his stuttered English.

They held themselves aloof as gentlemen ought—haughty and unapproachable. None moreso than the one I’d met that morning—Hamilton. He rushed about duties that no one had a part of, separate and princely in his resolve, his beauty like a flame, vital and bright in every room as he flitted about, drawing my eye against my will. He didn’t slouch over his writings; when he was seated, his limbs did not skew, but arranged themselves with perfect grace, as if for a sculptor. When he spoke, it was without an accent, words enunciated in the clearest and most scholarly manner. I wondered of his upbringing, thought he must come from cold nobility and I vowed to never ask of it, never allow him the opportunity to brag.

When Lafayette’s duties absolve me of his attentions, I recline in the yard of the building beneath the scrubby shade of an oak tree, arms aching from the morning’s exertion. I read steadily through the compiled records of the General’s previous battles. No one speaks to me. I’m easy to ignore.

I MEET THE GENERAL late that afternoon as, what must be for him, a perfunctory affair. He’s arriving at our headquarters on Market Street from a meeting of the Continental Congress and is likely exhausted. His demeanor is perfectly stoic and gentlemanly nonetheless. I’m immediately struck by his stature: tall, broad-shouldered, with old eyes. I salute, receive his famously charitable smile, and allow Hamilton to introduce me. I was nearly accustomed to it now—the pomp that my name held in America, endowed with my father’s behind it. “John Laurens, son of Henry Laurens, President of Congress”.

Hamilton was right. I’m not without my recommendations. I had come with a note of introduction from both of the distinguished Rutledge brothers, and provided General Washington several epistolary favors, transmitting his messages. General Washington had written me personally, invited me to join his Family, but I now feel as though I’m riding the coattails of my family name.

As the Lieutenant Colonel introduces me among a short list of my father’s praises, I want to sojourn his words, but I don’t have such authority. I haven’t earned it, so I stand silently until the General offers me a hand to shake. I offer him my promise of hard work and loyalty, and he accepts, asks where I’m residing in the city. I tell him about the apartment I’m renting, and he dismisses it, orders me to move my items into his personal headquarters with his closest advisors.

I feel more than hear Hamilton scoff beside me. I can’t blame him. But, as if in punishment, Washington offers him to assist me in moving my personal affects into his own room, and the General dismisses us from his study.

As we walk from the door, I find myself striding quickly to keep pace with this whirlwind of a man. Hamilton moves furiously. “You don’t need to assist me in moving my belongings,” I say quickly—
as we are already paced to the door and he leans his weight to open it. “I didn’t bring enough for two men to carry.”

He considers my dismissal, scrutinizing me with skeptical eyes, but I am not lying. For myself, I brought only a sword, some clothes, and a few personal items. He does not believe me, “Nonetheless, I’ll accompany you,” he says and opens the door.

I push it closed, “I’m sure your time could be better-spent.” Hamilton does not believe I have earned a place near to General Washington. And because I can feel his chest rising with breath for another protest, I smile reassuringly, teasing, “Though I’m gratified that you’re so eager to see me moved in with you.”

My teasing has the desired effect. He backs from the door handle and turns to me, giving me a cold, denigrating smile. “My room has been empty much too long, and I do prefer to share.” There’s no rhetorical entendre, yet I know he’s implied euphemism of some sort. It shows in his tone of voice, in the bold, challenging expression he wears and the heady weight of the quiet that follows. It is like that morning; like he dares me to flirt with him. Like he believes I won’t.

We maneuver. He steps away from the door and I towards it, a dance of courtesies. I turn back in the threshold, posture defiant. “You didn’t impress to the General how lovely my eyes are.”

A beat of silence passes. He doesn’t smile, but I can tell that I’ve surprised him. I feel victorious. He’s quick to muster a reply. “The General would not appreciate the quality as I do,” and he closes the door on me before I can respond.

I RETURN TO MARKET STREET late that night with my bags, rifle slung over my shoulder, anticipating more interaction with Hamilton—despite myself. He’s quick-tongued, rudely beautiful, behaves like entitled nobility, and I want to fight him with wit until we level the ground beneath ourselves.

Lafayette had warned me that Hamilton’s personality would eventually endear him to me, but he would not return the affection. Apparently, Hamilton thinks himself above making attachments. I consider the dangers of feeling unrequited friendship for the man and decide myself immune to that embarrassment. If I were less physically attracted to him and if I had less faith in my restraint to act on that attraction, I would perhaps worry of wanting to befriend Washington’s man simply for the challenge. But, as it is, I know I’m too taken with his corporeal attributes and too repulsed by my desires to seek his friendship.

Lafayette had shown me Hamilton’s room, just across the hall from his own, and I find it easily. The door is closed and silent, so I assume Lieutenant Colonel Hamilton has already retired to bed. I enter quietly, cupping a hand over my candle and propping the door with my foot to bring my bags inside...I find the room empty.

A city apartment, all the rooms in the General’s headquarters are small, but I gather from the perimeters of Hamilton’s space that it was intended for one man. I light the short candles on the desk. The room is meticulously tidy, all personal affects of its inhabitant tucked away in a few boxes. There is only one bed, neatly made. A soft pallet is collected beneath the window which I assume is mine to sleep upon. I move the rifle stationed beside it to hang by its strap at the foot of Hamilton’s bed, and I replace my own in its spot. My bags do little to claim my space—though it seems Hamilton will be an absent bunkmate.
I divest myself of my stuffy outer layers, stripping comfortably to my thin linen shirt and stockings. I saw no candles lit through the windows of the General's study, and the only noises I heard in the house were snores from the few staff that slept in this headquarters. I consider briefly that Hamilton may have requested to move rooms while I was walking from my apartment, but I quickly dismiss the thought.

I have more important matters to focus upon than Hamilton's absence, and a good reason to be grateful for a nocturnal roommate. I am energetic and fresh from college. I prefer to toil by candlelight. So, I retrieve the tome of notes I was reviewing regarding the General's previous battles, and I sit on my pallet to work. I want to know everything of his preferred maneuvers- of the British reaction to those moves. I search for patterns, transcribe my own notes, and familiarize myself with the names of players in each engagement. In the most recent accounts, I search for Lafayette's name, but it seems his arrival was not anticipated. As I read through the transcripts of maneuvers and the statistics of forces brought to bear, I find Hamilton’s name several times in battles across New York. There are mentions of reckless bravery, of logistical genius and tactical brilliance.

So, I see why he has come so young to this position. I understand his suspicion of me.

MY CANDLE’S NEARLY BURNT OUT when the bedroom door opens quietly. The room has grown so dark that I would not have noticed if not for the draft of fresh air that rushes across my legs. Hamilton steps in with a candle, covering it in his hand to block the light as if he expects I’ll be asleep. I feel his eyes on me and I lift my head.

"Mister Laurens...are you not weary from your travels?"

I raise my shoulders in nonchalance. "Not particularly." My voice is rough with disuse. I sit up in the pallet and, as I do so, he leans and snatches the pillow that I was reclined against. I appall at the suddenness of the movement before I comprehend that, "You intended to sleep here?"

"Out of courtesy, yes," Hamilton says, tossing his pillow onto the bed, shoulders sloped with fatigue, "But, seeing as how you've relieved me of the space, by all means, sleep on the floor."

"Courteous," I say dryly, tucking my bag of clothes under my back. I watch him as he begins to undress, turning his back from me and hanging his clothes inside a small wardrobe. Beneath his layers of uniform coat and vest, he's wearing a similar dress shirt to my own, though its fabric appears more coarse. It clings loosely to his body where heat has gathered, revealing a thin frame and muscular back and shoulders. I imagine if he removed that as well, his body would be a fit subject for an artist, graceful, shapely arms and a swell of muscle. As he turns back to his bed, I can see beyond him into his wardrobe, noting a hunting shirt he's hung in the back among some winter items. I appreciate the practical fashion of the north, but this particular shirt's breast pocket is emblazoned in gold, 'Liberty or Death', and I blurt a laugh.

He raises a brow at me, looking up from where he's working his way free of his breeches. He meets my eyes, follows my gaze, and laughs at himself, his smile a flash of white in the low candlelight. I realize it is the first time I’ve seen an honest smile upon his face, and I'm surprised by the humanity. "You should've seen the headband," he says, pushing his trousers down and lifting them off each knee. "I began rallies at school with several other boys. We fancied ourselves an army of orators." He laughs again and shakes his head.

He can't help but smile, knowing now how the Lieutenant Colonel had distinguished himself in battles across New York, it must be humorous to reflect on juvenile college days. "Why do you still own it?" I laugh.
He feigns insult, "I'll have you know I embroidered that myself- it's a warm piece of clothing!" and shuts the wardrobe.

I laugh once more and order the papers I've been reviewing, sensing that the act of preparing for sleep should be unanimous between us. I tuck them into my letterbox. I haven't entirely finished reading them, but I am informed enough to feel confident that I understand my duties and how I'm expected to perform them.

As Hamilton untucks one corner of his bed and climbs inside, I blow out the candles, darkness settling between us. He faces me on his side, lips slightly parted, an arm thrown carelessly behind his head. I can just make out the shape of his face, sculptor-perfect and ethereal by the cold blue light that seeps in the windowsill. He's a display of frustrating beauty, the sort that anticipates vanity, but I'm no longer sure if he intends it.

"Where were you?" I say, feeling strange when my voice comes out a whisper. "You're back rather late."

He opens his eyes, then closes them again and turns his back. "Washington requested my counsel about his Congressional meeting," he says, dismissive.

His humanity slips away and my dislike springs forth again. I'm not envious of his position- I know that he has earned it, but I refuse to be impressed by him or his lack of humility.

I lay down but don't easily find sleep.

HAMILTON WAKES ME EARLY with his stirring, changing clothes and rinsing his face in the washbasin. I can tell he is attempting to move with stealth, and I know myself to be a light sleeper. I consider feigning asleep until he leaves to spare him the knowledge of his failure, but it's too satisfying to hear his apologies when I sit up and inquire to what he's doing.

"The enlisted men have their exercises every morning and I join them," he explains. "It's the only time I have to run."

I push myself up from the pallet with this new knowledge, wondering if it's customary for the General's aides to interact with the enlisted soldiers. "I'll join you."

He picks up some soft-soled shoes and looks at me skeptically.

"All the best officers train with their men," I say, stooping to pick up my bag of clothes and rummage inside for a simple shirt and loose trousers. "And, I feel I should know more of the soldiers' training regiment under General Washington."

Hamilton doesn't question me further. His lips pinch with an appraising look, and he sits to put on his shoes.

THE MARQUIS DE LAFAYETTE is already outside, loudly reading a roster of names to take accountability of the soldiers mustered for their exercises. He's dressed extravagantly for an exercise drill, in a pleated dress shirt with a ballroom tie and waistcoat, fixed with gold buttons, and I think it may be the most casual dress he owns. He struggles to pronounce a few surnames and the men snort and jeer until Hamilton barks at them to stop.
Lafayette stumbles over ‘Fairclough’.

No one laughs.

I stand aside from the back among the few officers gathered. Of the many men Lafayette introduced to me the day before, I’m surprised that so few have come to exercise with the battalion. When I mumble so much aloud, a man standing beside me leans over to speak- Tilghman was his name, I recalled. Another one of the General’s aides. “Mosta the army’s stationed in camps outside the city. Their sergeants lead their exercises- and when so few men can afford to stay in Philadelphia, why wake up to train with them?”

The soldiers form up into four columns and I fall in to the front, stretching my legs as the men behind me do the same under instruction of the Marquis.

“Let Lafayette take the front.”

Hamilton’s edged his way up beside me, bobbing on the balls of his feet. His hair is tied back loosely and he seems younger- boyish in his anticipation of exercise. I frown. “I will step aside should the Marquis ask me to,” I say firmly, intent to lead as an officer.

“No, I mean- you position yourself behind,” he says, pushing me lightly to fall out of formation. His lip quirks at one side in a now-familiar challenge and his hand travels down my back like a lick of flame, “I’m sure it’s a good position for you.”

I shiver away from his touch, jolting forward a step and turning on him. His flirtations are becoming sinister and I feel insulted with my orders. New or not, I’ve come with recommendations- I was asked here. I don’t intend to be shoved aside. “I would prefer to lead from the front, sir.”

Both his brows raise at my hostility. “Admirable,” he says- but, it sounds more like dismissal than praise, “but, we need officers in the rear.”

“You take the rear.”

“Do not order me!” Hamilton’s voice raises and I immediately fall silent. I hold his eyes defiantly though everything in me wishes to drop his gaze and look to my feet. He seems to realize he had shouted after it’s passed and his lips fall into a thin line, “It’s a good position,” he says again after a long moment. “Perhaps the most important. The men that fall behind need someone to push them- someone with a powerful voice.”

“This is not my first exercise drill…” I say with condescension, stepping away from him.

Hamilton glares at the space growing between us. “Then you know the nature of this army,” he says. “You know that the will is there, morale is high- discipline is low. The men are strong and willing, but they fall out of their exercises nonetheless, they break their lines and drop to catch their breath. Is it not good leadership to…encourage them?” He steps closer and the challenge has not left his lips- they still lilt on each word. He meets my eyes. “Let Lafayette lead. He knows the path well and sets a fast pace. Have your hand at shouting with me…” with me “…if you have the energy for it, of course.”

He all at once changes the orders. On the goading quirk of one shapely brow, the most unappealing drudgery of sweeping up the unfit soldiers and motivating them to higher effort suddenly seems the most noble task. And, if he will be there doing the same, I vow to shout so loud Lafayette will hear me from the front.

The soldiers have taken up their places in four single-file ranks and the Marquis is positioning
himself in the lead as the sergeants of each company step to the side of their men. I break from Hamilton with a light shove, racing to the back of the formation. I hear him laugh in delight and make chase.

WE TAKE REST BY THE SCHUYLKILL RIVER, just outside the sprawl of the city. The town provides a well of fresh water for the men to splash upon reddened cheeks and drink from cupped hands. As they pump the handle to excess, water floods the cobbled street and soldiers take off their shoes to wade their toes in the coolness.

I’ve worked my own body into an exhausted state, breathless and sweating, I feel the heat that’s accumulated in my limbs return all at once to my face when I stop running. I wait behind a line of men to drink, placing my needs last.

Ahead of me, Hamilton’s removed his shirt, and carelessly plunged his head under the fountain. It’s a base act, unbecoming of an officer and selfish for the men who have waited behind him to drink. It doesn’t exemplify the discipline Hamilton was talking about, but in my exhausted state, I cannot begrudge him for acting as I secretly desire to. When he throws his hair back, he splashes a line of soldiers who laugh and kick a stream of water back at him.

A short battle ensues between Hamilton and the enlisted men. The latter of which wields the advantage of numbers, but the first is still stationed by the water pump, allowing him to pump a fountain of water against his hand, diverting it into a sharp spray, directly into the crowd. Lafayette runs forth with a giddy shout, leading the soldiers against this new foe, and the men retaliate by throwing it back at Hamilton in cupped hands until a shrill shout comes sharp from behind me and three young ladies rush forth, screaming. “Stop! Please, you’ll flood the gardenbeds!”

I smirk, anticipating the opportunity to see Lieutenant Colonel Hamilton set straight by a woman.

But, Hamilton jumps down from his perch at the well fountain, and he drops into the perfect bow, rising to cup one of the young women’s hands and place a delicate kiss against her knuckles. She flushes, but he presses forth, leaning lightly against her to mutter something near to her ear.

He hadn’t replaced his shirt and his skin dripped clean and flushed from our run.

Those poor ladies.

I QUICKLY LEARN that Hamilton is not so dignified as he looks. Beneath his poise and stillness is another face, full of mischief which he holds reserved in professional settings. But, when the situation allows, he doesn’t hesitate to provide wit and humor- intelligent enough to impress, but simple enough to amuse.

On orders outside my control, I find myself spending more time with him than I would otherwise elect. The General bids me shadow his three aides until a time at which he may appoint me properly to the position as his fourth. In the meantime, he provides me reading material and assigns me tasks of personal correspondence and translation. So, I sit in the General’s study among his closest men, and I write his notes.

It seems each man in headquarters serves a vital purpose to the General. Mister Harrison provides distinct eloquence to Washington’s correspondence, ensuring that his frank way of speaking makes it to the paper with the same message, conveyed in a way fit for a gentlemen. Dear Lafayette reads
through the endless annals of British battles and accounts of continental reconnaissance, providing
suggestions of troop movement and maneuvering, training and weaponry. Hamilton keeps all matters
of logistics, of supply and finance, foreign diplomacy and translation.

I cannot find a capacity in which I could be needed to serve…if not to provide distinction to the
General’s staff through my father’s name…

I loathe to think it might be my only purpose.

My conversations with General Washington are short and succinct, but through his warmth, I
recognize that it’s not due to any ill-feelings on Washington’s behalf. My own father speaks
similarly- quietly impassioned, dutiful, and authoritative. I know the General’s sentiments; his letter
of invitation asked me to become a Member of his Family, and for whatever reason I was selected, I
feel accepted as such.

I spend my days with Lafayette as I would with a brother. He speaks with me often, bluntly and
ardently- sometimes in French, but often in English as I do not begrudge him his frequent blunders
and he appreciates the practice; he stays close by my side as I do my local shopping, visit
Shrewsberry, and practice my swordsmanship. I’ve lent him my largest, less-formal shirt, and he
wears it each morning for our exercises, washing it by hand each afternoon as it's still somewhat too
small for the length of his torso and it clings to him with sweat. All the golden buttons have
disappeared from his waistcoats, but I have no theories to where he's sent them.

Mister Harrison is more reserved in his affection, but he has shown me his drawings, and I’ve found
him quite talented in capturing a person’s likeness. I suggested he draw anatomical studies, but he
claims it's a passing hobby and he'd rather focus on practicing law. I consider it a shame if it means
giving up a passion, but Harrison seems somewhat a passionless man, so I let the subject drop.

Fitzgerald, with bright orange hair and a distinct Irish accent brings humor and endless optimism to
the drudgery of office work, humming songs as we sort papers and drumming his fingers and feet
with lilting rhythms that draw me to grin at him.

Tilghman, Walker, and Meade speak clear French, though their diction in the language lacks the
fluidity of someone who's spent time abroad. They don't often spend much time in the General's
study, traveling to carry Washington's messages. As I settle in, I meet them sporadically, one by one.
They all present themselves as pleasantly and openly.

Hamilton remains masked. I don’t trust him for his flirtation. I've given him no reason to dislike me,
but he knows that I dislike him, and rather than confront me about why, he attempts to force me to
like him in clever ways- to admire him as the other aides do. He postures himself like royalty, speaks
flawless French whenever he notices Lafayette with me, he corrects my grammar in the General’s
notes, he shouts over me during our exercises. Our interactions are cordial at best, flirtatious at worst.
He escapes confrontation through innuendo, and because he knows I will not be beaten away with
words, he has pushed the matter until I cannot be sure if he wants to beat me or bed me. I do not
oppose him, so we do not openly fight, but there is an air of hostility that does not resolve itself, only
tenses further and coils into knots between us.

Curiously, he does not take advantage of our assigned sleeping quarters to continue his campaign of
making me uncomfortable. Sharing a room makes matters more difficult only in that I do not sleep
well and I must push myself to wake earlier than him. He naturally wakes early, but it's worth the
effort to see his shocked expression each time I wake him for exercises. I don’t think he’s
accustomed to anyone keeping pace with his energy.

Even as we both retire late, he comes to our room full of vigor, talking passionately of his ideas for
the United States, of his beliefs of a good federal government system to rule the colonies, of his logistical plans to unite the entirety of the American continent. He blusters about empires and human rights, and though his ideas are glittering generalities, so far from what is currently attainable, I counter his immortal visions with my own until we’ve both exhausted ourselves- both made ourselves sound like foolish gods. When he finally sleeps, he does not snore, but his very presence distracts me, makes it difficult to close my eyes- his easy breathing, the drowsy tangle of his limbs; there’s a vividness to him, even at rest, that makes death seem foolish.

I understand what Lafayette had meant when he warned me of wanting to befriend Hamilton. The man is a dream embodied. So, I stubbornly resist his charm on principle. There is something dishonest in his optimism…something dangerous in desiring him.

“THERE HAVE BEEN COMPLAINTS of the men harassing women in town,” the General says one evening as we toil by candlelight at our long oak desk.

Our pens all pause and the rustle of a piece of parchment crackles loud in the silence. We look up. The General does not. He stares at the notice from the city commissioner in disappointment.

I am sat beside Lafayette to translate words he struggles with, and Hamilton had situated himself across from me so that he might torment my foot beneath the table with his own, caressing and wriggling. But, his toes cease their movement, halfway up my calf and he turns his attention to the General, rises from the bench, and plucks the letter from under the General’s nose.

He brings it to our table and wordlessly begins writing a response- a formal apology. His jaw is set furiously and the room feels tense with his anger.

I watch him, my own hand stilled against a piece of parchment where I was attempting- unsuccessfully- to write a letter to my father. All at once, I decide to break his tension. “They’re following your example,” I whisper to him, leaning over the table.

He looks up sharply, horrified perhaps, to hear his own thoughts voiced aloud. “They’re following their base desires, acting brutes of it-”

“Because you showed them how.”

“I did no such thing,” he hisses.

“Those ladies by the Schuylkill River,” I say, leaning further over the table and he follows the motion, eyes narrowed, “your gentlemanly flirtation, your assertion to those women. In front of all the men, you aroused their imaginations to avoid being scolded.” I grin and raise my brows. I don’t pretend I wasn’t amused by the action, there’s no accusation in my tone and he must understand my teasing- his actions were harmless. “Now all the men think they can woo a lady so sweetly.”

He blinks, returns his pen to his paper and looks down and away from me, almost shyly if I thought him capable of it. He lowers his voice below a whisper so I must watch his lips to understand his words, “Then they must be mistaken, yours is the only imagination I seek to arouse.” His eyes glance coyly from beneath his lashes.

I kick him under the table and his shoulders shake with repressed laughter.

The General’s study settles back into comfortable silence, the gentle sounds of pens scratching paper and a summer breeze rattling shutters. We all imagine creative reprimands to direct at the soldiers for their indecency. Hamilton sets our ideas aside on scratch notes and passes the page around the table.
so we’re all satisfied to do away with the distraction.

One by one, the aides at headquarters mill from their work and retire to bed. All but myself and Hamilton are retired when the Marquis finishes his final diagram. He has scratched several maps with annotations, drawn up crude copies, and decorated the page with arrows, circles, and x’s. Throughout the night, he had stood several times to explain these to the General before being sent back to the table to continue. I’m still agonizing over my letter to my father as he stands to leave and bids me and Hamilton a good night. He travels to the General’s table to do him the same more formally.

The door closes behind Lafayette and I turn back to the table. My eyes catch on the daunting stack of letters that Hamilton is steadily working through. His pen moves calmly, unperturbed by the work still ahead of him. Finishing my letter is no longer a difficulty. I record its address, sign my name, and set it aside, reaching over the table to take a packet of his correspondence.

But, as my hand reaches the sheet, it’s slapped sharply. “What are you doing?”

“You have a large stack, it’s getting late,” I explain. It should be obvious. “I’ll help you.”

“Thank you,” he says, eyes narrowed, “I am quite capable.”

“I did not mean to imply the opposite…”

"Hamilton," from the head of the room, Washington’s serene voice raised above us both, the General’s eyes not bothering to leave his own pen, “allow it.”

“I don’t need assistance, sir!” Hamilton defies.

The General looks up from his letter and fixes his aide with an endlessly patient look, “But, Mister Laurens needs work, and you have more than enough to share,” he says. I see the defiance sink from Hamilton’s shoulders after a moment’s hesitation. “Perhaps, with his help, you’ll find more than a few hours of sleep tonight.”

Hamilton looks to me, lips thin, then his expression softens and he quirks his frustrating brow, daring me to find the double entendre in the General’s words. To think creatively of the ways I could ensure he sleeps. He means to distract me from taking his coveted work.

I roll my eyes at his gall and look pointedly to his stack of correspondence until he huffs in defeat and removes one letter from the top of his stack, pushing it to my side of the table.

“Mister Hamilton.” Washington’s chiding tone speaks to the disapproval of his aide’s inability to share equitably.

But, Hamilton does not budge, “He can pull from my stack as he completes his transcriptions,” he says, defending his actions.

The General hums, satisfied, and returns his attention to his own letter.

I set to work, transcribing the correspondence from General Knox, and as I write, I note a pointed increase in the speed that Hamilton’s pen moves. I can hear it race across the page, barely breaking to dip in his inkwell. His hand slaps the stack as he grabs another letter.

I write faster.

I slap the stack.
He writes faster.

We finish the pile before the General has finished his letter to his wife.

AS WE UNDRESS FOR BED, Hamilton begins our conversation as usual, but he seems different tonight. Where he typically talks with a tone of showy bluster meant more for a crowded dinner party than the intimacy of a darkened bedroom, instead, he speaks directly to me. “General Washington told me that he formally introduced himself to your father at the Congressional meeting the day you arrived.”

I look up from the washbasin where I was rinsing my face, glance over to him curiously.

He leans his hip against the bedpost and his eyes are honest, arms folded protectively over his chest. “He told me he had never taken the opportunity to meet your father until he received word that you would be arriving at our headquarters. He never took an interest in meeting him while he sat in Congress- and he still doesn't know him well…”

I absorb the information slowly, something warm clenches in my throat. It’s assurance that I was not invited here only on the merit of my name. The General wanted me a part of his family, but- “…Why are you telling me this?”

Hamilton shrugs and turns away to climb into the bed, “I thought you may like to know.”

EXACTLY ONE WEEK HAS PASSED since my arrival when Lafayette breaks into the General’s study, face flushed and smiling uncontrollably. It’s late and the staff has already worked their way through the General’s personal responses and retired to bed. Hamilton has nearly completed his requests to Congress for a shipment of muskets and bayonets, and I remain and pretend to edit a letter to my father for the sole purpose of staying later than Hamilton.

Lafayette’s smile is luminous, entirely amazed and he does not wait to be invited to speak, “A victory, mon Général!”

I stand.

“General Stark- in Walloomsac, New York- les milice du Massachusetts- ah...defeated...une force de l'armée Burgoyne! Hessians, Dragoons Brunswick, les Canadiens, les loyalistes, et Indiens- ah...over a...thousand are dead! But the...number must be...greater- the streets run de sang Britannique!”

Hamilton’s at his feet now as well. He translates Lafayette’s words where the young Frenchman is too excited to find his English. I’m too shocked to assist. General Stark has affected massive casualties on the British forces in New York. The losses will cost the British native and loyalist support. It’s brilliant news. This is the closest I’ve felt to the war since returning to America and the fighting is yet a week’s hike away.

Suddenly, it’s real.

“Stark enveloppait les forces de Burgoyne- ah...as they attempted to...raid pour les horses et provisions. Stark...took prisoners and killed le Lieutenant Burgoyne, Monsieur Baum- Burgoyne sent reinforts et we...destroyed those as well!”
There were no words for it.

“Support pour les Britannique...falls in the north! They see our...resolve! And fear us!”

Washington doesn’t need a translation, “Mister Laurens,” I snap to attention, “draft a letter to Commissioners Franklin and Deane outlining these events. Tell them to take the matter to the French court at the soonest juncture. Major General Lafayette—” my dear friend steps in beside me, cheeks still flushed and pinched on a foolish grin, “help him.”

“Yes! Mon General!”

“Have your draft to me tonight and we’ll revise it first thing in the morning.”

We nod in unison.

“And me, sir?”

Washington looks to his official aide and nods, “Finish your letter to Congress, Hamilton,” he says dismissively. He gathers up his stationary and places it in his letterbox, packing it away in his desk. “I trust you gentlemen to finish these tasks tonight. I believe the men should hear of this victory from me in person. And, they can forget morning exercises, sleep be damned.”

“Oui!” Lafayette says like a cheer and I cannot fight my own grin.

Washington leaves us with a rare smile, gathering his coat and hat.

I see Hamilton’s shoulders drop as the door closes behind the General- just the smallest motion to betray true feelings. I cannot see his face, but I imagine he’s banishing a frown because, when he turns me and the Marquis, he’s smiling brightly. “A victory!” he says.

Beside me, Lafayette jumps on his toes.

“It’s amazing news,” I agree. “The French court will have no reason to doubt our resolve now.”

“Oui!”

“Will you gentlemen need help composing your draft to the commissioners?” Hamilton says hopefully, already picking up his pen.

“We’ll manage without, I believe.”

It's the truth, but I regret saying it when he openly deflates. “Ah- of course,” he manages, “I did not mean to imply any doubts.” He smiles shakily and I wonder how he's managed to mask himself so efficiently when he gives all his emotions away so openly. “Then, I will leave it to your capable hands- as I have...honestly finished my own letters.”

I realize he was feigning business just as I was- likely for the same reasons as I was, and I feel foolish for keeping us both awake, pretending to write my father.

His hands move languidly as he packs his stationary, a scorned son, dismissed and unnecessary at his own station, and I recall his words several nights before. It was Hamilton who had assured me of my own merit- who had recognized my insecurities and assured me I was not chosen by the General for my father’s name.

I stand before he can leave, cover the back of his hand with my own to still his movement. “I met Mister Franklin a few months ago,” I say, “just before I traveled from France.” That’s why the
General asked me to write the letter...not you. “And, the commissioners sent Lafayette specifically for this purpose. Washington knows they'll recognize our names in the address…”

Hamilton understands. He studies our hands a moment before looking up and meeting my eyes. A slow, grateful smile reaches his lips, and his hand moves under mine, long graceful fingers turning to wind around my own. “I'm sure you made a favorable impression?”

“Let us hope.”

Lafayette laughs and claps a hand to my shoulder. "Monsieur Franklin...appreciates beaux hommes with...heart for liberty," he brushes his thumb along the line of my jaw and grins. "And you, petit Monsieur Laurens, are both beautiful et full of heart!"

Hamilton gives a bright chuckle and packs his letters one-handed so as to keep my own held warmly. He pulls it closer. “If you gentlemen have energy left after your labors tonight- I imagine the tavern on Market Street will be full of soldiers singing…meet me there- I’ll buy your drinks.”

“A dangerous offer, sir,” I say, returning his clasp.

“I do hope so.”

THE INK IS STILL DRYING on our twelfth draft. The candles have melted to stubs. We decide that, if our efforts thus far have not been satisfactory, there is no amount of human determination that could achieve our grave mission and the French court will never be convinced.

We grab our coats, moving quickly for the door, shoving one another to move faster. It's been months since I've had a proper drink besides sailors' spirits and this is a chance for me to distinguish myself for my ability to hold liquor. Lafayette has chatted extensively of his desire to sample the more 'rugged American vintages', and he races me playfully down the stairs. I pound a fist against Harrison's door as we pass it, receiving a disgruntled shout from the older man inside.

"Let him sleep," Lafayette chides in French, hurrying me down the stairs.

"He should sleep when the war is won," I whisper back.

Lafayette lets out a howl and unlocks the front door with a flourish, kicking it open and grabbing my hand. We walk down Market Street together, hands clasped between us, and as we near the tavern that Hamilton mentioned, we can already make out the rowdy rumble of the predicted songs. I cannot help but smile, swinging Lafayette's hand casually between us.

I imagine that the soldiers have been drinking for hours already, and recalling the notice of complaint that General Washington received regarding the soldiers harassing women, I take a moment to recognize that we are walking into the tavern as superior officers. There will be complaints of public drunkenness, harassment, obnoxious noises, rowdiness. We will become accountable for the actions of the drunken men in that tavern from the moment we step inside.

It does not stop us.

I keep the young Frenchman near to my side as we enter, diving into a wave of humidity, light, odor, and noise. It's difficult to make out where the songs are originating as the tavern is so loud with booming masculine voices. I guide Lafayette to the keeper's counter, help him order a glass of local wine and I select a rum for myself. We sit by the counter and wait for our drinks as the servers are too busy to immediately mind us.
"Do you see Hamilton?" Lafayette says, turned around and searching the crowd.

"I'm sure he'll show himself," I reply, and sure enough, a wave of laughter erupts from one side of the tavern. Hamilton is stood up at the center of a table of officers, telling a story. From the way he's holding his arms in front of his stomach to indicate a large waistline, I suspect it's the story of how he hid behind General Knox when a shell went off behind him. He's told me that one before.

I turn to the counter to collect our drinks, placing Lafayette's glass gently in his hand as he's still watching Hamilton talking animatedly. "He's a beautiful man," the Frenchman muses casually, swirling the wine in his glass, "Fair and quite...alluring- don't you agree?"

When he speaks in French, Lafayette talks more bluntly in public than he probably should, and I usually match his gall evenly. But, his words bring a high flush to my cheeks as if he's accused me of something embarrassing. "Ah...yes..."

"And mysterious," Lafayette goes on, "Mister Tilghman says he never spoke a word to him outside the General's business, in all the months they've worked together! Such a talkative man, and they never spoke outside work. Can you believe that?" He doesn't give me the chance to respond, "I was honestly surprised he invited us out tonight- victory or no. It must be you- he likes you."

"Shall we go say hello?" I say quickly.

Lafayette nods and looks down at his wine before trying a sip. He smacks his lips lightly to examine the flavor, and allows me to steer him back through the crowd. We have to push and shove to make our way, both of us unaccustomed to the bustle of an unsophisticated party. While the rush of energy in the room is similar, there's a different character to the excitement among enlisted men than there is in the stuffy mannerisms of an officer's dinner party. While the room feels more wild, it's well-contained, and my earlier fears of having to keep order in the room are assuaged.

When we reach Hamilton's booth, he's reseated, listening to an enlisted soldier's story of stealing a pair of boots off a redcoat during a raiding party and picking up a foot-fungus. A few officers from General Washington's staff are seated in the booth- Meade, Walker, Fitzgerald- but it's surrounded by a fair crowd of soldiers, cracking jokes and making the officers laugh. Something warm rushes through my chest at the sight- at the thought of a bridge between these classes of men. In Europe, all the officers that I trained under were from noble birth, carried themselves regal and haughty like Hamilton does...but without his rugged humor.

"Mister Laurens!" the man greets, "Lafayette, come have a seat." Hamilton's fingers grab me by the lapel of my coat and pull me clumsily onto the bench where he's made room. Lafayette follows, setting his wine on the table and leaning over to comment about his first drink in America. I raise a cheers for the occasion, and the men at the table are drunk enough to raise their glasses and start a conversation about the merits of drinking wine over hard liquor.

From beside me, "How's the draft to the commissioners?"

I turn my attention, somewhat surprised that Hamilton's sitting so near, leaning close. He smells of whiskey- too strong to be from his breath, like perhaps someone's spilt some on him. I chuckle at his question, "Good, sir!" take a wide gulp of my rum before answering. "Hopefully Mister Franklin grants more attention to my letter than he did to me when I visited during a l'heure du bain with his ladies..."

Hamilton's mouth forms a comical 'o' that brings me endless satisfaction. It's both a joke and an admission that my purpose for writing the letter was exaggerated- I never knew Franklin well nor him me. I turn away to take another drink, smirking into my cup as he slaps my arm, "Mister
Laurens!" he says, scandalized. "You never told me how intimately you knew the commissioners!"

I bark a laugh and look at him, grin at his exaggerated expression, "Not all the commissioners," I say, "only Mister Franklin." I lean close to his ear to lower my voice, "And, I'm sure that knowing him intimately is no special privilege..."

He laughs and I feel his shoulders shake, pressed tight to mine. His cheeks pinch, dimpled on his smile, and I wonder at him.

We return to the conversation at the table and I finish my drink, order another. Most of these men had been asleep for a few hours when the General brought them news of the victory, and they're energetic with their rest. Their talk moves easily from preferred alcohols to preferred brands of gun powder, from exotic travels to more exotic women, from jokes about the British to jokes about the French to jokes about themselves. I finish three glasses of rum before asking the tavern keeper for a lighter ale. Beside me, growing progressively more plastered and progressively more vocal, Hamilton adds commentary to each story, throwing back as much rugged wit as the enlisted soldiers do. He makes lewd remarks, brags of his romantic conquests, and gives repulsive sexual advice. It's absolutely ungentlemanly, and the soldiers roar with laughter. They love it.

...I love it.

The conversation has moved to the Continental Congress when I order my sixth drink and hand the keeper a gold coin as payment for the night- and a plea to stop bringing more drinks. The open conversation around the room has had me joining in without restraint and the words flowed from me easily. But, after a long-day's work, I'm growing too exhausted to ignore, and I have no taunts to offer against my father and his peers...

Hamilton's hand touches my knee.

I glance over at him curiously, but his elbow is rested on the table, chin held aloof in his palm and he looks innocently away from me. So, I accept the motion of camaraderie, covering his hand in my lap with my own. So far, in my week at the General's headquarters, Hamilton has shown a remarkable ability to comprehend the troubles of my mind. I figure he must know I'm uncomfortable with the talk against my father. I appreciate the sympathy.

His hand slides higher.

It slips from under my gentle touch and moves to trace the inseam of my breeches...tantalizing. And, I look at him again, brows drawing together. The touch could be passed as friendly...if it did not ride so high along the seam of my pants, tracing towards the crease of my legs. For a moment, he ignores me and I am staring dumbly at the deep flush of his cheeks, the perfect curve of his jaw, the stretch of his neck. Then, the corner of his lips quirk.

He moves to my crotch, gives a clumsy squeeze.

I do all within my power not to jolt in my seat. I grab his wrist and remove his hand from my lap, turn to Lafayette and tap his shoulder gently to be allowed passage out the booth. Beside me, Hamilton's sat up, alert and concerned, "Wh're you going, Laurens?" he says, words characteristically slurred.

I grab his wrist to pull him from the booth, "Could we have a word, sir?"

WE ARE JUST OUTSIDE, a few apartments down Market Street, his arm slung over my shoulders...
and stumbling on the pavement when he speaks up. "Wh're we going?"

"I'm taking you back to our quarters, sir. You're quite drunk."

"S' are you."

An accusation I cannot deny, but my words don't slur when I say, "Indeed- all the more cause for us both to retire to bed."

He hums deeply, low in his throat, frame swaying dangerously against my side, and the hand that's slung over my shoulder strokes a languid line along my collar. "So, you'll be joining me, Mister Laurens?"

His touch catches me. "Sir?"

"In bed?" he lowers his voice salaciously, and his words have none of their typical sharpness. "Where you're taking me..."

I hesitate long enough for him to slip his arm off my shoulder and around my waist. I recognize his tone, but I don't believe what I've heard- he's my superior officer, my colleague. "Mister Hamilton, you don't mean you want me to...have you in that bed?" Even with the obvious intent of his touches, our endless flirting, and the stolen glances we've shared for the entirety of the week we've known one another, the implication is too grave. The consequences are too many and the chances are too slim. But, he's already pulling me flush against him in the middle of the cobble road.

"You're right. That's too far..." he breathes, stepping back abruptly and throwing his weight around to spin me on my heel. I stumble, shove him back, but his hands hold around my waist and I'm forced to steady myself for the both of us or he would have me collapse atop him. He pushes me backwards up the front walk of a random building, down the side alley, and I have my feet for this drunken dance, laughing helplessly until I trip on the corner of a tall stack of firewood.

We land beneath a lit window, but the wall beside me is thick, heavy bricks set in mortar, and there's no sound from the other side of the windowsill. Hamilton's weight shifts atop me. He pushes up to his feet, stepping around either side of my chest to peak into the apartment building he's dragged me to, "It's the lobby," he whispers. "No one's inside."

"What are you doing?" I finally think to ask, crawling back on my elbows from between his legs.

He looks down to me as I struggle to my feet, and says, "Come b'tween the buildings- where the road cannot see us..." then grabs my hand and urges me to do so.

I could fight him, but I don't even try.

We move further between the buildings until the lamplight from the road fades to a sharp shadow. The stack of logs erases us from the road, and the light from the window illuminates Hamilton's face. We resituate, I against the wall for support and him leaning an arm against the bricks to steady himself. After a moment of catching our breath, he presses his second hand to the wall on the other side of my chest, bringing our bodies close and our faces closer. And he looks at me with a determined expression. My knees feel weak. Sluggishly, I realize the suggestive position I've placed myself in. I should feel threatened- not by his strength, I could move him if I tried- but by my own desire. Yet I don't.

"Wh's the meaning of this?" I feign stupid, slouching against the wall to his level and watching his mouth, half-sure my own's forming a dumb smile, "Why're we here?"
Hamilton's determination makes him sharpen, and his lip curls on a smirk. His hands shift from the wall, find my waist and pull me forward so my hips arch into him rather than sink to the bricks. "You already know."

I do. I know. It's where I want to be- what I want to do. But, "...we should go back..."

He leans in, pressing me back to the wall and following, flush against me. His legs tuck between mine and his fingers move beneath my coat. I should close my posture, push him away. Instead, I open my arms and give space for his leg. "Would you prefer a bed?" he says.

"Th's not what I mean."

He pulls away slightly, confused, eyes struggling to read me. “I don’t understand…you've been so responsive…” to the flirting, the touching.

“I respond only in jest!”

He doesn't believe me. He persists, leaning his weight against my thigh in a grinding torture. I can tell he is hard and thick beneath his breeches, one leg hiking to my waist. And, while I'm horrified by the situation, I'm also relieved. His attraction is genuine, not simple jesting, not sinister taunts or a ploy to expose me as a deviant. His body physically responds to my nearness. But, Hamilton is all at once too newly acquainted to lie with as a lover, and too familiar to romp with like a stranger, and while my body rises to his touch, my mind revolts. His heat feels good against me- too good.

I blearily think to press him back, but it’s already too late, he has felt me. “I was not wrong. You do desire me,” he whispers, voice deepening lustfully against my throat so I feel it vibrate.

I shove him, “You immediately assumed I desired you,” I say defensively. It’s not a lie, but it’s not denial- a lawyer’s defense.

And he checks it, “And I was immediately right,” his lips curl and move to touch mine.

I hold him at arm’s length.

“I want you,” he whines, and I cannot restrain him without more force- I am sober enough to apply it, but too drunk to think to. He’s still free to reach out and stroke my arm, cup my jaw and trace fingers lightly over my neck, down my chest. I reproach, arm falling slack. It feels good. It feels perfect. “I want you- you want me…we have privacy, opportunity, energy…arousal,” his fingers reach the clamp of my breeches and I grab his wrist. “Why do you deny yourself?”

“It’s not right.”

He narrows his eyes, “Neither is murder, but we do so willingly.”

Christ, we are too drunk to be logical. I flounder, “We kill for freedom- this…this is depraved.”

“Is freedom not a little depraved?” he says, lips reaching my throat, tongue dragging a line of fire against my skin. He is so close I can feel his words in my flesh, his body ripening like summer heat against me, “Is depravity not freedom?”

My head falls back, neck opening like a petal. Hamilton's words fall loose in my drunken muddle, placing a context for all my regrets- all the pleasure I drew from my sins. Freedom. His lips find a mark, pulling against my throat, drawing away with a nip of teeth. I feel heat settling in my groin and I feel precarious- like Geneva, like wide shoulders and firm lips, like a strong hand gripping my eager length along another’s, like harsh, bruising thrusts and a deep grunt.
Hamilton is beautiful when I allow myself to see him. Lit gently by the windowsill, his skin is cast in shades of gold, giving him a timeless, statuesque appearance. Eyes dark, lips parted and reddened from the pressure of their application against my neck, he pants lightly as I do, watching me like he knows my soul, eager like he could envelop me entirely and I would be gone to the world- forgotten and entirely his. He’s endless as the night and safe as the stars that hold our secret.

I suppress a moan as he presses flush against me once more and moves. My hands raise, but hold the air unsteadily. I don’t know where to touch him- how I possibly could. He surges close, holds himself steady at the base of my neck, breathes my air as he works himself against my hips, encourages them to move.

The crease of his lips seem a hairsbreadth from mine. I can feel where warm breath slips between them. He has teased me all week with dark thoughts, kissing him, biting him, drawing noise from him. I can imagine his breath coming short, stuttering in pleasure; I imagine his chest rising against mine, his nails clutching into my back, deep eyes hooded and hair splayed across a pillow, freckled cheeks stained red like wine, broken moans, guttural groans, heaving gasps, and a whimper of regret, the give of a woman's breast, the grease between her legs, sandy blond hair dripping with blood, fading blue eyes who're you?

It's me, Jem- it's John...you know me...please, you know me...Jem...?

I shove Hamilton back harshly, gulping down a sob, horribly sober and immediately nauseous. “Let’s be friends!” I blurt, holding the man’s wrists far from my neck. My legs feel weak, groin throbs with loss of his warmth and pressure, and I clutch his hands too hard.

His eyes are wide and understandably confused. For a long moment, he’s silent until he can find his voice. “…Excuse me?”

I realize I allowed matters to progress too far. I cannot pretend my body did not respond to his every touch- that I did not open to him helplessly, and I know my fears must be transparent, but Hamilton’s face doesn’t show anger- just disappointment and confusion, but also patience, so I press on, “Friends,” I repeat. “Only friends.”

His lips pinch with familiar disapproval as he considers me. He sees the futility of pressing me for intimacy. “I don’t keep friends.”

It's a rejection that I can’t accept. “Well, that’s unfortunate. You’ve got one.”
I JOLT AWAKE as something soft slaps my cheek with a jovial, “Wake up, dear Laurens!”

“What are y—” I look at the item that has slapped me, lip curling in disgust as I lift what appears to be a woman’s stockings off my face. I can easily conclude how Hamilton acquired such an item. “A souvenir of your night?” I presume.

He saunters in with all the flounce of a pleased king. He had disappeared sometime after our muddled romp against the tavern and he did not return in the night. “A gift,” he says.

“Which you accepted?”

He snatches the silk lace from my fingers, “Of course- it’s only polite for so fine a gift.”

“Youre decadence knows no bounds,” I say dryly. Where he managed to find a lady distinguished enough to own silk stockings last night is a mystery. How he managed to seduce her…I can imagine all too well.

He steps to the basin, throws water over his face, shakes his hands dry and runs them through his hair, finds the ribbon he’s bound it in, pulls it loose around his shoulders. His lip curls on the edge and he tilts his neck as he brushes the tangles from his hair, allows me to see. He has a smudged red mark beneath his chin.

It matches the one he left on my throat.

“Look, Hamilton…about last night…” He sets his brush down and turns to me. The weight of his attention is staggering, but I press on. “I shouldn’t’ve allowed the matter to progress so far…I never meant to imply that—”

“The General was looking for you about revising the letter to the commissioners,” he says, interrupting. “He seemed upset when I saw him.”

I stop. Stare. Realize what time it is. “Shit!”

IT’S AUGUST NINETEENTH and the Continental army has been stationed in Philadelphia because we’ve received enough intelligence from Washington’s spies to conclude that a British company is en route to attack the Continental Congress.

Lafayette works closely with the General to devise the soldiers’ training regiment while I ride to mail our letter to the commissioners. Together, they parade the army through the streets- both to discipline their step and to reassure the people of Philadelphia that General Washington and his men intend to protect the city from General Howe’s forces.

I can feel the city suspect an attack more and more each day, as if the buildings breathe anticipation, exhale anxiety. I feel it as I ride to mail the General’s letter. I feel it in the tension of the crowd at the market when I buy goods with Shrewsbury. I feel it in the quiet bustle in the streets as I make my
morning rounds after the soldiers’ exercises. I feel it everywhere.

I need more sleep.

We clean our weapons after evening meal, testing the mechanisms of our rifles and sharpening swords and knives. Lafayette perches against a stone wall beside the well behind the headquarters, one leg stretched to the grass and the other tucked against his body. He talks about his own meetings with Benjamin Franklin, about his family and his wife. I don't speak of my Martha, but easily talk of my dear friends in Geneva and England, our adventures and our exploits. When we've exhausted our arsenal of personal stories, we discuss strategy.

“Is good if Howe tries to…seize Philadelphia,” Lafayette says, sharpening his sword with a flint as I practice my parries.

I stop the motion of my sword, “Good?” I ask. “How do you figure?”

Lafayette checks his blade. “It means he will not rendezvous with Burgoyne in New York.”

I consider it, digging the tip of my sword into the soil. “Do you think that was the original plan? A rendezvous?”

Lafayette nods, eyes following the glint of his blade.

After a moment, I agree. It would make more sense to rendezvous than to split British forces. “To cut off New England,” I mutter. If the British were to isolate New England, the resistance would lose all support. So then, why would Howe target Philadelphia- and my father, rather than travel north from the Chesapeake? I consider, “Maybe General Stark’s victory deterred them from that original plan—”

“Non.”

“No?”

“No.”

“Then what?”

Lafayette shrugs, “I…believe ‘e just does not know.”

“General Howe?” I say.

“Oui.”

“Doesn’t know the plan?”

“ts possible.”

“Huh…” I lean my weight against my sword. “Poor communication or poor leadership?”

Lafayette grins, “An idiot king.”

THERE AREN’T ENOUGH MUSKETS to spare for men to practice their aim, but Hamilton insists on drilling the soldiers in rifle carries and order of arms. He rises at four each morning to muster his crew of officers and take accountability of the rifles. If anything, the drills serve to impress the people of Philadelphia that Washington’s army is half-professional, capable of swinging guns.
Secretly, I think it reminds Hamilton of his college days, marching around in his hunting shirt.

Lafayette and I observe. It grants us a fair excuse to escape the drudgery of managing the General’s voluminous correspondence.

Even if it means rising at four in the morning.

I’ve been awake anyway.

“General Washington says me- Monsieur Hamilton was among the last to retreat when the British took Harlem,” Lafayette says quietly in French, watching the soldiers march to the cadence Hamilton calls, holding his arms at the elbows. “He says, at White Plains, it was Monsieur Hamilton’s cannons which caused such heavy casualties, and on retreat, it was Monsieur Hamilton who posted guns on a riverbank and provided cover for the retreating patriots, holding his ground until the last men had crossed safely.”

Lafayette has only grown more enamored with Hamilton as the days pass, relaying stories of his achievements at every possible opportunity. Many of the tales, I’ve already read about and heard from Hamilton himself- always recounted with surprising modesty…no one else speaks of his bravery with such levity.

“When General Washington crossed de Delaware River, he says me- Hamilton was deathly ill with fever but rose from his bed and led his company across the water against Hessians, forced their surrender and continued the march through thick forests in snow and storm to Princeton where he fired a cannonball straight through a brick wall, slicing through a portrait of King George II…”

I’ve given up my attempts to resist Lieutenant Colonel Hamilton’s charm. I admit myself impressed and will stop at nothing to befriend him. Still, the man, in person has so complicated my life, I find that I…

“I’d rather not talk about Hamilton.”

OUTSIDE OUR CONTINUOUS TRAINING, our only opportunity to escape the paper and pen involves a dinner party with the gentlemen and families of the Continental Congress- a burdensome affair for the son of their highest official. I recognize the cruciality of my appearance for the sake of my father’s reputation, and now that I'm to be employed by General Washington, my dignity holds all the more weight. I dress impeccably, posture myself with the utmost dignity, and make pleasant among the banter of gossip that always spreads around such parties.

Like most matters, General Washington leaves the entertaining in Hamilton’s capable hands. This affords me the privilege of watching the Lieutenant Colonel at work, seducing the fancy of American nobility, lords and ladies alike, both genders attracted to him like a flame. I had been determined to improve our relationship and mend whatever growing bond had been severed in our lustful muddle, but since that night at the tavern, we had been more at-odds than ever. And, our contest had invaded our bedroom, leaving me exhausted and unsociable around my father's peers.

It’s much easier to listen to him flirt than it is to strike conversation, but when he takes a girl's hand and leads her lightly to the dance floor, I'm trapped outside the crowd- alone. Easily spotted by my father. And, I flee into the mass of gossiping ladies.

It’s there that the beast rears her head, a thousand eyes and a hissing tongue.

Rumor.
“Such a charming man— but a West Indian, I hear. Did you know that?”

“Ha! Of course, only a man accustomed to savagery would dance with Mary.”

“They say King’s couldn’t find record of his family— who’s ever heard the name ‘Hamilton’ anyway?”

“I read a pamphlet, claimed his mother was a… loose woman.”

“Plenty of those in the West Indies— even nobles are depraved in those parts, crooks, adulterers, sodomites.”

“And all of them slavers.”

“With the flair of his nose— he must have black blood on mum’s side. Mixing race is so common on those wild islands.”

“He certainly inherited a wild libido from her.”

“Father could be anyone, couldn’t he?”

“It’s probably Washington himself for all he dotes on the boy.”

“I wouldn’t revel if it were— he seems the type to court a loose negress.”

“Please excuse me,” I flee from ‘polite’ conversation on mercury’s heels, seeking solace in my familiar Lafayette. The young Frenchman is holding his eighth glass of wine, listening intently to a story from Count Casamir Pulaski. I regret briefly, whisking him away from an enlightening conversation, but Lafayette humors me without protest, walking to a small bench in the flowerbed.

After several moments of recuperation, I muster my voice. “The things they say!”

I feel Lafayette’s confusion focused on the side of my face as I glare into the crowd.

“About Lieutenant Colonel Hamilton,” I explain. “The malicious gossip… I tell you, it’s ungodly. In the time I’ve known him, we’ve spoken so much, but I’m convinced that even those closest to him must know nothing of him. These people talk as if they wrote his biography.” I’d wondered of Alexander Hamilton’s birth many times before, but propriety kept me from intruding on a subject he girded so closely. The Lieutenant Colonel was such a deceivingly private man, it’d be impolite to intrude. If he had been present to hear such slander, he would’ve attacked with all the ferocity of a feral dog, and I would’ve liked nothing but to do the same, but I was muzzled by my father’s position. I cannot embarrass father.

“He is an… intriguing topic,” Lafayette says calmly, shrugging. He’s a biased sympathizer of the gossip.

“Oh, if they knew,” I say, rolling my eyes. “The man’s a nightmare…”

My friend turns to me sharply. “Nightmare? … Vous semblez être très sympa…”

“He’s like that with everyone, I’m afraid. I doubt I’ve made any special impression.” Or I would if I hadn’t felt the impression of his cock pressed against my leg— clearly defined through his trousers. If I had not felt the heated flush of his body each night. If I had not woken up each morning smelling of his summer sweat. My deprivation of sleep has me desperate. I earnestly want to share my troubles with Lafayette.
“You…and he…left from that tavern? Together, no?”

I try to discern his meaning, how much he has inferred from my overtly flirtatious behavior with Hamilton. “Well, yes…”

He gives me a sympathetic look, sympathetic and suggestive. “That made no...impression? Was he...bad?”

“What?” I jolt, “No- he wasn’t- we didn’t- what…what do you mean?”

He shakes his head, fighting a smirk.

“We didn’t,” I repeat more firmly. “Though…” I shouldn’t say it. It’s risky, incriminating, but I already trust Lafayette more than my dearest friends in Europe, and he's expressed how affected he is by Hamilton's charms. This may be my only chance to share my troubles with a sympathetic ear. “Not...for lack of desire to.”

His smirk stretches and a brow quirks, bright eyes flickering toward me.

I cringe and explain. “I turned down the offer, I…” I press a hand to my temple, frustrated to admit defeat, “I asked him to be friends.”

“Ha!”

“I know,” I lament my pride, “But...since then, it seems that all progress we had naturally been making towards that end has dissolved. I’ve tried to talk with him about that night, but he diverts the conversation each time with an air of hostility. He’s…”

-I know exactly what Hamilton is doing, and I’ve already formulated my strategy to counter it. But, the prospect of explaining our...gentlemanly competition made the affair seem all the more childish.

It grew from our battle to outperform one another and extended beyond our services to General Washington. Our nocturnal conversations became a contest to outwit and force our own course of discussion. I would slyly divert the subject towards romantic encounters, drill him for information on his experiences-which he was eager to provide- but, as soon as I circled the subject of our own near-encounter, he'd shift to matters of state, to anecdotes of his college friends and his early days in the army. After three nights of this, he avoided our room altogether, remaining in General Washington’s study and bringing books on military history to study late into the morning. I immediately perceived his tactic and forwent sleep for two straight days, keeping myself awake with Lafayette’s battle maps. He changed tactics. The third night of this game, he retired to bed before sunset- a massive irregularity. When I trudged to sleep, he had taken my pallet on the floor and left me the bed. I woke him, demanded he move. He refused. The only response was to stubbornly join him on my pallet, shoving him to make room. He allowed it...welcomed it, and I immediately realized my folly. He embraced me, held me through the night, pressed close, breath warm against my neck, fingers stroking patterns against my chest-

“He’s been keeping me awake,” I admit vaguely.

Lafayette’s brows are drawn in confusion, “By...avoiding talk?”

“It’s difficult to explain.” I tug at my collar, neck itching under my cravat.

WE RECEIVE WORD THAT General Howe has landed in Head of Elk, Maryland and is
marching north through New Jersey. In the time that it has taken to receive this intelligence, the
British have likely moved at least fifteen miles.

Redcoats could easily be within thirty miles of the city.

Our pens work furiously in the General's study, rushing as if we can outrun the British by speed of
hand.

"Retire early to bed tonight," Washington says, fatigue lacing his voice and making him speak quiet,
an intimate vulnerability the General rarely shows. "No staying up and studying. We march out
tomorrow morning to assume defensive positions." He rises to his feet. "I must go discuss the order
of march with Stirling, Sullivan, Stephen, Wayne, Greene, and Armstrong." He counts the names of
his generals on his fingers and steps around the table. "Hamilton, Lafayette, come with me."

My friends jolt to their feet with a, "Yes, sir."

As they leave, I glance at Mister Harrison, wait for the door to close soundly, and say, "Early to bed!
A novel suggestion from the General, right?"

He glances at me and grunts, begins packing his letterbox.

I turn my eyes down and write a letter to my father.

I UNDRESS FOR BED before the moon has fully risen. Perform my nightly rituals with a weighty
exhaustion clinging to my bones. I feel I could collapse to sleep before reaching my pallet, and
perhaps forego Hamilton's haunting embrace entirely. After the first night that he occupied my
pallet, for the sake of pride, I could not relinquish my resolve to stay. He was the intruder and I
would not be moved to take his bed...no matter how his touches distracted me from sleep.

He returns as I'm arranging my pillow, opens the door and looks at me. He unbuckles the strap of
his sword and sets it by the door, begins unbuttoning his vest. "Please take the bed tonight."

I glance up.

He motions to the mattress, both brows raised imploringly, "I insist."

"I'm fine on the floor."

He gives me an impatient look. "I know you are. You've proven it abundantly." He strips his coat
and grabs a hanger from the wardrobe where both our clothes now hang. "But, you look ghostly,
dear Laurens."

I glare.

"You'll be marching with General Greene's North Carolina brigade tomorrow morning. Please." He
hangs his jacket and moves his hands to remove his breeches. I'd made a habit of looking away
when he undresses to his underclothes, but I don't. I glare as he continues, "Do what you need to
sleep properly."

"I'd sleep fine if you hadn't invaded my bed."

He raises his brows incredulously. "I took the floor in hopes that you would take the bed," he says.
"You've looked exhausted for weeks and I thought it polite- sharing was your idea."
"I was exhausted because you insisted on avoiding me-

"Avoiding you..." he stares at me.

I glare back.

He turns away and shucks his breeches, folds them, sets them in his wardrobe. "How do you figure I've avoided you? You're my friend, right?"

"Only by my declaration."

He blinks, considering. "Well yes...that's true," he says. "Though, you can hardly claim I've avoided you- we eat and train together, share our work, share a bed-"

"-and talk every night- a practice which you diligently avoided after you molested me against a tavern wall," I snap harshly.

He startles, eyes narrowing. "Because you diligently sought to torture yourself by reliving how much you enjoyed it." My mouth falls open but words don't come out, so he fills it, "So, I only moved to protect you at my own expense, at the expense of sharing my personal stories."

"Oh, that's a lie- I know nothing about you."

"You know plenty about me!"

"I know you attended King’s College; studied law; dropped out to fight with the New York militia at Harlem, Princeton, Trenton. I know you received a commission for honorable service, turned down several invitations to Generals' staffs before Washington picked you up-"

"And that's plenty to be getting on with."

"It's really not."

His face falls, something dropping, and I recognize disappointment.

I haven't been paying attention.

"You know that I want you," he says casually, like he could be commenting on my punctuation.

I hesitate, realizing I've hurt him. But, I think I understand. I'm accustomed to letting people down; I can recognize my blunders. He's given me every opportunity to see secret parts of him. Perhaps I don't know his story, where he comes from or how he grew up, but I do know him. A stupidly hopeful heart expressed in poetic visions of the future, a dark apprehension of human nature that hints at early betrayal and suffering, a wild ferocity like the quick and zealous beat of a tribal drum, a drive to squeeze the profit from every moment of life like he will never be quenched of this thirst...

...his attraction to me.

Can I blame him for being impatient in his lust when I'm impatient in my friendship?

I recognize his soul as he recognizes mine. I know him as well as myself. He can tell that I do. I know he wants me, but, "That's the problem."

He hums and turns away to wash his face. "Well...that's fair enough.” He dabs a towel at his cheeks and down his neck. The splotched mark has faded and he's avoided picking up new ones despite the fact that I know what he does when he 'disappears' from dinner parties. "And, understandable. I
should apologize about that night...and every night since. I've been entirely unfair to you."

He doesn't offer an explanation for his apology, but I can feel that it's heartfelt. I understand it and accept it instantly.

He wrings out the towel and braces his hands on the edge of the clay basin. After a long moment of watching the water swirl, he turns to me, frowning. "Honestly, she wasn't even good."

"Who?"

He smirks a little and shakes his head wistfully, "Kitty Livingston."

"I..." don't know who that is.

He turns and leans back against the wall, "She was this girl I fell for in Jersey- the daughter of Lord Livingston. God, I wrote letters to this tricky vixen for months while we were stationed in Morristown; flowery things- poems and love declarations. She had me fast."

_The stocking._ I understand his meaning. _He rode to Jersey to see a girl...while drunk...because I'd turned him down._ I shake my head in disbelief, though I shouldn't be surprised anymore. From listening to his stories, I know that Hamilton's life takes such a vigorous pace that riding out of state and back in one night just for sex is on par with a casual trip to the fruit market.

"Wow, was she glad to see me..." he muses.

I laugh, and some of the tension between us dissolves. "I would imagine! You must've rode an hour- totally unannounced!"

He grins at himself. "It seems foolish upon reflection, but- it did the trick, didn't it? She invited me in."

I shake my head again, "Unbelieveable..."

"I know! I probably smelled like a horse. But, lord, she had no such excuse and she tasted vile..."

I wince in disgust and throw his pillow at him.

WAKING IN A BED has become so rare that I take a moment to comprehend where I am when my name is called. I've grown so use to waking with Hamilton's arms wrapped loosely around me that I roll onto my back without the support of his chest to brace me. But, he is there when I turn, standing beside the bed, lit by candlelight, lips thin and brimming with fondness, "Did you sleep well?" he says.

I try to answer, but my voice hasn't joined the realm of the living and a grumbled hum is all I can muster.

Hamilton snatches away the pillow and my head falls to the mattress. The pillow slaps sharply on my face. "Get up and dress- we march in an hour."

I want to protest the abuse, but Hamilton's pillow still smells of his hair, and this is repayment for my waking him for exercises every day for my first two weeks at Washington's headquarters- I had once pushed him entirely out of bed. "You're far too excited to march..." I say lightly, lifting the pillow.

"Ah, but it's my horse that'll be doing the walking, and this is what we've been waiting for, yes?"
When I sit up, Hamilton's already dressed in his uniform, holding his feathered artillery cover to his chest, sword in one hand...the picture of eager valor. "I hold to a well-established maxim, dear Laurens, that there is three to one in favor of the party attacking."

"We're not attacking," I say, smiling lightly as I throw the sheet back and step to the wardrobe, grabbing my trousers and coat and spreading them out on the bed before collecting my shaving kit. I can feel Hamilton's eyes following my bare chest as they had last night when I took off my shirt.

"But, we are meeting the enemy on our own terms," he says, voice contained as if my half-nudity has pacified him. "...Whoever first occupies the field and awaits the coming enemy, will be fresh for the fight; whoever is second in the field and has to hasten to battle will arrive exhausted."

"'And so the clever combatant imposes his will on the enemy, but doesn't allow the enemy's will to be imposed upon him'," I reply, sitting to spread shaving cream over my cheeks. When I glance at him in my hand-mirror, Hamilton is staring at me, expression shocked blank. I grin, never failing to feel amused when he appalls at me. I should be appalled at him- where he managed to find the writings of Sun Tsu; I had been fortunate to find a French translation in Geneva. "Formal education on warfare- quite useful." I quote him his first flirtation, smirking.

He teeters on his heels as if holding himself from launching at me in passion, "You've studied the eastern styles of war?"

"Some," I shrug. "Ghengis Khan, Tiglath-Pilesar, Cyrus the Great...I admit it was not part of my curriculum in college. We focused on fortification and conduct of war since most eastern theory is useless against European powers." I run my knife carefully over the stubble under my chin.

He smiles brilliantly. "Though not all of it."

I nod in agreement. "Not all of it."

THE TROUBLE OF HIKING WITH A HEAVY PACK is that it engages a cluster of muscles in the lower calf that are rarely used in any other context. After hours of rucking in this way, the pain becomes excruciating and impossible to ignore. I had written to my father from the headquarters on Market Street, twice requesting that he send his slave, James, with a horse- 'preferably a stallion, three or four years of age, I don't care of the color or temperament, but he must be strong for galloping and leaping'.

I've heard no response.

So, I march at the lead of General Greene's North Carolina brigade, pressing my legs for their last vestiges of strength. The other officers of Washington's army all ride horses, and I was offered one, but at the expense of a Captain Lee. Naturally, I declined.

We march every day for two weeks- relentlessly, heedless of the weight on our backs. It begins drizzling after four days on the road, making the ground wet so our boots all soak up the water. We know the purpose of our urgency, we have no complaints. General Greene's division will serve as reserve forces and deliver the final push in the offensive. Glancing around the men that I march with, I cannot help noting that many are colored. If they hail from Carolina, there's no doubt that they're freedmen- come to fight for a nation that would enslave them. I'm honored to march with them, exhausting as it is.
ON SEPTEMBER NINETH, we march from a camp in Newport, Delaware. At midday, we stop to take food and rest, water the horses and change our stockings.

I tend to my blisters.

Shrewsberry approaches me, distraught with brows drawn in anger, lamenting an assault from several soldiers who stole his wide-brimmed sun hat. He describes the attack in detail, unprovoked, but nothing he should not have been capable of defending himself against. He raises his voice, so I raise mine. I know Shrewsberry to be stronger than most men in this army and it frustrates me that he didn't rise to defend himself. He doesn't trust me to protect him if he offends one of the northerners, no matter how many times I've assured him that he should defend himself. But, I promise him to ask my father to send a hat, and I offer him some of the salted beef I've been gnarring at.

He frowns as if I've dismissed him, and I admit that I shouted harshly in my frustration. But, he sits by my side and accepts the preserved meat and we eat in silence until two men with officers coats and three horses approach. Lafayette rides mounted while Hamilton walks beside him, holding the reins of the other two horses.

I rise to meet them having not seen my friends for weeks. I step fast to Hamilton and size up the horse he's brought while he sizes up the man I was dining with.

He speaks first, accusingly. "Captain Lee reports that he offered you his horse and you denied the offer. Is that true?"

"It is."

He narrows his eyes at the levity in my tone and raises the reins in one hand. "Was there some deficiency in this horse that you could not ride it?"

I glance at the horse and return my gaze to his face, "No- of course not."

"Then ride it."

I push his hand down gently where he's thrusting the reins to my chest, "As I told Captain Lee, I appreciate the offer, but it's not necessary. I'm fully capable of hiking with the others."

"No one doubts that." Hamilton stares at me incredulously, lips pinched. "The only question is why an officer on General Washington's personal staff is walking with the Privates!"

My brows knit and I drop his hand as his voice raises angrily. I quickly perceive his meaning. "Are you implying that Washington would be ashamed to have his officers showing humility?" I accuse. "Have I over-estimated His Excellency in believing him a noble Republican man? Does he think himself a king and his officers all nobility?"

Lafayette hisses at me from his horse and I can tell I've shocked his sensibilities by insulting his General.

Hamilton just rolls his eyes, "This isn't humility or some noble self-sacrifice," he says. "You're degrading your office."

"Excuse me?"

"An officer doesn't hike in the march. Haven't you been told this?"
"I don't need reminding of superfluous traditions."

"No, you'd obviously ignore them anyway."

"I would- I'm not above these men solely for merit of my rank."

Hamilton shoves the reins into my chest with bruising force, knocking my breath. "You are," he says, "and you better prove it to these men because when you're on that field and all of hell is raining about your feet, you have authority- you make decisions. Because someone has to and you've been educated to. To degrade your rank is to squander that education and risk the lives of all your men- because no one will heed your authority if they think you their equal. And if your orders are ignored- and no one else rises to the task with merit, everyone dies." He grabs my hand and shoves the reins between my fingers. "Get on the horse."

I glare stubbornly.

"That's an order," he growls, "from a superior officer."

"From who?" I challenge. "You?"

"Me." Lafayette racks his horse to turn sharp, motions as trim and clipped as his harsh order. He fixes me with an impatient look and turns to leave the clearing. I watch him ride away, body tilting with each step until he's some ways away, fuming and furious with me.

I take the reins roughly, glaring at Hamilton. But, he's no longer looking at me, eyes fixed on Shrewsberry again, glaring.

He folds his arms over his chest, shoulders tense, "Do you declare yourself his friend as well?" he says.

"Excuse me?"

"Your slave."

I grit my teeth, slapped with the sudden shift in attack. "Shrewsberry's in my employment. I pay him for his services."

"Services which he has no choice but to give." Hamilton speaks without missing a beat, and before I can deny it, says, "Because if he denied you, he could be hanged, right?"

I recoil at the cold indifference that's overtaken him, speaking of such disgusting practices with a calculated detachment. "I don't approve of such treatment of free men," I say firmly.

"You don't approve of slavery."

"Of course not!"

He hums in consideration, finally looking at me, "But, you are an accomplice of it, and you do profit from it."

"I never asked to."

"True," he grants. "Strange how life can place you in such an unfair position."

My lip curls, "Sir, I've done nothing to provoke this...attack of my character."
He doesn't respond immediately, "No, you haven't. Your only crime is unworldly, inept virtue."

He has never openly insulted me, and I'm shocked with how deeply his words cut. Delivered apathetically, I can barely think to lash out in return, "Don't scare me off now, I'm your only friend, Hamilton."

He snorts, pulls his horse nearer. "Right. Of course, I mean no offense. So often our most attractive qualities are also our worst." He mounts his horse and looks down at me with an uncomfortable air of authority. "Just...don't mistake your rapport with this man for friendship. In this culture, a black man can't be your friend. Not truly. Not yet."

WHEN NIGHT BEGINS TO SEEP in murky ink above the trees, we make camp just south of Birmingham Friends' Meeting House, far enough away from the structure that it would be out of reach of musket fire, but near enough to see the lights in the windows. The trees in this region are scruffy and dispersed irregularly along flat fields, nestled between granite quarries, cut sharply by an errant branch of the Brandywine River.

After hiking nine hours of the day, the men are exhausted, famished, and stinking. Cooking fires are contained to the far north of camp to conceal them should the enemy approach— as we know they will from the south. The division between enlisted and officers becomes profound as the men separate into packs to eat amongst their friends, and I sit atop my pack, separated a ways away from the officers of my regiment, separated from everyone.

We hold just over fourteen and a half-thousand men, gathered into a mile-wide plot of land. In the distance, General Washington is stationed in the center of camp, at the Ring House. I can see his staff gathered to eat outside the stout brick building. I recognize Lafayette's curls, even at this distance through the crowd. The shorter man beside him must be Hamilton, leaning close over his lap and saying something sharp that makes Lafayette's shoulders shake in laughter.

If I consider myself Hamilton's friend, I know I'm not alone in that respect.

AFTER DINNER, I DISAPPEAR to gather my satchel of bathing items— a bar of soap, some wading shoes and a towel— and I hike a ways to find a section of the Brandywine where the riverbank rises high over the water. The moon is full, giving enough light to avoid slipping on rocks as I step down the embankment and find a dry root to hang my nightclothes.

I rub soap over my skin before stooping to wash my uniform coat. Going into battle with clean clothes isn't imperative, but the heat of our hike has left a foul odor clinging to the fabric, and if I leave it overnight, it'll set. It's been two weeks of marching, and I am disgusted of my own filth. Enough like-minded men are bathing upstream that suds occasionally drift in the current and swirl around my legs.

The splashing and agitation of dunking my clothes to rinse out the soap makes a veritable clatter, loud enough that I believe myself alone.

Until, "Do you mind if I join you?" a familiar voice says loudly.

My heart lurches as my mind comprehends the voice and the request. I look up the embankment, see Hamilton perched over the small cliff, crouching low but still above my eye-level...asking to bathe with me. He's disarmed, head uncovered and jacket unbuttoned. Behind him, the lights of our camp
cast his shadow in eerie golden hues, and I'm keenly aware of my own nudity.

"Washington ordered we stray no further south than this ford and it's crowded upstream," he explains.

There are many valid reasons that I should deny the request, and Hamilton seems to recognize that with the humble, pleading tone he takes. I'm still angry with him for the insult he laid against me, but the ride to Birmingham allowed me ample time for reflection. I recognized his reasoning and had to submit to his logic.

He must know I'm weak for him. "Of course," I say, feeling his gaze appraising me, testing me, and really- how could I deny his request without revealing a different sort of weakness?

Hamilton jumps down from the ledge gracefully. He begins stripping his layers- a common sight, but after he's unbuttoned his vest and hung it beside mine, he pulls his long shirt up over his head and bares his chest confidently. In the month that we'd shared quarters, he had always kept his bare skin covered...perhaps in propriety to my hated attraction. I had seen him shirtless before, but never alone, in a context that I could appreciate his form. And, I hate that I was right- that he'd be a fit specimen for an artist, all sharp edges and gentle slope of muscle, clearly defined. He's gorgeous. And frustrating.

"I'd think you wouldn't mind a crowd," I say, pulling a tactic from Hamilton's book and flirting to cover my discomfort. "You certainly have no shame for it...and no reason for shame."

He laughs wryly and when I glance over at him he's crouching to wash his shirt, eyes still roving over my body in open admiration. "Do keep that up, Laurens, flattery will get you everywhere with me."

"With you?" I say, "I'm pretty sure I could already get anywhere I wanted with you."

"Oh ho! But, that's true," he lifts his shirt from the river, dripping, and flings water at me.

I drop into the stream and splash him in retaliation, smug when he leaps back from the water's edge with a yelp and slips in the mud, falling on his rear.

He curses and pushes upright, rolling to examine the state of his stockings. "Christ, I try to spare you your southern sensibilities and you wreck my stockings!" he laments. "I have to wash this...oh my modesty is soiled!"

I bark a laugh. He wades into the river and I back away from him, raising both brows in amusement as he tries to rub the mud off his rear without removing the garments. The current is strong from recent rains and it pushes his face into the water when he crouches. I laugh. "Take them off!"

"Oh you would like that!"

I snort and he grins.

"Yes, you planned this, didn't you- fiend!" he launches himself at me, bare chest smacking my side and toppling me so we both plunge oblong into the river. The cool water closes over us and we wrestle, hands against slippery skin. When we resurface, we're panting and eager. I leap for him, bearing his face into the water until he grabs my arm and tugs me down, trips my leg so we slip a few feet in the current, wrapped around each other. Grappling, we emerge to gasp air, then sink again.

At length, lungs burning and hair tangled, we brace ourselves against a rock to resist the current,
giving up the battle to catch our breath, leaning our shoulders against one another and grinning at ourselves.

There's no need for apologies.

I kneel in the river, submitting to my modesty, but after a few moments, Hamilton shifts beside me and removes his stockings to wash the sandy mud off the back. He stands and bends to work at the fabric until it's mostly white, then he rubs the soap over his body while he's bare.

And I stare.

He's so well-formed I could weep. I'm disarmed. Shapely does not begin to describe it. Lithe and compact, built for efficient strength with calves defined like carved marble. His back curves to a trim waist and boyish hips, muscles that shift beneath freckled skin, appearing and disappearing as he moves, defined in long lines that I could trace with fingers and lips. He glistens by moonlight, and the feeling returns- that otherworldly, profound premonition that I'm courting my destiny with an immortal spirit, brimming to burst from human form. I have no alcohol to blame for the tumult wreaking havoc on my heart, but it pains me that this man can intrigue my mind, body, and soul so entirely.

I'm helplessly aroused, pressed against the rock and horrified with myself.

His manhood...I'm staring at his cock like an idiot. Like I've never seen one before. He's not even erect, but he's larger than I had imagined and cleanly trimmed and I would hold him and damn myself anew just to feel the weight of his flesh. In my hand, in my mouth- I could have tasted him, kissed his lips, felt his skin in a more passionate wrestle had I allowed it...

I shut my eyes tightly.

"We...should be getting back to camp," he says.

When I look back, Hamilton has shifted, lowered his waist under the water. I can tell that he saw my arousal- and my agony, and I realize that his modesty stems from pity. I loathe to think of him protecting me from myself, and with a bold defiance, I step towards him, reach to touch his waist.

He backs away and gives me a warning look, lowering his voice. "General Washington will be expecting me...and Greene may be expecting you."

He's right. And, I appreciate his retreat. If I touched him, I'd regret it. I'm sure I've already cursed us all by gazing at him with sinful thoughts. "Yes...of course," I agree.

He nods and dips his head under the water, straightening his hair before wading back to the shore. I follow from a distance.

WE WALK BACK TO CAMP SLOWLY, as if the idea of parting ways pains us both. The march to Brandywine had been long, with many errands in between. I hadn't seen him for weeks before today, and our interactions had been unsatisfying, left me wanting for his company.

We carry our wet uniforms over arms with sleeves rolled up, dressed in nightshirts and breeches, our feet sloshing in soft soil from the recent rains. I don't believe I've ever seen Hamilton walk slowly, but when I step faster, he falls behind, so we stroll leisurely in silence. After having seen him undressed, I cannot shake the image of him and his graceful shape. I know he's appraised me as well. We've both bared something that cannot be taken back.
It should feel uncomfortable, but it doesn't.

We're a hundred meters from camp when he breaks the silence. "Ajax."

I turn to him. "What?"

"Ajax," he repeats, continues walking.

I take a moment to comprehend the name. It's Greek- the mythical hero. I squint at him in confusion, struck by his distant expression- as if he's said something meaningful. "What're you talking about?" I say. "The Iliad? Achilles' cousin- Ajax, Ajax?"

He laughs through his nose. "My first friend," he corrects, and he meets my eyes with an intimate look, vulnerable like he's made some huge admission. "His name was Ajax. I shared everything with him when we were boys, loved him like my own cousin." He shakes his head in fond reminiscence. "He taught me to swim, I taught him to read, we pretended he was the mythical hero, and I his Achilles, racing each other along the beach, and God, he was fast, but he made me all the faster for it. We'd dig holes in the sand and look for shells and I'd tell him stories about the cannon fights I'd seen between British and French ships in the bay at Charleston-"

"Charleston?" I interrupt.

He raises a brow and quickly comprehends my shock, "No- no, not your Charleston. Charleston, Nevis. In the West Indies- it's where I was born."

So, the rumors were at least partially true. I quiet my surprise, but revel at the coincidence. By namesake, we were sprung from the same box.

He continues. "Ajax was a little older than me, but we got on well, better than I did with my own brother. I remember he was smart, with a voracious appetite for learning, and we weren't even teens, but I remember we shared profound conversations about the meaning of power in this world, how knowledge was the only means of elevating oneself."

So, he had a brother. I realized Hamilton spoke entirely in the past-tense, words quick in odd places, accent lilting on the edge, well-contained like he'd practiced speaking like a northerner to erase evidence of his birth. "What happened?"

Hamilton looks away, slows to nearly a complete stop, but his voice doesn't waver. "He was auctioned off by the court in Christiansted after my mother died."

Auctioned. I don't need an explanation. Ajax was a slave. Hamilton had befriended his childhood servant. A black boy.

I don't keep friends...

Not truly. Not yet.

I suddenly understand him vividly. "I'm sorry," I say in sympathy. "My mother died when I was young too. About eight years ago."

He hums, shrugs away the mantle of mourning before it can lay on his shoulders, and he keeps walking. Now that he's started speaking of the subject, he seems possessed with it. "Mother never allowed us to play together in town and I couldn't understand why. Of course- I knew what slavery was- I'd seen enough auctions and whippings in Charleston to teach me of that dynamic of ownership, but I could never imagine myself a master. We were like cousins. We treated them so
nicely at home, like our own family, but when I went to market, Ajax had to carry my groceries, he
couldn't come to be tutored with me and I wasn't allowed to share my books with him outside the
apartment- and never with the ladies. We had nine slaves- four grown sisters, their four boys, then
their mom who was about twice my mother's age, all inherited from my grandfather- not the one I'm
named after, my mother's father- he'd died a long time before, but her mother held onto all his
property and signed it to us in her will. We only had them for about two years before the auction,
and I doubt that their new owners thought of them as family."

He spoke quickly, frantically. I gathered pieces of him as he spoke, greedily consuming the subtle
facts he betrayed, each one a revelation with new mysteries arising. First- he must be an orphan,
otherwise there wouldn't have been no need to divvy property after his mother's death; that raised the
question of how his father had died. Second- he was indeed West Indian, specifically from Nevis,
but he later lived in St. Croix with his mother and brother; which begged a purpose. And, third- his
family was not wealthy as I had imagined, nine slaves as inheritance. I would easily have fifty after
my father split his property four ways.

So, why did I believe him nobility? Who was his father? Who was his mother? How did he come
to America? Why does he keep it all secret, even from his friend? There's so much to ask.

"Why did you not inherit Ajax?" I say.

He's silent for a long moment, receding, having exhausted his share of vulnerability for the night, but
I have so many questions. "Mother's property went to the family," he says simply.

"So you should've been given something in her will-"

"I was twelve, no one expected her to die-look, the point is I've had friends before," he speaks so
quickly the sentence slurs together. "And, I do now. I have a lot of them, in fact- Ned Stevens, Rob
Troupe, Herc Mulligan, Gibbs, Tilghman, Fitzgerald, Meade; I still write to boys from Kings and my
artillery commanders and some ladies from Morristown. But, you don't see any of them here right
now, do you?"

I don't understand his meaning.

He explains. "Ownership is the principle motivation of the human animal, and friendship is a matter
of dealing in percents. As time passes, acquaintances come and go, and you replace them or allot
their portion to others. In my experience, everything goes away." I don't keep friends. He lengthens
his stride and lifts our pace to something more businesslike, as if speaking of friendship as matter of
arithmetic has reminded him of our responsibilities.

I walk faster to keep pace, at a loss. His cynicism makes him unreachable, a heart locked away,
giving nothing in "percents". Such a drastic measure to protect himself from grief contradicts the
vulnerability he's gifted me for my solidarity. That hardness is the reason I was so hesitant to trust
him with friendship, and I now almost feel foolish for granting it. He almost began to let me in, so
now he's trying to drive me away. "That's...a dismal outlook," I must. "The sort of speech
someone uses to deter the people they care about when they're afraid of getting hurt again." He
stops in his tracks. "...Do you really believe everyone who loves you will go away?"

He looks at me sharp. We're close enough to camp that the torches light his face in wavering gold.
His mouth is set angrily, but for once, I've disarmed him and he seems properly exposed. Under his
stately nightclothes, cold logic and blistering rhetoric, he's completely naked in my eyes.

"Fear of hurt won't help the heart, Alexander," I say gently, lowering my voice so it's swallowed up
in the sounds of crickets and soldiers moving about their tents. He thinks himself so wise, but it's my
"It'll only make you lonely," I say. "You've built up all these walls, made layers of gates to dictate at which distance you can hold people who want to be near to you, an Alesian fortification around your heart." Hamilton is rigid as a deer in sight of a bow, comprehending my words, and I have him completely, "But, you know Alesia didn't submit to Caesar as planned; he only starved them with isolation. Avoiding any semblance of true personal connection will just leave you alone with yourself. And perhaps you can avoid the risk of depending on someone who may leave you like your mother did, but you also lose the chance to depend on someone who may stay, that might share your burdens, carry you through your troubles, and satisfy the needs of your heart. Call me unworldly and inept, but I'd rather be heartbroken than unsatisfied."

His eyes regard me warily, face flushed, and I'm relieved that he doesn't mask it. He doesn't let a lustful heat rise to his gaze or waver on his feet like he might attack me in passion. All those things were avoidance-loathsome to me and easy for him. I must have revealed my attraction the first time I saw those eyes on the General's doorstep, stuck staring at his beauty; I gave him ammunition to assault my dark desires, a way to discard me. Because if he could lay me outside his walls among his lovers, that's all I would be-finished business.

But, if I could draw out his attack, keep him invested in pursuing me long enough to exhaust his forces and charm him in my own right, he would lose his will to attack and submit to an alliance. He'd be forced to let me in.

So far, the strategy's worked well.

After several moments of staring each other down, he steps to my side. He takes my hand casually-the way I sometimes hold Lafayette's, and leads me to walk into camp, towards General Washington's tent. His gait rolls naturally rather than floating on his feet as he does at parties and around gentlemen. "Have you ever been in a real battle before?" he says.

I relax. He's not dismissing me, but the conversation's over. I've been understood. "No," I admit. "I've done a couple watches and taken musket fire, but no full engagements. Why?"

He frowns at my answer and squeezes my hand. "Because there's sixteen-thousand redcoats marching at us and I really want you to survive."

I SHARE A TENT WITH GENERALGreene, but only in formality. In reality, I work through the night as his 'volunteer' aide on behalf of General Washington. The job involves collecting reports from company captains, taking accountability of troops, recording our number of rifles and bayonets, and delivering correspondences to emissaries.

General Washington has stationed his forces along the creek at six separate Fords to the north, hoping to out-flank General Howe and envelop his forces from above. He spoke at length with Lafayette and myself about the plan, and we all contend that the British will try to flank us from the north. Sending and receiving correspondence from the deployed regiments takes hours, even on horseback. I've kept and fed Captain Lee's horse, but once my rounds are completed for the night, I return her and march back to General Greene's division.

I don't retire to bed until late afternoon the next day. Before I sleep, I write a letter to my wife. Just in case.

IT'S EARLY MORNING, SEPTEMBER ELEVENTH when I'm roused from my cot by one of
Proctor's artillermen. The picket duty has spotted moving lights four miles south of Pyle's Ford, a three-hour march from the Birmingham Meeting House through wooded areas.

The march will commence at four o'clock in the morning. I stomach a quick breakfast and I put on my uniform, dry from where it's hung overnight for two nights. On the other side of the tent, General Greene pours over maps, already dressed.

It's still dark outside, the bustle of preparation lit by torches and cooking fires, quiet but heavy- the calm before a storm. Captains in each company order the effort of packing up our tents onto horse-drawn carts along with personal belongings, all of which are carried to the Ring House and stowed on their carts to be moved later.

The men line up in blocks on the field, somber and silent. I take my place at the front.

The march commences.

FOR TWO AND A HALF HOURS, we march over puddles and through briars, guided by torches at first until the sun begins to peak over the horizon. When we reach the edge of the river at Chadds Ford, we stop, begin digging mounts for our cannon. General Greene delegates the effort to me and six Carolinians, and I divvy the work evenly. We complete the work in time for Proctor's artillermen to join us and take up arms by the cannon.

We drop back into lines between General Wayne and General Armstrong, two and a half-thousand of us in Greene's division, blocked into three brigades and outfitted to march with bayonets fixed-those of us who have one. I fall in beside Greene on foot, rifle clasped in both hands.

At six-thirty, gunshots echoed from the west.

At eight-thirty, there was motion in the distance, within sight.

Maxwell's light infantry was stationed ahead at the Anvil Tavern to slow the redcoats' approach, and the shots serve as a warning that the enemy has engaged them and is coming within range. If I squint my eyes, I can see the bright red of the enemy's coats in the distance on the other side of the river and through the cover of trees, flashes of blue and white pressing them but falling back. I can see tension creep into General Greene's posture, and I wish I had not returned Captain Lee's horse. The waiting is the worst.

I would like to charge and meet them.

The low, deep beat of a drum rattles my ribs and alters the pace of my heart like some feral synchronization with the soldiers around me, forming the army into one living breathing entity, waiting to attack.

A snare drum joins it, moving my feet to shift in their boots in anticipation.

I so long to attack.

The enemy breaks through the line of trees by mid-morning, fire a few shots over the river, but they do no more, our drumming ceases and the British retreat back into the tree line and have morning tea.

*Tea.*

"This is ridiculous!" I protest, marching to General Greene where he's still perched on his horse at
the lead of his First Virginia brigade, as he has been all morning. "The majority of our forces are amassed against this..." I'm not honestly sure of how many British soldiers are across the river, but the forces look slight. If there's more than six-thousand men, they're concealed very well, "It looks like one division, sir."

Greene cants back on his horse, "Patience, Mister Laurens, we follow the third Maryland regiment over the creek at noon, I've already received this order. General Wayne and Maxwell will lead the assault at Chads' Ford, General Sullivan and Sterling will follow from Briton's Ford, and we complete the envelopment from Chads' Ferry. We march only when the Marylanders have crossed the creek."

I know the plan well enough, sat with Washington and the Generals as they debated it. In practice, I watch the assault fail completely. Maxwell's remaining infantrymen march on the British at noon with the third Maryland regiment, crossing the creek while we assembled. But, within half an hour, we were retreating again.

"Sir, we've barely pressed them!" I say, jogging back to General Greene's side.

Our lines hadn't even moved to cross the Brandywine River.

Before Greene can explain, four horses break into view behind Wayne's lines, approaching Greene. Tallest among them, General Washington is easily recognizable. Lafayette rides almost as high as him, and I recognize the Count Casimir Pulaski from the dinner party. Hamilton rides by the General's side. He breaks away from the officers' slow patrol, riding at a gallop to General Greene.

"There's been a change in plans," the Lieutenant Colonel announces, jumping down off his horse. "We've received word from Major Spear at Martin's Tavern that the area is clear. We were wrong," he glances at me, "the enemy hasn't split their forces to flank us from the north, they're all amassed here, fifteen-thousand strong. Do not engage until the northern divisions join you. You'll still be leading the final charge."

It's difficult to imagine the meager forces spread before us sinking sixteen-thousand deep, but if the report is true and we face them without our full army, we'll all be destroyed. The General is right to hesitate.

Before he remounts his horse, Hamilton leans towards my ear, clasping my shoulder tightly, "Good luck," he says.

It's all I need to hear.

Washington rides back up the riverline with an air of resignation. He's frustrated by this ordeal. I had been so sure the British would attempt to flank us...

I watch my friends ride away.

Hours pass in this lag, and men who grow weary of standing sit in the grass and play with blades of it, wiping sweat from their brows in the sun. It isn't until late afternoon that we're roused from our positions. The divisions under General Sullivan, Sterling, and Stephen are moving all their men into a defensive position on Birmingham Hill near the Meeting House.

...to the north.

Against forces bearing on us from above.

General Cornwallis is flanking us as we had predicted. The entire army is marching double-time,
sprinting to cover lost ground. There's a horrible vindication, being right in the worst possible way.

For whatever reason, Major Spear's report wasn't true, and now the British are bearing on us from the north and from the west, and after three hours of endless gunfire to the north of our division, we watch the other Generals' forces all struggling to retreat. The fields around the Meeting House are lining with bodies, patriots engaging the redcoats by hand as nine-thousand men bare down on us, and General Greene comes alive on his horse, breaking into a gallop and yelling for us to arrange ourselves into lines, a semi-circle, one-hundred-eighty degrees north-west, and lay supporting fire to assist the retreat. Two cannons join us in the scramble, and we align in rows, the men in front laying prone for a line behind to kneel, all firing muskets.

As the British march on us, their leading bodies start dropping, peeling away from the ranks, stepped over and trampled by their comrades- and still they charge on. Slowly. Until they meet us in range. And, some of my fellow Carolinians start backing away as they fired, putting their own compatriots in the line of their muskets. "DON'T MOVE!" I scream, "HOLD YOUR GROUND OR HOLD YOUR FIRE!"

When the redcoats are within fifty meters of us, General Greene rides to the front of our formation, and I'm shocked when Lafayette appears behind him, sword raised. "CHARGE!" they shout.

And we do. We run.

I sprint ahead.

We collide like two tidal waves, bodies smashing and falling against one another. The first man charges, and when he reaches me, I dodge a slash of his sword, grab him, thrust my bayonet through his stomach and he falls. He had screamed...

I shock at myself, at the mindlessness that had overtaken my limbs- so easily claimed a life. But, my blood rushes through my ears and another man presses at me from behind the first. I meet his slash in defense. He would kill me if I did not kill him, but the rationality doesn't need to reach my consciousness. I have no need for thoughts at all. Just instinct. I grab his arm and twist his grip until my rifle overcomes his sword and my bayonet presses through his neck. Beside me, a Carolinian screams as a bayonet tugs from his face, having ripped through his throat. Blood burst across my face, bitter on my lips.

I recall, all at once, among the horror of cannonading and the ground erupting about my feet, the madness of Le Bruin's painting of the great Battle of the Hydaspes. *Alexander and Porus*, the curl of men's bodies, collapsing into another's arms, the fury of a spooked horse, the charge of regimented men. Was it an accurate image? Is that how this field now appeared?

Was this such greatness?

It couldn't be. There's no grace in the grunt that leaves my lips as I force an enemy officer's sword through his own arm. There isn't beauty in the curve of a man's neck, briefly exposed, when I grab it to push him back and he gurgles, coughing blood from a stomach wound the patriot beside me inflicted. These aren't an artists' brush strokes.

We fight through the day until darkness falls, incessant shouting and the clash of metal, explosion of cannons, "Incline to the right!" "Incline to the left!" "Halt!" "Charge!" Iron balls slough up the ground, trees crack overhead, lit fire in artillery. "Pull back!"

We're pressed into a fighting retreat. Loathsome. I ignore the order for as long as I can, extend myself beyond the ranks of my peers, deep into the enemy's throat- until a ball glances off my ankle.
as I press forward to grapple with a man. My leg twists from beneath me in sudden agony and I collapse briefly- enough time for a bayonet to raise over my back-

and collide with a bright sword, two hoofs landing near my face as I push myself aright.

"Se mettre debout!" Lafayette slices through the soldier's chest.

I scramble to my feet and back up, hobbling. My friend immediately presses in front of me, blocking the enemy with neat rakes of his sword, beating away the jabs they make at his horse. And I back out, retreat with the others.

THE SOUND OF CLASHING METAL echoed long after the fighting ceased. Bodies cluttered at odd angles across the field. When I had said we killed for freedom, I had never done so myself, considered my support of the act an extension of the sin, but now...there was a darkness in me. It was appalling how easily I accepted it.

Two men had lifted me to the back of Lafayette's horse and I rode behind him from the battlefield, both of us receiving assistance in dismounting at the nearest medical tent in Dilworthtown.

"What happened to you?" I say, watching him as he reaches for Captain Marshal's arms.

He curves a shapely leg towards me, showing off where his breeches are soaked red just above his knee. "I-ah...attempted to rally your patriots," he says, laughing wryly through the pain.

THE SURGEON WHO RECEIVES US in the officers' tent looks at my ankle and finds something disconcerting in the swelling, "It's just a contusion," I assure him, moving my toes for emphasis, but he grabs my leg and finds a magnifying glass, presses a thumb into the injury, making me scream. He tells me the bone has been shifted and the ankle sprained, and I don't need surgical training to know that he will reset the bone through an incision.

Luckily, I'm allowed to be very drunk for the procedure.

As I set about the task of drinking my flask, the surgeon begins removing the musket ball from Lafayette's thigh. He groans beside me, grabs for my hand and squeezes it until my fingers ache and turn purple. I coo at him with comforting words, how bravely he fought, how handsome he was in charging on his horse, how much his wife will love his rugged battle scars.

Then the surgeon comes to me.

WE SPEND FIVE DAYS recovering from our injuries in a blur of pain and sensation and movement. The army does not wait for us to heal. I borrow a horse to ride with General Washington's staff from house to house, a new one each night. Benjamin Ring's, John McIlvane, Henry Hill, Mary Miller, Joseph Malin, Warwick Furnace: they all offer up their homes and their offices to the General and his advisors.

Unable to walk properly and delirious with a light fever, I spend my time in bed whenever we've taken up headquarters. Luckily, Lafayette has also been momentarily relieved of duty, and he rests beside me on his own cot, regaling stories from Brandywine. I try to recount my own tale of the battle in a letter to my father, but memories of the day evade me until I sleep- when images return in
feverish detail.

One morning, Lafayette asks me how many redcoats I killed. I realize I don't know.

I do know it was not the full British army at Chadds' Ford. We had only faced nine-thousand redcoats with nearly our full effort. If we had charged, we could have destroyed General Knaphausen's forces and met General Cornwallis with strength...we could have won on both fronts. Instead, we had run away...

On the fifteenth, General Washington received word that General Howe had learned our location and was planning to stage an attack the next morning. So, I rose early on the sixteenth, roused Lafayette, and we hobbled out to our horses and rode with the General to Goshen, the area around Whitehorse Tavern. The army set up, still ten-thousand strong, and Washington ordered General Wayne to engage the advance forces, but as soon as fighting commenced, a wretched rain poured over our heads, coming upon us in sheets that splashed up from the ground. Horses lost traction in the grass, and we were forced to flee the field...but so were the British.

The encounter did nothing to help my recovery, but the General comes to the room I share with Lafayette, and wakes us personally, says that his papers are getting out of hand. We were both eager to return to work.

And, coming into the office, I quickly realize the cause of the build-up, eyes scanning the room for a familiar head of auburn waves. I find a few new officers, sitting at the bench with their quills scratching, having taken up positions as the General's aides pro tempore, but I don't see him...and I realize had hadn't seen him in days...since we left the field at Chadds' Ford. I had expected he was kept busy without my company, but I realize I hadn't even seen him at Goshen.

"Sir, if I might ask, where is Lieutenant Colonel Hamilton?" I say curiously. The bench by Washington's desk is disconcertingly empty and I fear for my friend.

The General's lips purse and he shakes his head, face brimming with a barely-contained frustration, "We don't know," he says. "I ordered him to burn a barn of flour at Daverser's Ferry so the British couldn't seize it for rations. He hasn't returned."

"They took Daverser's Ferry a week ago, sir. He would've come to you by now if he-"

"We believe he may have been taken prisoner."

I absorb the statement slowly. Hamilton hasn't returned to camp. No one has heard from him since his last mission to set a barn alight. There are endless possibilities- he could've burned alive in the barn, been killed by marching redcoats, or the General is right. It's likely that the British would take him prisoner as Washington's right-hand man.

The gentleman's conduct of war had been abandoned in countless ways during this war already. He could be tortured for information. I wouldn't dismiss the fear.

And now, I couldn't dismiss the image from my head- Hamilton with both hands tied roughly above his head, slowly suffocating from the press of his own shoulders, body flayed all over with fine slashes from a knife, openly carved by a whip...the redcoats wouldn't...there would be uproar from the disaffected colonists that still supported them. Every American would be a patriot. How could they not boil with rage if the British laid one scar on such a beautiful man?

But...if his death was passed off as a battle casualty...no one would ever know...

"We'll make a bargain for him," I say brashly. "Won't we?"
The General looks at me from under his brows, half his attention focused on the mounds of
correspondence that are stacking up on his desk in our absence. He speaks dismissively. "If he's a
prisoner of war- a theory of which we have no proof, Congress would have to approve me to offer
the British a trade for his release, and seeing as how Congress will be receiving news that the enemy
is marching on Philadelphia, I doubt they'll be reticent to the proposal at this time."

"Congress should've left Philadelphia weeks ago," I say, "they cannot punish you for this. If
Hamilton is being held by the British, we must make a trade for him. He knows all of your secrets,
and he would die in their defense." I reach for a sheet of parchment. "I'll write to my father-

Washington stills my hand and I drop the paper. "Slow down," he says firmly. "This is only theory.
We have no evidence to provide in support."

"We can make a search for him," I say fervently, all respectful mannerisms for my General discarded
in fear. "I'll ride out at once-

His Excellency laughs at me, both brows raised and he shakes his head. "Believe me, Mister
Laurens, Hamilton's disappeared for lengths much longer than this. You must calm yourself. All we
can do is wait for him to return to us, now...in the meantime," the General raises both brows and
motions to the stacks of notes from his officers and his spies. "You have work."

I drop into the bench, resigned and anxious. This is what we've been waiting for, yes? He was so
eager...

The door creeks open, floorboards groaning as a courier steps in and salutes.

"Just drop it on the stack." Washington sighs.

"Sir..." the rider holds his position, teetering nervously on his feet, "It's from Captain Lee...

Washington's brows knit and his face falls, attention narrowing on the forlorn appetence of the
messengers face. Haunted. "I sent him to burn the flour barns at Daverser's Ferry, why has he not
reported until just now?"

The soldier thrusts the letter towards the General.

"And, for that matter, why does he report over his commanding officer?!" Washington's voice is
raised. He avoids the letter.

I don't want him to take it.

The soldier's eyes pinch shut, flinching, he pushes the letter forth. "Sir..."

Washington snatches the letter. His eyes skim the page and I dread the words.

Lafayette stands. I follow to my feet.

Washington doesn't speak. After a long moment, expression blank, he closes his eyes.

"...Sir?"

"...Lieutenant Colonel Hamilton is dead."
The Paoli Massacre

*And oh, I'm better than this, but your hand is a fist*

  *and a fist is all it takes*

  *

"...Lieutenant Colonel Hamilton is dead."

THE GENERAL'S OFFICE IS SILENT, a jolt of shock like falling into an abrupt ditch, the collective lurch of something entirely unimaginable. Unbelievable.

The meaning doesn't register.

I stare dumbly at General Washington, and he purses his lips, drops heavily into his seat, shoulders sagging. Lafayette begins to weep beside me, curling into himself and sobbing, clutching his leg where he's injured. I don't hear him over the blood rushing in my ears. I watch with a hollow detached feeling, waiting for someone to laugh, declare it was all a joke- until Lafayette's grief whips me into devastating awareness. No one is laughing.

Alexander. A flame of beauty, brimming with promise and possibility and poetry, an infectious eagerness, his eyes like sunshine, his smile a shot through the heart, his laugh a tidal wave. My running partner, my mentor, my writing collaborator, strategic consultant, personal editor, principle motivator, my equal in zeal, the match that my heart's been aching for...

Alexander Hamilton is dead.

The room erupts into a cacophony of noise. My ears rush. His Excellency's officers talking over each other, Washington himself getting up and stepping to Lafayette's side to put a hand on his shoulder and help him stand up. I stare dumbly, unhearing.

They're discussing their next move, the tasks that Hamilton had not yet accomplished would need to be assigned to other officers. Washington would need a new aide. He would expedite my formal assignment to the position. They would need to locate Hamilton's body...if possible. A courier would need to carry a message to the Continental Congress, an officer would be required for leading the evacuation.

I'm not listening.

I hadn't realized I... I haven't drawn air. I had lost all thoughts, mind totally blank. My chest feels knocked, bruised...gutted. I hadn't realized that Hamilton had occupied such a large piece of me, but my heart's been torn and I may collapse. I cannot comprehend a future bereft of our late-night conversations, our immediate understanding, our synchronized humor and the tight cord of empathy between two like minds. Everything we were becoming, all that we could've been- gone.

Some part of my soul recedes from me, braces itself for desolation- a lifetime unmatched.

"How?" I say, breaking their talk of business, voice cracking. My face must be empty. I feel empty, guilty- like I did when mother died...when Jemmy died.
General Washington doesn’t respond.

"How!"

Washington looks at me but doesn’t speak.

The courier does, "Sir, the letter says he drowned." I turn to him sharply and he shifts on his feet, continues, "In the Schuylkill. British footmen encountered the party, and they fled. The Lieutenant Colonel and three men who lagged boarded a flat raft and paddled upstream in escape, but...well, the report claimed the British fired into the boat with repeated volleys and all the men went overboard...they were likely shot before they hit the water and run through with a bayonet once they landed downstream…"

I can imagine it too well, having seen bodies lining the riverbeds. Hamilton’s infectious light becomes another grey corpse, bleeding a stain of red downriver, eyes dull and unseeing, mouth lolled open. I cannot accept it. “Did anyone see the bodies? They may have abandoned the boat by choice,” my voice sounds frantic even to my own ears and a few eyes fall on me in sympathy. I keep talking in defense, “Used the boat as cover to move upstream…what does the report say?”

Meade picks up the letter, “Lee’s cavalrymen were pressed to flee or they would’ve risked capture… but, from the description of the noise Lee heard, the gunfire was so thick, no one could’ve escaped unscathed.”

"-No, Laurens is right, boats make fair cover- it’s worked for me- I’m sorry...whom are we discussing?"

In the doorway...drenched like a walking corpse, was- no…

The door creaked as Hamilton pushed it open, and I’m not the only man staring. Beside me, Lafayette sways like he may faint. The Lieutenant Colonel steps inside, eyes widening at all the room frozen and gaping at him.

He steps back towards the door, "Apologies, I’ve interrupted," hey says. "But...who was shot and bayonetted? I’m sorry I'm returning so late, your Excellency, but I had to warn Congress of General Howe’s approach, and my horse was seized by dragoons and all the others had already gone away, so I ran on foot and..." he pauses in his babble and our eyes meet. He squints at me, "Mister Laurens...are you...crying?"

I hadn't fully realized. But, he's right, my eyes are pricking and leaking freely. I can't reconcile the agony that my body was bracing with the relief I'm now lifting- my body unstable, equilibrium disrupted. Hysteric laughter bubbles from my chest; I throw myself across the room, onto my friend, arms tight around his frame and he grunts in surprise.

He must have rode through the rain. His wet clothes soak through my uniform and he doesn't reach up to return my embrace- it doesn't matter, I don't let go. Around me, the other aides are gathered round to touch him, clasp a shoulder or pat his back. He quickly understands what we were discussing when he stepped in.

He laughs. It's music.

HE TALKS FOR NEARLY AN HOUR, explaining how he had been burning the flour barns in Daverser's Ferry when a company of British Dragoons chased them from the site. He had been worried that Captain Lee and his cavalarymen were killed. One of the men in his boat was shot. They
were forced to leave him behind, a second man having been injured- their escape was made the more
difficult when a volley went through the floor of their raft and it began sinking. They both jumped
overboard and carried the boat upstream, paddling furiously. Once they were out of range, they
touched-shore and Hamilton directed the cavalryman towards camp. He set off in the opposite
direction, sprinting on foot towards Philadelphia to warn the Continental Congress of the necessity to
evacuate, writing a letter to John Hancock. He ran four miles before finding a British camp where he
stripped his blue uniform, snuck inside, stole a horse, and rode to Philadelphia.

There are five volunteer aide-de-camps stationed in headquarters and they gather around the
General’s desk to listen to the story, awing at Hamilton’s bravery.

If Washington is impressed, he doesn’t show it. After a heavy moment of silence, Hamilton catching
his breath, Washington responds evenly. “Will they leave the city?"

Hamilton straightens aright, “Sir…I did all I could to convince Congress of the urgency to leave. I
impressed the importance of preserving their safety- as I have been doing for weeks in my letters.
They believe that evacuating the city is a mark of surrender. They are…frustrated that…” we lost
Brandywine.

Washington is unmoving, an unearthly stillness that only serves to reinforce the idea that the man is a
monument, carved like a statue. I watch him as he contains his own frustration, weighs heavy
options, decides how to progress. “Mister Laurens,” he says.

I snap to attention.

“Write your father.”

It’s a simple order, but I feel the weight of it. Convincing my father to do anything he doesn’t already
design to do is…not a simple task. I glance at Hamilton. He’s looking back at me, hair matted from
his exertion and face flushed. He’d risked his life, breeching enemy-held territory alone on foot,
unarmed with wet gunpowder and a ruined rifle, running for miles in the dark to carry a warning to
stubborn old ears that would refuse to hear it. My father’s ears.

It’s an exercise in futility, but I nod, “Yes, sir…”

“THEREFORE, I IMPRESS TO YOU THAT it is of the utmost importance for you to-”

“-Mmm, stop there,” Hamilton says around a bite of boiled potatoes I brought us for dinner. He
chews and swallows, toes wriggling against mine under the table. The General had ordered him a
bath and a meal for a quick recovery from his strenuous journey, but Hamilton insisted on taking the
latter in the office so he could get back to work. His pen doesn’t stop. He doesn’t look up from the
receipts he’s been mindlessly transcribing while we eat, “You lose predicate emphasis when you
place your descriptor in the partitive genitive,” he says, hair dripping clean down his shoulder. "It
implies there’re other matters of importance, which is true, but not applicable to him. Try ‘it is
absolutely imperative’.”

“How about ‘entirely necessary’…” I offer, “I don’t think it wise to say ‘imperative’ to my father.
He hates being told what to do.”

Hamilton looks up from his receipts. “If you’re writing to his sensibilities you’re allowing him to
remain insensible.”

I snort and scratch through my draft. “Alright, imperative.”
There’s a creak at the door and I turn to see who’s coming in. General Washington has been receiving couriers in his office all day, but most of the staff has left to take dinner at Parker’s Ford Tavern. I stayed with Hamilton, revising my letter to my father while he worked- to keep him company, to keep him in my sight- reassurance he’s alive.

The messenger enters, “Good evening, Major John White reporting as ordered, a letter from General Sullivan for His Excellency, General George Washington.”

I stand at the announcement, eyes lighting.

Hamilton doesn’t look up from his quill. “General Washington is taking dinner, if you’ll leave the message-”

“John?” I hobble over the bench. “John White!”

“Jack Laurens!”

His eyes light with recognition, and before either of us can think of it, we’re embracing by the doorway, chests knocking, laughing at coincidence. “How long has it been?” I say.

He laughs, “Only a few months, I’m afraid- but thank God, you haven’t writ’ a day. I’d almost managed to forget your ugly mug.”

“Oh, I’ve written every day, just not to crusty sops like you,” I smack his shoulder. “Orders from General Sullivan? Is that where you ran off to?”

“You haven’t heard because you haven’t learned to write your friends,” he goads, stepping back and smiling warmly. I’ve always thought him handsome with warm dark eyes and a slender jawline, but in uniform, he looks like a portrait, all done up in gold with Majors’ stars on his shoulderboards. He holds up his tri-fold cover, a green ribbon hemmed into the seam.

“An aide!” I say, “You’re his aide-de-camp, congratulations.”

He shrugs. “Not the field position I desired, but an honor just the same.”

“Well, I’m happy for you, you deserve it, I’m sure-”

“.The letter?”

We both turn, arms entangled.

Hamilton has stood and is holding a hand out imploringly. “To General Washington, I’ll collect it.”

I step back, “John, allow me to introduce Lieutenant Colonel Hamilton, Washington’s aide-de-camp.”

My friend cuts to attention and introduces himself, blustering an apology for our warm reunion, cheeks flushed in embarrassment for such a brazenly affectionate display before a superior officer. Hamilton raises a brow and repeats his demand for the letter. “It’s a request for character testimony on his behalf.” John says, passing over the document. “General Sullivan was briefly involved in a raid at Staten Island in August- Mister Hamilton, you should recall the action. I recieved several epistolary favors signed in your name from General Washington- suggestions for our maneuver...and well, despite his best advice, the raid was not successful. Now, his conduct is being called into question after our loss at Brandywine. Members of Congress are accusing him of treasonous cowardice and threatening to strip his rank.”
“That’s horrible,” I say. “From what I’ve seen, General Sullivan is a good officer-”

“He is,” Hamilton says with surety. His lips purse and his expression is dark as he skims the letter. “Congress would blame Washington for the defeat, but those that hold loyalty to him point blame to other Generals- Sullivan was unfortunately the first to receive Cornwallis’ flank. He had no choice but to retreat...still, it looks bad.” He sits with the letter and begins writing notes.

I follow him to the bench. “Did you even see Sullivan during the battle?” I ask quietly. I can’t imagine he would’ve had time.

“I didn’t,” he admits. “But, I’ve read the transcripts from the other Generals’ aides and I believe myself knowledgable enough of the character of the man and the engagement to comprehend the assault on his character and refute it,” he glances at John, “I’ll testify on behalf of Washington.”

White gives him a grateful smile.

I lean over the table and whisper. “Can you do that?”

“I’m his pen. His Excellency entrusts me with everything, including responding to all his personal inquiries. He’s told me this before.”

I consider. Hamilton could be risking serious reprimands- court marshal if he over-steps the authority of his office, “Why risk it though?”

Hamilton throws a look to White, and my friend steps back from hearing our whispered conversation. Hamilton’s eyes flick back to me, dark like a thunderstorm, “Washington has to design a plan to defend the Capitol of this nation from falling to the British who are already in the process of seizing it. I won’t worry him with pettiness and rumor in Congress. He’s well-aware of what’s happening- and why this dissention needs to stay quiet.”

I understand- at least, enough to agree that Hamilton’s doing the right thing. “Let me help,” I say.

“What? No- absolutely not.”

“But-”

“No!”

HAMILTON FAILS TO WRITE THE LETTER that afternoon, after arguing me out of my assistance by threatening me with charges of insubordination, he spends his time talking to my John about the merits of Sullivan’s character. If he’s to deliver a character testimony as Washington’s pen, he elects to learn all he can of the man in question from a man who works with him closely. They discuss exactly what occurred throughout Sullivan’s maneuver at Brandywine and analyze the steps. At every opportunity, I give my tactical opinion.

Washington returns to the study with his supplemental aides and the conversation stops as the young officers pour in and unpack their letterboxes. The General meets Major White with stoic warmth and, as my dutiful friend, John respects our wishes to allow us to handle the matter of Sullivan’s request. He doesn’t tell Washington.

The General checks on the progress Hamilton’s made on his receipts. He’s nearly finished and requests more work which Washington denies- and he protests, until both are shouting and
Washington's voice booms a deep baritone over the room. So, Hamilton relents, sits beside me and reads over my drafted letter to my father, finishing his edits.

As I begin rewriting my final draft, Major White sits by my other side and transcribes some receipts from Sullivan’s camp. Hamilton, unoccupied, tickles my arm with the feathers of his quill, reads over notes he’s already taken, taps rhythms against my foot under the table. After a few hours, we have just begun to light candles and John finishes his work, leans his shoulder into mine, “When you finish that, let’s go have a drink, eh?”

“Only if Mister Hamilton comes…”

THREE HOURS LATER, I’m sloshed in a seat in the tavern. I haven't seen Hamilton in at least an hour and I can’t be bothered to look for him. My shoulder’s pressed to John’s, regaling to the Chevalier de Mauduit a story of our journey back to America from France, British officers interrogating us in the brig of a French sloop. They recognized us as Americans, checked my bags for royal papers, found my British law books, and immediately pegged me as a student.

“Returning home to daddy, they said!” John teases, tipping his drink at the Chevalier and looking at me. “Good little King’s boys! Christ, Jack, I don’t think I’d ever seen you bite your tongue so hard; I thought blood’s gonna drool out your mouth next time y’spoke.”

“It left a scar,” I laugh.

“That’s a lie. You can’t scar a tongue.”

“Sir! You know me n’liar!”

John leans towards me in our bench, faces close to inspect my mouth. His shoulder brushes mine. “Prove it,” he dares.

I resist in cheek, pressing my lips tightly closed, craning my neck at him so our faces are tauntingly close.

He grins and reaches up to squeeze my cheeks so my lips pucker and my protests spew forth as babble. I stick out my tongue and he whoops, “Ah- yep! There it is, I see it…y’call that a scar? -t’s a speck!”

“Th’s a scar!”

“NO!” a shriek, a crash, breaking glass, a loud thunk of a body hitting the floor. We all turn from the table, eyes following the commotion. Parker’s Ford Tavern, a dive adjunct to the General’s headquarters, is brimming with officers, both from Washington’s staff and the artillery company surrounding us. It’s late enough that most people are still awake, but too early for the women of the house to have retired.

Unfortunately.

On the far side of the room, through the commotion of a crowd, turning its attention, Hamilton is stumbling up to his feet- hand covering his mouth. I immediately recognize the shape of his curls and curse under my breath as he throws himself violently from my vision and the clatter continues, more crashing, a stool smashing into the ground, a woman crying and grunts of pain.

I’m limping my way through the crowd before sparing a thought.
“Scoundrel!” a man shouts.

I hear Hamilton laughing; I cannot see him.

“Margret is mine—”

“Margaret didn’t seem t’ believe so—” another thunk of a fist hitting flesh, more laughter.

I break through the barrier of two ensigns, watching as a man twice his size shunts Hamilton’s head to the floor and curses him. The daughter of the house is cowering back, weeping. Hamilton spits blood, cackling, and the man moves to straddle him. I don’t hesitate, shoving from the crowd to grab the man by the scruff of his shoulders - I can only get him half to his feet before he lands a hard kick to Hamilton’s chest.

“She’s promised to me!”

The blow lands with a sickening thud. My friend grunts and curls in on himself, “Didn’ know!” he says lightly- and I growl at his levity.

The man is on him- a civilian by his clothes, but hulking in size- lands another kick, and I throw my weight against him, shoving him back, “Stand down, sir!” I command. He has a dark bruise over his eye which I assume is Hamilton’s artwork, but it’s barely enough to slow his fury.

He pushes me at my friend and I stumble, and free from the barricade of my grip, he kicks Hamilton again, “He taunts me!” he spits and I’m back on him again in a second, holding him back. “You knew she was—”

“-said I didn’-” Alex sings.

“-you vain rebel bastard- think yourself so pretty; just wanted t’prove you could!”

“-who needs’ta prove it?”

“He said he didn’t know!” I try to put myself bodily between my friend and the slighted suitor he insists on egging on. The man throws me aside, drops to punch Hamilton while he’s down, and I launch myself back into the fray.

I tackle him to the ground. Someone jumps on me, I kick them. They hit back. A burst of pain at my temple. My ears rush. At my feet, Hamilton is scrambling to his. He tears at the officer that’s jumped on me. I grapple to roll free from the fray. I kick at the officer that intervened. His epaulets show he’s ranked colonel- my superior. He shouts something, but my ears are still ringing. I beat my head into his. He grabs my collar, squeezing my throat. I choke. Hamilton tackles him from the side and frees me. I roll to pin the civilian as the man grabs Hamilton’s legs to pull him off. Hamilton accidently kicks me in the process.

More grunts, more grappling, bursts of pain, a crowd in tumult-

“GET OUT!”

HAMILTON’S STEP IS UNSTEADY as we stumble down the threshold. I know that I’m drunk from the lilt of my vision and the tingle I feel in all the places that should hurt. But, my friend is far worse-off. He only makes it a few steps before he drops to vomit in the grass, groaning when the clench of muscle disturbs his injuries and the acid of his bile reaches his bloody mouth.
I kneel beside him, putting a hand between his shoulders, but he throws it off. I remain still beside him until his body stops clenching and he breathes heavily, then I pull him upright and put his arm over my shoulder, hiking his weight against me.

His breath hitches in pain, stealing away his voice before he can struggle to push away. "Get off!"

"No..." I grab his wrist to keep his arm over my shoulders. I start us walking up the front path to headquarters, letting the alcohol numb the pain in my ankle. "Would you care to explain what happened?"

His head lolls and he wipes at his mouth. "Fight."

"I noticed," I say, voice deadpanned. He puts his feet on the ground like he wants to help us walk, but all it does is move my precarious, injured balance as he fumbles. I give him an incredulous look. "But, over a girl?"

"Kissed 'er."

"That's bold," I say, but I realize he’s drunk and keen to be brazen- I’ve experienced it myself..."surges close, holds himself steady at the base of my neck, breathes my air as he works himself against my hips."

He gives me a withering look, eyes glaring at my lips accusingly.

A moment passes in silent denunciation until I can’t stand it- "What?" I demand.

"You're bold," he reaches up clumsily to pinch my cheeks, pursing my lips.

I almost lose my footing. The implication hits me like another punch. He had been watching me flirting with John White…and turned away to kiss a stranger. I fumble to divert him, “Did she really not tell you she was promised to that man?"

He reels. “Of course not! I wouldn’t’ve… I’m not some sort of fiend, I-” he works himself up in angry defense and trips over his own ankles. He pulls away as if only just realizing that he’s leaned against me. "I don't need 'elp, unhand me- you’re injured, you shouldn’ even be walking-" I hold him firmly, until he relents, fuming and spitting curses, "why d'you do t'is?"

"Because I'm your friend."

"Well, stop-"

"Stop being your friend?"

He huffs and tugs at his arm again, wincing when the action hurts.

"Stop moving," I hiss.

He resists.

"I'll carry you," I threaten.

I ALMOST EXPECT GENERAL WASHINGTON to greet us at the door and strike us down in a righteous speech of the distinction of our office and how we’ve disgraced him. But, word hasn’t travelled so fast, and I hope it doesn’t travel at all.
Hamilton gave up resisting my assistance after he realized that he’s too intoxicated to fight me. Granted- it took him time to realize this and he laid both our bodies with more bruises from his knobby elbows. I help him up the steps of headquarters and bring him to the Parker house kitchen, propping him in a chair beside the cutting counter.

He sighs and sags in relief, grudgingly grateful.

I touch his cheek gently, tucking his hair behind his ear so it doesn't fall in his face. “Hey…wait here, I’ll return.”

And I move as quietly as I can through the house, tip-toing with my limp past the General’s study where Washington is likely writing a letter to his Martha. I walk outside to the well to fill a fresh pot of water, bringing it in and stopping in the bathingroom to grab towels before returning to the kitchen.

Hamilton’s rested his head against the counter, appearing half-asleep. His eyes follow me as I close the door and move about the kitchen, collecting a pot, a glass, some sage, and- with a little raiding through the Parkers’ stocks, a tin of comfits.

A servant would typically make tea if I asked, but seeing as how I’m to avoid anyone knowing what a drunken state we’re in, I set about lighting a fire myself, fingers clumsy on the flint. The task is simple, usually requires half a thought, but I work with all the focus of a drunken man with half his faculties. I put tea on to boil, grabbing the glass and returning to Hamilton’s side. I carefully pour myself some water from the bucket, drink it down, and refill the glass, pushing it into his hands.

He sits up gingerly and looks at me before drinking eagerly. His lips fall open, gasping for breath when he’s finished the cup and he leans to pour more, but I take it and refill it for him, feel his eyes on me, heavy. “You shouldn’t’ve fought,” he says, words jumbled, and I’m set to protest but, “Someone would’ve stepped in 'elped me, and it would’ve passed over, but you…” hit a colonel.

I understand his concern and regret it, but I’m too drunk to parse through why I should. That colonel choked me- an unnecessary escalation of force, but the threat is on me…a court-marshal for striking a superior officer. “I’m sorry…” I mutter, picking up the washcloth and dipping it in the cool water.

He leans away when I move to press the cloth to his cheek.

“I’ll be gentle,” I promise, but the weariness doesn’t leave his eyes and I realize he’s not afraid of the sting. He makes a grab for the cloth to take care of himself, but I stand and pull it away, moving to the dining table. I grab a second chair and plant it across from him, propping my feet on either side of his legs, bracing him in. “I lived alone with two kid brothers while I studied in England,” I say. “Harry got in plenty of fights, he made fair practice. Now, c’mon.” I lean to wipe the blood off his chin.

“‘I’m not your kid brother!’ he spits, shoving my hand back.

“I didn’t say that,” I protest, grabbing his wrist, “I studied some medicine, please.”

For a few moments, we stare each other down, his gaze defiant and mine imploring. I can feel the tension leave his arm as he relents, exhausted. I don’t need permission to cup his neck and draw him forward to wipe at his mouth.

His lip is swollen, cheek bruised, and when I draw his mouth open with a thumb, the flesh is pierced with tooth-marks from the force of a punch. I observe carefully, ask what hurts. He reports that none of his teeth feel loose, watching me without blinking, eyes lingering at my neck. I assume I
must have bruises. I ignore his stare, keep the cool cloth applied with pressure in one hand, “May I check your ribs?”

“Nothing’s broken,” he reports quietly. “I would know, I’ve-

“That’s fine, let me check.”

He doesn’t protest or finish his thought. He removes his jacket carefully, containing an eye-roll, and I assist when his fingers fumble, moving my attention to unbuttoning his vest once he has the matter in hand. He’s silent throughout undressing. I know he’s sore and mollified when he doesn’t even flirt about it.

Down to his shirt, I press a hand under his arm, applying light pressure until I see him wince. I mutter an apology and press on, feeling gently for any displacement. I tell him to take a deep breath, ask if it hurts, and conclude that he was right- nothing’s broken.

The teapot hisses at the hearth and I rise, swinging my leg over Hamilton’s lap. He holds the cool cloth to his bruised cheek as I pour two cups of tea, holds out a hand when I return, keeps his cup in his lap when I pass it to him. Exhaustion clings to his frame, keenly noticeable, outlined by bruises.

As a being, Hamilton is diverged. In the time I’ve known him, he’s never done anything in parts, thrown himself either fully into his task or entirely dismissed it. And, his energy rises and drains in a similar fashion. All or nothing.

I hold out the tin of candies to him and he raises a brow at me. “Your mouth must taste awful,” I explain.

“Not as though you’re tasting it,” he mutters, but his fingers dip into the tin and he accepts the comfits.

I don’t respond, look to the counter where I put the sage to chew for my teeth. My own mouth feels dry and tastes of rum, but I would feel ungraceful to spit in front of Hamilton, so I take a sugared peanut and chew thoughtfully, leaning back against the counter.

Beside me, Hamilton interrupts my thoughts, “After having seen your actions today,” he says, watching my lips as I swallow the candy, enunciating his words carefully, “I believe it would be...in your best interest to stop...pursuing this friendship.”

I raise both brows. “Excuse me?”

He moves his eyes from my mouth down to his cup, takes a sip of tea and returns the cup to the saucer with conscientious, delicate movements. “You acted...irresponsibly to your station, and dishonorably in defense of my mistakes,” he says, concentrating to articulate properly and find the correct words. “Therefore, you should distance yourself from...misplaced affections and keep all our...future discourse of a professional nature. Our friendship will be as...colleagues only.”

I throw him a skeptical look. “You want me to pretend we’re not friends- after I just got choked by an officer for you...?”

“I want you t’ stop declaring yourself my friend.”

I purse my lips, folding my arms over my chest. It’s true that he’s never accepted or returned my offer, but from the way we had interacted since he’d returned that morning, I had felt close to him-comfortable in a way that I desperately needed. As far as I was concerned, we were friends- we had been for weeks. ”You can tell a man to ignore his heart but you won't relieve him of his sentiments.”
He narrows his eyes, shaking his head, “Sentiments, Laurens, you’re not in love with me, so what do you want?”

“Want?”

“From me? What d’you want?”

“I don’t want anything-”

“Oh, you lie.”

“Why do people think me a liar!”

“Everyone wants som’thing.”

I wrack my mind for some answer to his query because I know he won’t relent till I provide one, but thoughts drift out from my drunken muddle. Why is it, with Hamilton, I’m always expected to decide the nature of our relationship while drunk? “Your friendship,” I say.

"...Why?"

"Because I like you."

"I know...but why?"

I appall at him, frustrated. "Does there need a reason?"

"Yes-" he says immediately, and breath rises in his chest, a flame fills his eyes and I can see his muddled spirit sharpening in debate. “There’s always a reason,” he declares. I raise both brows, but he presses on. "You don’t idolize m’work ethic as your determination must match my own tenfold, you obviously aren’t prone t’worship rank, you’re attracted to m’I know- but that’s not it b’cause you refuse to act and my advances should be hateful tem’tations...so why do you insist on following me about, seekin’ out m’help, fighting with me, caring for me like this?"

"I enjoy your company."

"Lots’ people enjoy my company, Margaret would’ve enjoyed my comp’ny. You monopolize it-insatiably. There must be a reason. Tell me."

"Hamilton."

"Tell me!"

"Let us retire to our quarters, yes?"

"Tell me!"

His voice is raising, so I lower mine. "I have. I really do just...enjoy you."

"What part?"

"Part?” he said it as if he were built of brick and mortar and I’m growing increasingly uncomfortable in this discussion, but he’s too determined to leave it, lips trembling in anger.

"Hercules idolizes me m’exotic stories b’cause he never leaves New York, Meade uses my wit for momentum to build his teasing, Rob thinks me handsome and he keeps a fine collection of handsome
boys, Gilbert thinks me a hero, and hell, Ned thinks me lovely and fears he may be my brother- beg I could answer that!” He talks fast, words slurred and eyes narrowed suspiciously. “Everyone has their heart set upon something...extraneous of my self- a detachable part, and they'll take it when they leave, they'll break if off and steal it away if I allow it."

I’m horrified. I’m understanding more than I want to, and I know that, if Hamilton were sober, he’d say none of this. He’d probably not allow himself to think it. I feel a lowly peeping tom to some private part of my friend. So, I get up and start putting away the pots and cups I’d used, "Of course..." I say agreeably.

"Because ownership is the principle motive of the hu-"

"Of the human animal, yes...c’mon..." I coax him out of the chair, and luckily, he seems to have exhausted himself from spitting salt against his friends. His movements are languid, weighted with fatigue, but complacent. I guide his arm over my shoulder once again, keeping him cocked against my side so that his feet hold their mark with each step I guide him to take.

“...I ruined your reunion,” he mutters, directing his voice at our shuffling feet.

“It was hardly a reunion- a few months separation is nothing with J. White. We know we still enjoy each other,” I say gently.

He shakes his head, “Nonetheless, I’m sorry...”

I rub circles into his side and lead him through the hallway.

He’s let me see more of himself than I should have, and I know I shouldn’t allow myself to speculate, but I wonder how much of his cynical fears are borne of his relationship with Ajax, how much is borne of the abandonment of being orphaned, how much has developed through misplaced poetic sentiments throughout the years that followed. The man fancied himself in love with Kitty Livingston, hadn’t he? He must be no stranger to heartbreak.

So, how much of this honesty was borne of drink? Hamilton made himself out a romantic in every sense, flowering his affection in idyllic words, but in vino veritas. This mistrust of his own heart betrayed him and I understood all his usual romantic bluster as a protective mask, a gate on his wall.

I help him mount the stairs and we move together toward the quarters all the aides have been sharing. I feel closer to him for every vulnerable grunt he makes when I pull on him the wrong way.

I’m no stranger to romanticism. Father had warned me to avoid the distraction of friendships in Switzerland, and I had disobeyed. I had him...my dear Francis. I had misplaced my own poetic sentiments, flowered my friend’s image in thoughts that endeared me to him too tightly, infected me with the darkness of lust. When he reached for me, I did not hesitate. It’s been years since I’ve felt pleasure such as that he provided in his form. But even to think such things now, a cold chill flows in my blood, and while I cannot bring myself to blame my friend or detach myself from those affections no matter how we may disagree with our loyalties, I am wiser to the lure of temptation and how it can ruin pure friendships. Francis has not written to me in years, I mistook our lust for honest passion.

What I feel for Alexander Hamilton is not lust.

It's recognition. As though I must have known him for a thousand years, in a thousand lives.

I imagine I would enjoy his body like I had enjoyed Francis...more. But it's not necessary. I would keep Alexander in any capacity, and I would prefer him my partner in all the manners of gentlemanly
love, honorable devotion between friends- as I keep Lafayette, more perfectly matched, our songs rolling in harmonious chords. Our values are the same, our motivations synchronized, and I didn’t need the fear of losing him to know we could be great. He wouldn't understand this in his drunken hysteria, though I'm sure he must feel its imminence.

Perhaps that’s why he resists.

I prop his weight more balanced along my shoulders, all but carrying him as I mount the last step and guide him through the hall, careful on my rolled ankle. "You asked why I want your friendship,” I say, “And, I guess it’s as I said...avoiding connection will leave you alone with yourself; the only way to keep company in the heart is to join it with another's, to share yourself..."

His head lolls against my shoulder, forehead pressed to my golden epaulet.

I realize I'm talking to myself, but it's alright. We reach the bedroom, and all the other aides are out. Lafayette’s bed is empty, and we’re alone. I don't mind it. After a few drinks, and in the proper company, I feel loquacious. He's alive and a miracle and I want him to know me.

Hamilton falls onto the first cot I direct him to- mine, limp like a puppet cut from its strings. I hang his coat and vest, trouble him to take off his breeches and shoes. He’s exhausted and complacent like he’s never been. He sprawls in a loose tangle of limbs.

Then, I’m sitting beside him. Feeling open and gutted, continuing along my previous thought, "See, I...I've been alone my whole life.” My voice feels loud and rough and uncomfortable, but he’s explained himself to me and I'll level the ground between us. It's only proper. "As a child I was obnoxious," I say. "I scolded the other children for succumbing to the ideals of their parents. If I made friends, I drove them off by clinging to ambitions of rising together to save the world from tyranny. I isolated myself from my parents by surpassing the material my mother gave to study and debating my father's trade until he hated me. I admit you saw me true, sir, when you called my unworlthy virtue a vice. I admit that my expectations are high- but only as has always been demanded of me. When mother died, Father softened, and I know he doesn’t hate me and I consider him my dearest friend, but...his loneliness makes him a liar- soft on me because he has no one else to rely on, and that's not how I aim to earn his respect. Though I love them dearly, I feel my family doesn't know me at all- not as the fam'ly here does."

Hamilton’s rolled over, sitting up on his elbows, alert. He’s silent, watching me, face cut in marble, giving every ounce of his attention.

I can’t breathe in the intensity, so I press on urgently. "Sure, I have acquaintances in Charlestown, Geneva, London, Paris. I love many people and would share my thoughts with them, but as you say- you don't see them here, do you? They're not the same as us. So, I don't keep them and I don't share more than my mind. And, you're right, I suppose, that everyone must want something. I must be guilty myself because I want so much- specifically from you..." He raises his brows, and somehow, I manage to hold his gaze as I continue, "I struggle to explain it, and I know it must confound your experience, but it's something that I've only just realized I need, and knowing you has introduced me to hope of finding someone capable of fulfilling it. I don't want to admire at your elegance or awe at your achievements- though both are great and lovely, that's true. I just- want the profound and productive love shared between friends of a similar spirit, of honorable and Aristotelian virtue, and I feel that we could do that. I want to know your heart...and teach it to know mine- and hope beyond propriety that they match."

The room falls abruptly silent. I’m breathless and bare, said too much, waxed poetic, and I fear I’ve surely overwhelmed him, but it must be his own fault. He could not allow it to be so simple as a short request for friendship. He doesn’t speak, just stares at me, at a loss for words. Alexander
Hamilton is never at a loss for words. “I…um, I…” he stutters, his mouth lulls and he narrows his eyes in frustration, mind too tired to conjure thoughts, “I…”

I think to apologize, but to do so would withdraw everything I said, and I consider that a last resort. I’ve spoken honestly, tongue loosened by rum, and embarrassed or not if I take it back, I may never admit my desire again. So, I divert, “I know Lafayette’s offered his cot, but he’s injured badly, so if you…will be comfortable to share with me, I shall be fine with it.”

Hamilton’s jaw clicks and I can’t tell if he’s relieved to change the subject or frustrated that he didn’t contribute. He sits up more, points to the cot he’s stretched on. “Is this yours?”

I nod.

He nods. “Then yes,” scooting back, he lifts the sheets and crawls beneath them, backing against the wall to make space. After a moment of settling carefully, he lifts the blankets for me.

So, I undress, follow him under the sheets and lay close, facing him, sharing his pillow.

I can hear his breathing, shallow and fast and when I try to close my eyes, I feel watched. I don’t dare look to check, faces so close we’re sharing air. If I open my eyes, he’ll know I’m keen to his attention, hyper-aware of our proximity. Whatever conclusions he may draw from that, I don’t know that they’d be true, so I keep my eyes shut, feign complete comfort.

Until I feel his forehead pressing to mine.

I startle, eyes flashing open.

He’s close and awake, so close I feel him exhale against my cheek, eyes half-lidded, grey in the moonlight, watching me intensely. A small shift of angle would bring our lips together. His voice vibrates between us, “Either kiss me or turn over- I’ll never sleep like this…”

In the long moment I spend in dazed bewilderment, he could take my inaction as consent, but he waits and I lean my mouth away, taking enough room to see his eyes properly. “You turn over,” I whisper back.

He laughs wryly through his nose and retreats, smiling in palatable disappointment. He pulls away from the press of our foreheads, and rolls over gingerly, faces his back to me at a polite distance. His body goes limp and I see him trying to relax.

I stare at the back of his head, arms curled to my chest for a long moment. He wasn’t driven away by my eager words, if anything, he’d pulled himself nearer, asked for a kiss knowing the weight it would hold. The skin of my cheek tingles where his nose had pressed against it. I can feel my mind rearing to argue with itself, weigh options and consequences, and I don’t want to hear it.

I reach for him, touch his arm.

He glances back briefly and I almost shy away, but he turns fast, tense and skittish as if he fears he ruined my resolve.

I take heart in the fact that he hopes I will, moving my fingers up to his shoulder and following, sliding my elbow under the pillow and slipping behind him. I drape my arm around him. He remains tense, but after a moment, he touches my hand, guides it under his arm to rest against his collar. I take the invitation to pull him against me true so his back touches my chest and he softens, pressing back flush and relaxing completely.
When we’ve situated, he feels easy in my arms, fitted perfectly to outline my shape. It drives a low hum from my chest and I press my face into the back of his neck. He leans his head back in response, fitting in the curve of my nose. I feel a lurch in my chest, acceptance. This will be our relationship. A piece of me belongs here, indulging myself, denying myself.

I sleep easy and deeply through the night, through the other aides fumbling to bed, through Hamilton leaving in the morning.

A COURIER COMES FROM GENERAL WAYNE, rushing through the front flaps of Washington’s field tent and crashing into the desk of letters I’m sorting. I’ve already had a headache all day from beating my head into another officer’s and imbibing far more alcohol than any one man should be advised. One of Washington’s servants stoops to collect the letters frantically and I join him at the floor.

The General catches the man by the arm and pulls him aright. “News, Colonel?” he demands. “What happens on the British side of the river?”

Wayne’s messenger catches his breath, “Your Excellency, an attack- a raid- a massacre,” he struggles to speak, panting deeply. My hands have stilled at the floor, listening intently. “There must be a rat, sir- someone told him, he knew, sir- Howe knew we’d stayed back when y’crossed the Schuylkill. We got your order to attack them at Tredyffrin, and we were set t’do it this mornin’, we were all camp’d out at Paoli, but they came for us in our beds. We weren’t ready-”

“How many?” Washington says, face trained blank.

“Sir-”

“How many were killed?!” the General’s voice raises.

“At least fifty,” the courier reports, still panting, “Prob’ly more.”

Washington slams the table.

The courier’s shoulders jolt in fright. I just raise my brow, fingers clenched on the letter in my hand. Fifty dead in a dishonorable surprise attack…if I could punch something, I would as well.

Washington’s voice is hoarse when he speaks, fist clenched tightly, but his frustration doesn’t seep into his voice again. He trains it. “Give your full report to mister Laurens,” he orders, flattening his hand on the table and steadying himself. “That completed, you’ll return to General Wayne’s camp and- if he has not already begun- tell him his orders are to commence evacuation to the east side of the Schuylkill where he’ll regroup with me personally.”

The colonel snaps to attention, “Yes, sir.”

Washington grabs his cloak and ties it over his shoulders, stepping urgently for the flap of his tent, “And for God’s sake, boy- take a horse.”

OUR HOSTS AT PARKER’S TAVERN want no more trouble from soldiers. I assume that Hamilton’s fight was not the first or last they cleaned up during the General’s stay. So far as I’ve heard, no one has reported the scuffle at all. If General Washington noticed the bruises along my neck and the edge of Hamilton’s mouth, he’s said nothing of it.
After midnight, we ride to new headquarters at the Casselberry house in Evansburg.

I haven’t seen Hamilton since last night, waking to an empty bed and Lafayette’s pained fumbling as he struggled to get himself up. He didn’t know where Hamilton had gone, so I proceeded to wonder all day whether the man regretted our conversation. But, my friends ride too near to General Washington to discuss the matters I transcribed from General Wayne’s courier. It plagues my mind; I long for a friend’s counsel.

Something the courier said…

I’m several horses behind the General when a rider approaches him at a gallop. After the news that such urgency brought this morning, my heart leaps to my throat in apprehension. From my position, the courier’s news doesn’t reach my ears, but the General’s posture doesn’t tense and after a moment, he smiles, thin, says something to Lafayette who rides at his side…and my friend howls a cheer.

Washington calls the line to a halt and Lafayette kicks his horse into a gallop, riding down the lines and yelling, “Victory at Saratoga! Victory!”

“NO, LAFAYETTE, YOU’VE GOT THE ENTIRE CAMP cheering and drinking to a victory that we can’t even claim!” Hamilton’s voice is stern and frustrated, feet crunching leaves outside the fabric of my tent. Two shadows move along the side of the tarp, approaching.

I had been given word that Washington had assigned me to share quarters with Hamilton, but my friend had been busily attending to the General’s needs, retrieving headcounts from Paoli and sending reports about Saratoga to and from Generals at other camps.

I was dismissed to oversee the erection of our tent…

Meaning I had nothing to do but to search Hamilton’s letterbox for his notes of character analysis for General Sullivan…and draft a testimony so eloquent he would have to let me co-sign.

When I hear my friends' voices, approaching from outside, I sit up in my cot, blowing frantically on the ink of my draft before hiding it under the bunk. I stand, eager for news, reaching the opening of the tent in time to meet my friends mid-debate.

“We killed two for each man,” Lafayette says, enunciating his words carefully as he always does around Hamilton. “Strategically, it is a victory.”

“And tactically, they got routed, they retreated- and you say we like you were there personally- is that your intention? John, sit down, your foot.”

Hamilton doesn’t look at me as he orders me away. I look between them- at the cane Lafayette is leaning against for support. I ignore the order and jump to Lafayette’s defense. “He means we as in our cause. You know what he means,” I say. “And a retreat is not always a loss, he’s right. We inflicted twice the casualties on them as they did us. That’s a reason to declare victory…”

Hamilton waves it away, “Fine, fine…declare it a victory, Gilbert, just…don’t let your General Gates outshine Washington, yeah?” he says, clapping Lafayette’s shoulder.

The young Frenchman looks horrified at the idea.

Hamilton laughs and bids him a hasty good night, “To bed with you, I’m serious, sir,” before turning back into the tent. Alexander’s mannerism is rushed to be rid of the Frenchman, and I’m confused
for the behavior, but Lafayette is already dismissed and Hamilton walks into our tent. “Washington shouldn’t have allowed him to announce it as a victory…” he mutters and begins to undress.

“But, it was…a victory,” I say. “He himself described it thus in the debrief…”

Hamilton shakes his head, fingers working brusquely over his vest buttons. “Because it is one in number of casualties we inflicted- tactically, it’s not, and…it is unwise to glorify a victory under Gates which is what Lafayette has done.” He gives a long-suffering sigh. “Washington cannot claim we succeeded under his command at Brandywine. We don’t want to let the soldiers assign all the credit for Saratoga to General Gates when-”

“General Gates led the men at Freeman’s Farm, it is his victory,” I say. “Washington wants the proper man to receive credit…so, why did you dismiss Lafayette like that?”

Hamilton’s jaw clenches at those words and he looks to the flaps of the tent. He steps over and closes them before coming inside, unbuckling his swordbelt as he walks. “General Arnold deserves credit for Freeman’s Farm,” he says, voice hard. “Gates wanted to run from the enemy!” He throws his sword to its place by the wall and it hits the corner of the desk loudly. “Washington told me, John-Arnold pressed the men to fight the retreat. He argued Gates for three hours before mutinying to rally them. He was shot and trapped under his horse, and he fought on from the ground- he salvaged a total route and cost the redcoats hefty losses!”

“That’s amazing,” I say, “Why are we not spreading word? He’d be a hero!”

“It would discredit Gates,” Hamilton says, stooping under the bed. He picks up his letterbox and I bite the inside of my cheek as he looks through the papers, hoping he doesn’t glance up and see my draft of the testimony where his box had been resting. I’m not ready explain why I’ve written it against his wishes.

“Sit down. I’m going to tell you something that you cannot repeat,” he says, pointing to me like a threat. “To absolutely no one- not even Lafayette, not even allude to it. Our connections to France are imperative and it…involves dissention in our ranks that would discredit us as a nation.”

I sit on the cot beside him, brows drawn, “Does this have to do with the intelligence department that Washington established?”

Hamilton looks at me sharp, “What do you know of that?”

“Well…” I shrug, huffing a breath, “I know Washington holds irregular meetings with a civilian who always gets to set up an office at our camps.” I give him a weary look. I know how well he can mask himself and the subject of secret intelligence puts me on edge. With what the courier from General Wayne mentioned- about a ‘rat’ in their camp at Paoli…what kind of deceitful operations were we fighting? How closely was my friend involved? Hamilton outran British dragoons on foot, stole a horse from one of their camps, and carried a letter through enemy territory alone. His capabilities are daunting- horrifying. I know him, but I’m beginning to realize that I don’t know what he does. “I don’t know much of anything,” I admit, “besides that it exists. Why? What do you know?”

“I told you,” he says, “Washington entrusts me with everything.”

A fringe of my initial dislike skitters at the edge of my mind and I banish it. Hamilton doesn’t take his position lightly. I know that. “When you say ‘everything’…?”

“All I can say is…the French won’t even consider negotiating to assist us if they believe the integrity
of our not-even-half-professional army is compromised with internal power struggles. And, there’s already talk in the Congress of…certain Generals…vying to have Washington replaced as Commander in Chief.”

I curse under my breath. “Gates?”

Hamilton shakes his head. “We don’t know. There hasn’t been definitive proof as of yet concerning Gates, but with Stark’s victory at Bennington and now this victory at Saratoga, Washington’s dissenters will flock to support him whether he’s vying for power or not. Our loss at Brandywine doesn’t help the cause…”

“So, what are we gonna do- half the camp is celebrating General Gates as we speak.”

“I’m going to send him a pamphlet,” he says.

“What?”

“To get definitive proof.” He looks down and rummages in his letterbox, bringing out a thin paper booklet, handwritten. “I confiscated this off a soldier this morning, a pamphlet under an anonymous penname, written by a politician who’s dissatisfied with Washington’s leadership.” He hands the book to me, glaring at it in disgust, “As I said, Congress wants to point blame. It’s treasonous filth, and there’re probably twenty or thirty in circulation, so the author has already recruited help to transcribe his work and disperse it among our ranks…” he shakes his head. “I’ll send it to Gates under the guise of the author, seeking a response. Gates dismissed General Arnold as his second and replaced him with General Lee who just got parole. Lee’ll try to join us in a month’s time to rendezvous with Washington and, if Lee’s familiar with the work, we’ll know Gates shared it with him. From there, we can decide whether it merits seeking out more solid evidence of treason, and judge how to approach their dissention without alerting the French that it even exists.”

“There are so many ways that could backfire,” I say, lifting my leg to sit on the cot, facing him. “Alexander, consider it- if Gates is still loyal to Washington and we send him this packet, it may hearten him to take up the cause and rise up against him. We don’t want to create our own enemies-”

“But we have to know what enemies we have!” He stands and runs his hands through his hair. “I hate it too, John- I truly do, but this is Washington’s order. We discussed it and I asserted that same point, but…the pamphlet is being published here either way- and one of the articles describes a plan to spread their publication to the northern army where it’ll gain support. Washington believes if we can beat them to it, we can use their libel to expose our traitors. If they reach New York’s press before we get the pamphlet to Gates, we lose that opportunity and the treasonous journalism spreads nonetheless.”

“We could hunt down the authors in our camp- I actually wanted to talk to you about that. I think we have spies in our ranks; I was talking to a courier from General Wayne after the slaughter at Paoli-”

“We did- have a traitor, yes,” he says, reaching for the pamphlet from my fingers. I hand it over, brows raised curiously. “A deserter left camp just before the attack. He carried our position and numbers to Lord Grey and he took it from there- taking the flints off their rifles, now that was clever.”

“How do you-”

“-know?” he shrugs “I…read your report. The numbers didn’t match the sum of the casualties and the accountability taken in the morning. Add those factors and there’s only one conclusion- someone
left camp.”

He’s lying. I realize it immediately. He didn’t draw conclusions from intuition alone...

He lifts some papers to put the pamphlet in the bottom of his letterbox and his fingers still against the wood. His face goes blank, fingers skimming through the sheets, pushing them aside and searching frantically.

“What’s wrong-?”

“Where is it?”

“What?”

“My cleaning oils are moved- they were here when I left- it’s gone…I locked it, it’s-…did…” he picks up the case, jumping to his feet, letters flying across the tent. “Did you open my box?!” he hisses.

“I…” I hesitate, eyes glancing at the cot beneath which my draft of the testimony was tucked under a scatter of his paperwork. I had opened his letterbox to find the notes about General Sullivan, but that’s all I’d seen. But…with the talk of espionage and traitors and sending a pamphlet to General Gates, I wonder what else I might have seen that he’s so keen to protect. If Washington trusts Hamilton with everything, he must know the movements of the General’s intelligence department…and he’s hiding something from me. I narrow my eyes; “Why do you mind if I opened it?”

“Did you!”

“Alex-”

He growls, and before I can think to defend myself, he’s smacked me with the box hard enough to send me sprawling over the cot. He doesn’t waste time to straddle my waist and pin my arms with all his weight. “Did you,” he speaks quietly between gritted teeth, leaning into me menacingly, “open… my stationary box?”

I lean my face away from his, wincing. I won’t hit him, but he’s making it difficult to breathe. “I did.”

He grabs my collar and drags me up, curling my spine awkwardly, “What did you take?”

“I don’t know! What?”

“You took it-”

“I didn’t take anything!” I say, honestly confused and growing offended. His face falls in confusion, a twitch in his brow. “Hamilton, what’s this about? I was just reading your notes-”

“What?”

“About Sullivan!” I grab his wrists at my collar, pulling them so I can lay back. “I wrote a draft of the testimony so you’d read it, I…I’m sorry I did that, but…I didn’t touch anything else in your box, I just brought it in from the cart that came from Birmingham-”

Hamilton backs away, eyes wide, “You’re sure you didn’t…”

“I didn’t steal from you! I swear it!”
His lips purse and he backs off me, allows me to sit up. “Was anyone else with you?”

“Major Tallmadge helped me unload everything,” I answer, narrowing my eyes. “But, I didn’t see him open your box”

He sighs and gets off my lap, posture relaxing. His body leaves a warm imprint on my thighs. “No, of course you wouldn’t.” He moves back through the tent to redress, “I’ll strangle him.”

“Tallmadge stole something from you?” I guess, watching as Hamilton pulls up his breeches and tucks his shirt into the waist. “Something important?”

He shakes his head and picks up his vest, “No…but someone should have told me before he borrowed it.” His fingers work over a couple buttons, and before I can ask any more questions, he picks up his coat and says, “We’ll use your draft of the testimony, I’m sure it’s brilliant,” and he leaves, hat in hand, a flap of tent fabric and a wave of his long coat.

And, I’m bewildered.

I WAKE TO AN EMPTY TENT, wondering if Hamilton returned to sleep at all last night. His letters are still scattered about the floor and I stoop to collect them, feeling that same tight rise of bewilderment.

Hamilton didn’t trust me with some secret he was keeping for the General, and while I had to respect his position and the clearance he had to sensitive information, it makes me uncomfortable. Hamilton had trusted me to know his insecurities, to know his childhood abandonments, to know his unholy desires, carry and unpack his things, and collect these letters off the floor.

What secret was so dangerous that he had girded it from me?

I REPORT TO THE GENERAL’S OFFICE after morning exercises, carrying my draft for General Sullivan and several letters for French ambassadors. Neither Hamilton nor Lafayette reported to participate in the exercises, so I took up the lead with Gibbs, glad to be back on my feet again after an extended recovery for my rolled ankle.

As I walked to the General’s headquarters, a courier brought me a package from Philadelphia and I brought it inside to read, opening it as I climbed the steps. The office, all but empty with all the General’s aides out carrying messages, I took the letter to the nearest desk and angled it towards the window for sunlight. Skimming over the words, it doesn't take me long to get the gist of the message, “No, dammit!” I shove the letter away.

“Mister Laurens!” Washington snaps, voice commanding immediate attention, I go rigid. “There will be no cursing in this army!” he orders sharply- and lowers his voice, “Especially not among my officers.”

Even alone in the room with him, I’m compelled to keep formality around the General- though he rarely heeds his own orders in regards to cursing. “Yes, sir…”

“All right, then, what is the problem?”

I rise from the bench and present the letter from my father, explaining, “Sir, the Congress won’t evacuate until they are sure the city is lost. Word must have reached them that you’re planning a
counter-attack against Howe.”

The General sighs and rubs his temple, leaning over his papers. “Word reached them because I sent it,” he says.

“Sir, that’s—”

“The entire truth, Mister Laurens,” he says, looking up at me from under his brow. “They deserve to know the full scope of the situation. Their decision to remain in Philadelphia is an act of faith in me and my ability to protect them,” and he shakes his head, “but, you’re to write back to your father and tell him it’s unwanted. Tell him to enact the evacuation as a precautionary measure in case my designs at Germantown fail.”

“Yes, sir…”

I resume my seat at the bench and bring out a fresh sheet of parchment to begin a draft. As I start writing, the door opens and stumbling footsteps carry in my friends, Lafayette hobbling with an arm slung over Hamilton’s shoulders. They immediately begin talking over one another.

“Mon General, non, he says—”

“-Sir, Monsieur Lafayette’s injury is more severe than he would have you believe—”

“-Sir!”

“-And! He insists on following me about duties that he has no place in, regarding the…information I presented to you yesterday…”

Washington turns to them, eyes narrowed at the young Frenchman, “And, did he read the papers, Mister Hamilton?”

“No, sir.”

“Is the package sent to New York?”

“Yes, sir.”

“Good…”

Walking across the room, Washington’s boots hit the floor with heavy thuds and Lafayette seems to shrink under the scrutiny of the General’s disapproval.

Hamilton doesn’t hesitate to begin explaining, voice hard, “The ball that pierced his thigh splintered against bone and has lodged shrapnel in the surrounding tissue, causing a formidable risk of infection- if it’s not removed, the leg will have to be.” Hamilton straightens his spine, “Sir, he needs a hospital.”

“I see…” Washington says, turning away from Lafayette and my friend’s eyes close in pain that transcends his body. Each word Hamilton spoke seemed to dig the musket deeper into his flesh. I feel for him. “Mister Laurens,” the General says.

I rise back to my feet. “Yes?”

“In your letter, mention to your father that he is to take a passenger from the city upon his evacuation…and deliver them to the nearest hospital. A translator will meet them there.”
Lafayette takes a few seconds to understand the order, and I see his face fall as he does, eyes brimming with tears for the pain and separation that’s to come. If anything goes wrong in the surgery…he may never return to the staff. But, if he doesn’t have the surgery, he may never walk on his own legs again.

I frown, but nod, “…yes, sir.”

I begin writing my orders as Hamilton escorts Lafayette downstairs, presumably to be taken by a medical carriage to Philadelphia to meet my father. When he returns, he looks at me, expression torn and edging on guilt for condemning our friend to a hospital. I give him a sympathetic look and a nod of approval. It was cruel and hard, but it had to be done.

He sits at the bench and I slide my letter towards him for proofreading, tucking our character testimony for Sullivan under the letter. After hearing Hamilton speak of the General’s affairs against traitors in our ranks, I wonder what secretive matters he’s working to protect Washington from—whether this decision to speak on behalf of Washington for the sake of protecting Sullivan is involved. He’s given me every reason to be suspicious of his intentions, keeping me entirely in the dark…but, I trust him.

He signs his name at the bottom of the page, just over mine.

WHEN THE LETTER TO MY FATHER IS COMPLETED, Hamilton rises from the table and takes it in hand, “I’ll travel with Lafayette to Philadelphia and deliver this personally— with your approval, sir,” he says.

“Very good,” Washington says, rising also to his feet, “because I have orders for you there,” and he picks up a document from his table, blowing gently on the ink. “A gravely important task…and not a simple one, but I’m sure you will handle it with the utmost delicacy.”

It’s not a question. Hamilton’s brows draw and he steps around our table to the General’s desk, accepting the orders carefully. He immediately unfolds the page and begins skimming over the writing, fingers reaching down to the hilt of his sword and tapping a nervous rhythm as he takes in his responsibility.

Hamilton walks back around my table, and I gather my papers. Someone will have to ride to General Sullivan’s camp and deliver the letter to either John White or the General himself. This may be the best chance to go. “I’ll join you, sir,” I say, getting to my feet.

But, Washington halts the motion, pushing my shoulder back down to the bench, “You have not been dismissed, Mister Laurens.”

My blood chills. Hamilton stops in the doorway, glancing back.

“What is your rush to leave?” Washington says.

I don’t falter, an alibi quick on my tongue, “A piece of personal correspondence for General Greene, sir— he assured me I could visit his ranks at any time and I have a suggestion for a method of organizing picket duty…”

“Ah,” Washington says, his grip on my shoulder loosening. “Yes, he did request you several times this week. If you’re feeling healed enough to serve, General Greene is helping to organize an important…task. I’m sure he’d be pleased to have your ideas.”
“Sir?”

Washington’s voice lowers to a deep rumble, “A raid,” he says, smiling conspiratorially. “Revenge for Paoli. If you’re up for it.”

THE MIDDAY SUN is not as warm as it had been a few days prior. The recent rains have made the soil soft and brought an autumnal chill to the air that speaks of an early winter approaching. In Mepkin, the slaves would be hard at work, bringing in the crop and making preserves for the winter. September crawls as a more bloody affair in Pennsylvania this year.

Hamilton walks with me to the stables to collect our horses. The idea of parting ways with him again seems cruel now, as we’re finally beginning to know each other, but perhaps it’s what I need to quell my curiosity. Whatever secrets he keeps for the General, they’re not mine to know. When I officially become an aide and merit the trust that he’s earned, I’ll surely know of important matters as he does. He’s told me his concerns for the General already- and eventually, he might tell me enough that I can help him to protect Washington. I just hope he doesn’t involve himself in matters that he won’t be able to escape.

"There's fifteen-hundred soldiers in the camp Washington has you targeting," he says, "and he's not providing enough men to match. It's the same situation as the raid from Paoli," Hamilton tightens the straps of his horse's saddle, "And they were all killed in their beds because they had an information leak- you have to be careful with this operation."

His voice is tense and concerned and I have to ignore that his worry is directed at me. "I know this."

"What you said to Washington: a plan for organizing picket duty...you lied," he says bluntly, "And, I appreciate you carrying the message for Sullivan...but, maybe you should think of something to provide for Greene on the subject of picket duty...standing watch of our camps is something we struggle with- because we don't have an organized method, no orders for the sentry. It's why we were so easily attacked."

I nod thoughtfully in agreement, throwing my saddle over the horse that Hamilton stole from the British, a gift from my friend, provided in the absence of a horse from my father. "What orders does Washington have for Philadelphia?" I say casually. The subject’s bothered me, but after hearing so much of the secretive matters he’s engaged in, I had been hesitant to ask.

He feeds his own horse an apple and takes her reins in hand, "I'm to collect as many shoes, blankets, horses, and items of necessity as I can from the citizens of the city before the British occupy it..." he says casually.

Whatever I had expected, it was not that.

"Who's to say the British will occupy it!" I say, indignant.

"It's precautionary."

I'm shocked- and frankly disgusted with the idea and how easily he accepts it. "So essentially, Washington is ordering you to steal from our countrymen because we might fail to protect their city from being invaded. What, exactly, does he think we're fighting for if a man’s property is entitled to seizure by the military?"

He raises both brows at me. “Ah, a southerner who believes in Abolition is uncomfortable with government seizure of property?”
I don't blink at his taunting. “Absolutely- this doesn’t involve abolishing an oppressive trade, it’s just stealing monetary items from hard-working Americans. It’s immoral.”

He snorts. “Your mission is any more moral? Killing men in their beds?”

I shock at him, “Alex, those fucking lobsterbacks under Grey were killing men who’d surrendered…” I say defensively. “They ran them through with their hands up-”

“And, if I don’t collect supplies from Philadelphia, the redcoats will by force- this isn’t just to supply our army, it’s to deprive the enemy.”

I finish saddling my horse and take the reins. Hamilton pulls his horse tight to his side and gives me an imploring look, tilting his head towards the door, and we both start walking into camp.

He explains himself, “John, believe me, I hope you’ll skewer every bloody redcoat on that field- I don’t intend to denounce your raid, but to prove my point. Please don’t paint me a tyrant for carrying this order through... Property is just property- men can live without their material objects, they shouldn’t live without their agency. We have to trust that our ends are more just than the injustice of this seizure.”

"I...couldn't paint you a tyrant,” I assure him, laughing tensely. He’s absolutely right, but I already hate the idea of him facing the mob or going into a city with secretive orders from Washington. I worry for his safety if he’s involving himself in a spy ring, and even if those fears are unfounded, he’s still entering the city to enact a difficult mission. I cannot imagine anyone will be pleased to hear their belongings were being seized for Washington’s soldiers. They’re bound to take it out on the messenger. I could already imagine Hamilton standing on a city podium, delivering an eloquent speech to the stir the hearts of citizens to 'cheerfully afford their assistance to soldiers, whose sufferings they are bound to commiserate, and who are eminently exposed to danger and distress, in defense of every thing they ought to hold dear.'

To a citizen whose property is being taken, it would sound like a load of shit- and they would throw the like at my friend...

We walk in silence through the lines of tents, men taking care of injuries, writing letters to their family to go out with a post courier, cleaning their uniforms, checking their weapons. Lafayette’s wagon becomes visible at the end of row and we glance at each other, at our orders, shoulders heavy until we reach the Marquis.

I offer Lafayette a greeting, touching his hand and assuring him that I’ll draw up some maps for him to desecrate with his battle plans when he gets back, warning him in advance about my father’s temper. He laughs, assuring me that my father can’t be more frightening than his grandmother- and I’m prone to agree.

The carriage guide calls back to Hamilton that they have to leave, and Alexander turns to me, fingers shifting in his horse’s reins. He stands back at arm’s length, studying my face for several moments until I offer a smile and he can’t help but return it, slapping my arm. We have our orders- grave as they are, we’ll carry them out. It’s exciting to be on our feet.

“Hey, you better come back,” he says. “I don’t think I can handle all these Frenchies on my own.”

“Oi!” Lafayette voices from the wagon, kicking Hamilton with his good leg.

I lean over his shoulder towards his ear, “I think I’d rather take Frenchies and redcoats over a bunch of angry homeowners…”
He laughs, meets my eyes, and ducks to hug me, tucking himself into my chest, head under my chin. I can’t tell if it’s the force of his hug or the force of my heartbeat that drives all the air from my lugs. I return the embrace slowly, putting my chin to the top of his head, and I look up.

Lafayette waggles his brows at me.

I stick my tongue out.

Hamilton pulls away, clasping my shoulder again before backing to mount his horse, “Hey, be safe.”

I grin. “You as well…”
The Battle of Germantown

The Pound of Flesh, which I demand of him, is dearly bought

... 

THERE IS A DARKNESS IN ME that differs from the dark stains that course through my bloodline. For generations, my forefathers wrought their success on the backs of others, but as soon as I inherit my share of my father's property, I'll release the slaves that wish to leave- and employ those who'd stay. My darkness is not a component of inheritance. It was not threaded into my flesh and family tree, but stained into my soul. It was not unavoidable and I cannot pay it away with manumission. I will not outrun it by presenting myself as a gentleman. Though the truth will hide under that mask...

Valor.

It reared in me after I reported to General Greene. As Hamilton suggested, I provided him a proposal for the watch. I offered to serve overnight picket duty. Taking up a rifle or sword on no sleep, being up all night on watch was a dangerous risk and I would risk myself before any other. I lack these sorts of experiences that mark the life of a soldier, so I stood several hours of sentry duty.

The next morning, before the sun rose, Greene's division, supported by three regiments and some dragoons, made the attack- I led a charge of twenty men.

And I rampaged through the camp. Each man that I drove through on my sword assuaged me of my frustrations- as if by stealing away the motion from his limbs and heart, I could justify the movement of my own. I made no dishonorable, unopposed kills. Hamilton had concerned me of the morality of ‘killing men in their beds’, but the alarm went up, and all the soldiers were awake and resisting, and groggy as they may have been, their sheer numbers placed the burden upon us to mount our fears and press with all our skill and bravery. Like at Brandywine, I found an unfamiliar rage in my heart; I forgot all mortality and fought by the blade, an erotic thrill in tempting death- a frantic and novel gluttony for life.

Five-hundred British bodies were strewn across the field of battle, some half-dressed, some still in their nightclothes, cheeks lathered with shaving cream, but every one of them armed and overcome by force. A camp of fifteen-hundred redcoats, and we killed a third of them.

I relished the slaughter...

I OFFERED MY SERVICES TO REMAIN with General Greene's division, providing assistance as a volunteer aide in addition to my duties to General Washington, collecting reports, transcribing receipts, organizing pickets, overseeing supply distribution, riding notes feverishly back and forth between camps. Occasionally, I carried parcels from my father, describing the welfare of Congress as several of the delegates begin leaving to travel to York...

My father had begun packing to leave, and I committed the credit for this miracle to my dearest friends who had departed from me to find him in Philadelphia.

Lafayette reached me in a letter, attached in a parcel from my father and I delighted in his correspondence. He was brave through his surgery and well-attended by a translator from Washington himself, Major Monroe. The shards of the musket ball had been successfully removed,
and if the nurses could manage to keep him off his feet, the Marquis would make a full recovery. He didn’t complain a word of the procedure nor did he mention any misgivings about my father, but then, I never heard a complaint from the Marquis and took it as little indication of his actual comfort around my patriarch. I wrote to him nightly for updated accounts of his health, but if he responded, his letters never reached me.

Hamilton managed one letter from Philadelphia, two days after their departure, marked in response to my letter of the twenty-second. He warned me forthright that he would not be writing while he’s away, expressing regret for not having time for it and assuring me that it is not for lack of desire to converse with me. He answered my queries of his work, describing the painstaking business of collecting supplies from unwilling patrons, managing a party of twenty officers, twelve horses and Captain Gibbs- listed in order of increasing difficulty.

In the void of letters from him, I worried that he must be surrounded by angry citizens, an increasingly Tory population, and a city under the shadow of an impending British siege...everything of Alexander’s station placed him in the center of a target. I devoted more thoughts to his safety than I could afford to spare while simultaneously in the service of two Generals- even as a supernumerary on both staffs.

I kept myself busy lest I miss my friends too dearly and sink into familiar melancholia.

But, it’s easy to keep busy.

We are short-staffed, and after the battle at Brandywine, the army is bereft of able-bodied troops. Those that remain are ill-equipped, hungry, and exhausted from frequent attempts at prodding the British strongholds. They speak eagerly about the expiration of their service agreements, and I loathe to hear it, but as a volunteer force, it remains unavoidable. It will take several weeks for any reinforcements of Continental Troops to come from the northern army under Gates’ Generals, but if we were going to request forces from the army in New York, we should have done so weeks ago.

I am all too aware of the disadvantage that our army is falling into.

My visits to General Washington are enlightening in ways that my position in the field cannot be. On the evening of the 22nd, just hours after cleaning the British blood from my uniform and body, I was poised in His Excellency’s tent, having reported the results of our raid.

I was transcribing Washington’s response to General Greene’s request for more musket balls when my friend, Major White, arrived in his tent with a note from General Sullivan’s division.

He saluted sharply, stepped inside upon Washington’s invitation, and immediately reported. “Sir, we evacuated the army from the east camps where we were blocking the Fords along the upper Schuylkill as you directed- in short, the enemy was ignoring us in favor of plundering the locals for supplies and caches. From the disdain they stirred, General Sullivan secured several informants, and we have reliable intelligence.”

Washington looked up from the letter, interested, and I watched my friend with piqued curiosity. His Excellency had been receiving intelligence notes from across the field in all sectors all week- nothing urgent enough to come by a forward-deployed General’s aide.

White continued, “General Howe is planning to move his forces to Fatlands Ford at Norristown…we left our campfires burning and our tents assembled, but the feint didn’t work. Someone must have informed them that we’d evacuated.”

Washington hums in understanding, “I guess they learned their lesson from Trenton.”
After a moment’s consideration, I made a dark realization. After Brandywine, Howe had spread his army along the Schuylkill from Fatlands Ford in the east to Gordons Ford in the west. If he wanted to attack our musket and rifle ammunitions base in Reading Furnace, he would use Gordons Ford as a staging point from which to launch. Fatlands Ford made a perfect stage to attack Philadelphia...and Norristown stood just between our army and the Capitol city...

As Major White sat at Washington’s desk to begin transcribing His Excellency’s response to this intelligence, I stood from the bench. “Sir!” I said, “he’s going to march unopposed into Philadelphia, we have to move to-”

“I know this,” His Excellency stopped me firmly before I could begin to suggest that we muster a defense. “And we will not move.”

I faltered, shoulders falling in surprise, “Sir!” the tent went silent and I realized that, not for the first time, I was missing a key piece of the General’s plans. “You’ll... let them take the capitol?”

Washington’s eyes pinned me still, and I suddenly felt like a child under my father’s scrutiny, foolish and young, but simultaneously appalled and indignant. My respect for the General outweighed my protests, but he waited for me to sit back down at the bench before he explained, voice low and grave and quick, “Philadelphia has no military worth; our men are exhausted and Howe’s forces are spread such that, if I move our soldiers in any semblance of a defensive stance, we would be leaving all our most valuable supplies at Reading unguarded. If all else of our government falls at this juncture, the army must remain capable.”

I stared at His Excellency as he returned his attention to Major White’s correspondence, and I felt my friend’s eyes on the back of my head as I absorbed Washington’s words, the full scope of realization taking time to settle into comprehensible thoughts. So many factors connected that I had not believed were related- our designs at Germantown, Hamilton’s orders to wipe Philadelphia of military supplies, weeks of letters at Congress to flee the city, the congressional delegates’ disdain for General Washington’s plans...

This was a contingency for the loss at Brandywine.

The capitol had become a pawn...a trap for Howe to fall into.

ON SEPTEMBER TWENTY-SIXTH, a small detachment of troops miraculously arrived from Major General Putnam in New York, reporting that they were ordered to rendezvous with Washington's army by an order from His Excellency himself dating to the fourteenth. When I carried the news to Washington, he gave me a brief look of confusion before dismissing me.

We lost Philadelphia that day.

NOW, TWO DAYS LATER, another division of troops comes from Major General Heath in Massachusetts. When I carry the news to Washington, he shakes his head fondly and mutters, "Hamilton", the answer to an unasked question.

The man himself instantly appears in the doorway of the General's study, poking his head into the room. His eyes meet mine and he smiles in a brief fit of excitement, I mirror his eagerness, a jolt of elation to see him again, safe- before he finds himself and focuses his attention on Washington.

"Sir? I completed your request to Congress," he says, stepping in and producing a letter.
Washington accepts the paper, with a soft, "And I have received your reinforcements from the north."

Alexander's eyes dart back to me in quick realization. His face flushes- as does mine when I realize I've inadvertently reported him to the General for acting without orders. Before our last meeting, while we all believed him taken prisoner or killed in action, he must have called for reinforcements from Major General Putnam and Major General Heath...ordering them with Washington's authority.

"Sir, I penned those orders in haste while I was in Philadelphia, I acted on the assumption that-

"You took initiative," Washington says mildly, already dismissing Hamilton's apology. "And acted with the discretion of your office in the necessary moment. As I ask of you." He turns his attention away from us both to proofread the drafted letter.

It's as close to a 'good job' as I've ever heard from the General, but Hamilton’s frown doesn’t lift under the praise and he glances at me, a questioning look. I shake my head. I didn't know he had written orders. His eyes dart back to Washington and he braces himself at parade rest, hands tucked neatly behind his back, chin lifted with a defiant forcefulness as he waits for the General to read his letter.

Feeling slovenly in my posture, I mimic him, and the motion catches the General's eye. He raises a brow and dismisses us both. "I can read very well without your audience."

WE NO SOONER REACH THE HALLWAY, than Alexander is turning me around and grabbing my shoulders, all the weight of missing him suspended between us. His smile in Washington's office had insinuated his eagerness to reunite, and with some privacy, his grin becomes all the more dazzling- as if the light in his eyes must be reflected off me. "You're well? You look well- it's good to see you, I've heard your raid was a success," he speaks fast, words pulled sharp in his sonorous timbre. "Two battalions fallen overnight- and with no small credit to yourself." His hands fall to clutch at mine.

Whatever unease I had felt for enjoying the bloody affair melts in a rush of his infectious excitement. "Your messenger gives me too much credit," I laugh. I had mentioned the raid in my letters, but only in passing, reporting numericals, casualties, and supplies lost. I hadn't detailed my own contribution- because he had not asked and I had not wanted to talk of it. But, I realize he must be excited to hear of actual military matters, glad to be away from requisitioning supplies.

Alex squeezes my fingers, dropping one hand to guide me down the hallway with the other, steering us both towards the front door. "Don't be modest," he chides. "His Excellency doesn't exaggerate- and you played a role in the raid's success, didn't you?"

The implication strikes me into a giddy smile. "Washington said that?"

"In sparing words," he admits, "but, it's what I believe he meant, and I've had enough practice transcribing his thoughts to read between the lines." There's no admiration for Washington in his voice, and we walk briskly away from His Excellency's office as if he cannot be away from the General quickly enough. "He approves of your bravery- if not fears for your safety, but I maintain that Washington girds his best officers too closely to exploit their best potential. Try not to interpret his concern as a lack of faith in your abilities."

I absorb his compliments with hesitant pride, glad when he offers an opportunity for me to divert the course of our conversation. "It sounds as though you speak with experience."
His smile only grows warmer and he holds the door open for me as we step outside. "If Washington used my potential, we'd've won this war by now," he declares.

I bark a laugh, shoving him as I pass the threshold. He's jesting, and judging by his wolfish grin, he trusts me to realize it, but if Washington heard him speaking in that manner, he'd get a lecture about arrogance- joking or not.

"When must you return to General Greene?" he says, beginning a walk towards the Paulins Mill stables.

I hum in response, shrugging my shoulders, "Technically, I've finished my work for the day. He's to meet General Washington tonight to review the plans for Germantown, but I've already gone over the brief with him and transcribed all his notes, so he dismissed me to Washington's service, said he'd meet me here later tonight to return to camp..."

"Well, Washington's occupied with that request to Congress, and he doesn't expect me back for a few hours. He won't have anything for you until they're all ready for his briefing..."

"Which is to be after dinner, yes?"

He nods.

"So...I have...free time?"

He nods again, eyes searching my face with mounting elation. I hadn’t realized it. I stop in our path to consider the concept of taking a break from military work. The last rest I'd taken had been for painfully healing the contusion I’d received at Brandywine. And, I am glad to be back on my feet properly; I have no desire to rest.

Hamilton turns to me, hand still folded around mine, "Come with me," he says, pulling my arm. "There's something I'd like to show you." He resumes our pace to the stables; I stretch my legs to keep up with him. "Fitzgerald briefed me what I missed this morning," he says. "Washington rode to Fatlands Mansion to survey Cornwallis’s camp last Sunday. There’s a view there for miles, and the clouds cleared up- I’ve been wanting to see...”

Fatlands Mansion. Hamilton’s voice drifts and I recall what my friend, Major White, had reported six days ago. Howe is planning to move his forces to Fatlands Ford- the enemy was surely settled on that land by now. Does Alexander know?

“That’s quite a ride,” I say.

“True, but...we could see both Gordon’s Ford and Norristown from there...a beautiful view and a...a good purpose to survey it...” his voice drifts shyly with a sort of hesitant desperation, mouth pinched with this sudden reluctance.

Diffidence doesn’t suit him- it betrays his intentions, the information he omits.

I realize he’s asking me to follow him behind enemy lines, and his posture screams that he knows the severity of what he’s asking. I wonder whether the enemy camps are something he’s been wanting to see or ordered to see, and I notice, for the first time since leaving His Excellency's office, that Hamilton has carried a travelling bag slung over his shoulder. This excursion was planned. If his assignment is to take a report of Howe’s movements, I can understand why he wouldn’t say so forthright- he would have been ordered not to- though he must expect that I'll draw the conclusion myself before giving an answer whether I’ll accompany him...
While I would loathe such orders for the inherent risk involved to Hamilton’s life and character- and while I would feel embittered for the insinuation of distrust against Major White’s report- I understand His Excellency’s need for reassurance. At Brandywine, Major Spear’s false report that General Howe’s entire army was mustered against us at Chadds Ferry lost us the opportunity for an easy victory. We cannot afford another loss at the hand of faulty intelligence.

Still, I’m not trained in reconnaissance, and if we were caught in such a proximity to the British camp in our dark blue uniforms (as there’s no chance we’d go shamefully disguised as civilians) the redcoats would hang us like dogs. It sounds to me like he simply wants me to make the trip with him for company, a dangerous trip and a dangerous invitation.

I agree without hesitation.

Tension falls from his shoulders and we chat about our week of separation as we ready our horses. I’m relieved to hear that he enjoyed my letters, and received every one of them. I had feared they were excessive, embarrassingly abrasive, too ardent to be appreciated, and inadvertently demanding of reciprocation that I knew not to expect.

Because I conveyed all my work with His Excellency through those letters, I find myself without much to talk about, but Hamilton takes up the conversation, recounting what he hadn’t had time to commit to paper. "The tories were having a grand time in the affair,” he says, "sweeping up the streets for the redcoats to come march on- practically polishing the cobbles." He shakes his head in disgust. "This one man- Joseph Galloway," he gritted his teeth to speak the name, "he led an effort, rounding up patriots who had no choice but to remain, putting them to confinement in their own houses- ugh...he kept the rabble off the streets beautifully."

I raise a brow at him and throw my saddle over the mare’s back- still the one he had gifted me because my father’s been preoccupied. "Beautifully?"

He huffs with frustration for the admission, "Yes- it would have been a mob without his discretion…” Lifting his own saddle, he has to stand on his toes to reach his horse’s back and dress him. Dropping back, he gives a smug grin, “Of course, he couldn’t prevent me from collecting on the General’s orders, and he did aide us in keeping civility...for the most part.”

“For the most part?”

“I got in one good punch before Gibbs threw a fit.”

I laugh. Hamilton had complained in his letter about working with Washington’s personal security chief, but I wonder who had given the other more trouble- Captain Gibbs or himself. I still have some bruises to attest that Hamilton is a difficult man to protect.

His grin widens, pleased with my amusement. “And you?” he says. “What role, exactly did you play in the raid’s success? How many did you kill in the fight?”

His blunt curiosity brings back a gorey stench, sudden, pungent and coppery and nothing like the reality of the stables. I had been soaked in it, unaware until I returned to camp and undressed and I saw the blood...drenched into the buff fabric of the lapels, darkening the royal blue to nearly black. Shrewsberry had to force my fingers to release their grip on the coat, horrified to clean the stains. All acts of revolution have become honorable in their necessity...but...I know intimately the number of men I had killed…

“I only ask because you were so successful…practically nothing we’ve done lately has been so...” Hamilton says gently.
I glance over, above my saddle, fingers clenching where I had not noticed them. He’s watching me with his brow drawn in concern and I startle. “Oh…I…” I realize he’s right to ask for details, if not for curiosity then for professionality. It’s important to not only report the numerical success of an endeavor, but to analyze the causes to render them a precedent for future expeditions. So, I explain the orders I established for our sentry, the method of relieving a watch-stander, the specific march we arranged to ensure that the entire perimeter of our camp was covered at all times, the signals and warnings that were established in the case of an attack.

Alexander asks questions when it’s necessary to draw more information from me, he’s interested and impressed and professional in his inquiries. I appreciate it, until he says, ‘How was it though…the fighting? Gilbert told me about Brandywine- you fought like a man possessed, he said, ‘a Spartoi Américain’. It sounds like you enjoyed yourself…”

It’s a compliment, but it feels like an accusation. “I had twenty men in my platoon,” I say intently, quickly, a small number, but for a volunteer Aide without a real field post, it’s not unusual to have a small, irregular command. “We cleared three squad encampments and an officer’s tent, took five rifles, a cart of muskets, a crate of gunpowder—”

“No, I mean… how was it? It’s been nearly a year since I saw any real action.”

I stall, fingers tight over the horse’s reins. No one asks about the fight itself. After the battle, the officers of Greene’s division had drank together in celebration, we had boasted our prizes, but no one had expressed their personal reflections- no one had the gall to recognize the demons growing under our skin, an erotic thrill in tempting death- a novel gluttony for life.

Alexander watches me, waiting for some sign of comprehension, but I don’t speak, so he says, “Personally, I miss it.”

If he was not voicing a sentiment mirrored in my own breast, I would appall at his candor. I can only think of one acceptable reason why anyone honorable should wish for the horrors of war, “For the glory?”

“Of course—” he says, then quiets before admitting,”but...also the simplicity.” His hands pause at his saddle and he stares at them distantly. “When everything becomes a rush of danger, all the air a swarm of volleys, you can feel your own life, just an act in your hands, just a couple feet within reach; it’s...complete control. All decisions become simple logic- perform or die. There’s no nuance, no room for interpretation, no judgment in that moment. You’re right or you’re dead- and if you’re right and you’re dead, you’re remembered in glory. It’s simple and sure. The fastest response any divine hand ever delivered.”

I’ve stopped my hands at the straps of my own saddle, watching his face for any shift in expression- he sees me staring. “...A response?” I say.

“To our cause- freedom.” He resumes adjusting the straps, tone gone casual. “...We kill for freedom.”

I recognize my own words, spoken so many weeks ago, pressed against a tavern wall in a heated flush of arousal. I had meant them at the time, but at the time, I had never performed the act. My heart thinks differently now- conflicted. When you strip away all the causes and laurels, you’re left with blood on your clothes, aches in your bones, and a horrified look from a servant who’s known you all your life.

Hamilton presses one boot into his saddle and lifts himself to mount, a graceful movement, familiar. “When I came to the mainland,” he says conversationally, “I had no political attachments, no
opinions about the prices of parchment or tea or cotton, just the basic principle that human dignity
has worth. Each man should have the right and the obligation to meet his potential, and their
government should not interfere but facilitate. It should function with the same principle to become
the best of its capabilities- the most fair, the most ordered, the most just, so that a lowly clerk with the
proper ethics can become a scholar- a lazy noble can rot in his own indolence, but those that are
dererving, hard-working, willing, they can make judgments for their own welfare.”

I listen to Hamilton’s blustering speech as I mount my horse, leaning into the saddle comfortably as
we begin a slow canter. I’m relieved to let him take up the conversation, sure that he’ll ameliorate the
discomfort he’s caused. He has a pleasant voice, deep but bright, forcing my attention to his meaning
with sharp enunciation and a hint of an accent when he focuses too heavily on his words and lazes
on their delivery.

I’ve spent the past week missing his chatty disposition. From my mother’s bedtime stories to
Aristotelian lectures at college, hearing others talk has always helped me to organize my mind, and
Alexander seems to do all the work for me, voicing my thoughts through his own tongue and
arranging them in a way that banishes the traitorous conflicting parts of me.

“The greatest thinkers of our generation,” he says, “brought feelings alive on paper so eloquently the
disaffected became the dissatisfied, musings turned to a movement...and the movement itself is a
miracle. We should have lost our support in New York- but we didn’t. Loss after loss, men re-enlist.
Can anything short of a shared sanctified spirit create such a determined, hardy, persevering force of
men? The fact that our cause still exists should be proof enough!” he motions broadly with his hands.
“So, perhaps it’s proprietary, or just human determination- but no less divine. Either way, battle is my
answer. It feels right, so it must be right- freedom, self-government, justice, liberty. We deserve that-
we should die for that, kill for that- and enjoy it. It’s a good and lovely thing!”

I laugh when he puts so much force into his words that his chest puffs, and when he looks at me, I
feel my smile grow flushed. All week I had been searching for that easy acceptance I felt after
Brandywine. Somehow, in the bloodiness of the raid, I had lost my assurance. Now...I feel better.

He grins, satisfied, and kicks into a gallop. I follow, considering. It feels right, so it must be right...

WE RIDE SOUTH ALONG PERKIOMEN CREEK, pressing our horses at an exhausting pace,
thighs burning with the effort of keeping aloof in our saddles for a nine-mile ride. We move on
established paths until we reach Germantown Pike, a rise in the landscape where the British-held
lines begin. Though there’s no sign of fortifications, we guide our path into the woods for cover. We
pass Landis Mills and Runnymeade, Dorchester and Mills Grove, houses a distant outline on flat
ground through the treeline.

Hamilton's posture is comfortable for such a difficult pace on uneven terrain. His coat flaps behind
his legs, clinging around his middle to outline his attractive slenderness, and the effort of pressing his
knees into his horse’s sides shows the definition in his thighs. His hair comes loose in it’s tie and
brushes his face where it’s not pinned under his trifold. Our pacing shifts comfortably between us,
sometimes he in the lead and sometimes myself- though he knows the way and I prefer him in front
where I can watch him.

When the contour of the land rises, Hamilton rushes ahead, guides our gallop to thinner tree cover,
and stops, dismounting before his horse has fully-stilled. I slow behind him, hoofs thumping loudly
as my horse trots to a stop and I drop into my saddle, “Are we on foot from here?” I say, already
moving to dismount.
He guides his horse to a patch of brush where a tree had fallen into a gully. “I doubt we’ll have any problem,” he says, “but supposedly, there is a patrol that passes through Audubon twice a day...our intelligence claims that Howe’s been insultingly lax in his fortification and these patrols are a staged rumor- but if that intelligence is true, Howe’s also holding a Generals’ meeting today. Security will be strong. We cannot risk being given away by shrieking horses- and moreover, we cannot risk them being spooked if we’re caught on foot and pressed to make a run.”

I agree. It will be nice to have our horses stowed at a safe distance, easy to reach but difficult to stumble upon accidentally, hidden in a fair amount of cover. “Let’s keep them close,” I say. “Within sprinting distance.”

He nods.

WE REACH THE FRONT LAWN of the Fatlands Mansion at noon. The Schuylkill divides Cornwallis’s forces in the West from the property and Howe’s movement to Norristown in the east nearly hides behind a bend in the river. On either side, we’re surrounded by enemy camps- distant, but looming.

Alexander seems giddy for the threat. We skirt around the edge of the long, manicured lawn, ducking beneath trimmed hedges. Behind the gated border of the property, the mansion sits haughty and impending with long white columns and a trickling fountain- a garden tended as neatly as a French gala lawn. There are no gardeners outside or servants so far as I can see, but it’s safer to hide from the windows in case anyone indoors might look outside, and Alexander keeps his voice low as he directs us around the border of the property and into the back yard. The homeowners were patriots when His Excellency visited last week, but there’s no telling who might be quartered inside now that the British occupy this land.

When we reach the rear of the property, we duck back into the cover of trees, Alexander having located the highest point of terrain from which to scope. As soon as the treeline covers our movement, he breaks into a sprint and I follow, fast at his heels. It’s been weeks since we’ve shared our exercises, running circles around the enlisted soldiers and directing the sergeants to shout at stragglers. I’ve missed having him beside me, faces flushed, hearts pumping, breath tangible and quick, the most basic natural connection.

“Is this where General Washington made his survey?” I ask, pressing my legs to keep up.

“No,” he replies easily, “But, Norristown’s a ways further than Gordons Ford- we need higher ground.”

“How will we see through the trees?” I say, leaping over a log and dodging a few low-hanging branches to stay beside him as he takes up the easiest track of our path, feet crunching in the fallen leaves that coat the ground.

“Who says we need to see through them,” Hamilton throws me a clever grin and picks up his pace, rushing ahead to the peak of the hill. I huff, stretching my stride, but before I can catch up, he takes a sharp turn and leaps abruptly. I spin on my heal just in time to avoid being kicked in the face as he pulls himself up and flips his legs back and over a high branch he caught.

I stagger back, bewildered.

He throws his leg up and over the branch to straddle it securely, pressing the flat of his palm to the tree between his legs and dropping his other hand down in a blatant offer to me. I could barely reach
the branch if I jumped and grabbing his hand to would tear off his arm, I’m sure.

“No way…” I shake my head.

“Laurens…”

“You won’t pull me up there.”

“We’ve come all this way!”

“This is ridiculous,” I hiss.

His lips press into what can only be described as a pout and he flattens his chest against the tree limb. “John…”

“It’s undignified.”

“Who’s to see us?”

“I’ll tear my uniform trying to get up there.”

“Then take my hand.”

“I’ll pull you down-”

“Oh, come on-”

“No, you’ll pull something in your arm.”

“Then I’ll move- you can use this branch, here,” he shifts his chest up, moving with precarious grace, bracing an arm against the trunk of the tree to stand and step to an adjacent limb, climbing several branches higher. I watch, unimpressed when he plants himself on a sturdy limb and sways his feet, making a hithering motion.

I purse my lips.

He raises his brows.

I sigh. “Dammit.”

AFTER A SERIES OF GRUNTS, slips, and ignoble huffs, I find a comfortable nook to perch in and settle. I’m sure I’ve scraped my stockings and made pesky stains, but hopefully nothing’s torn but my dignity.

Alexander’s already braced himself precariously against the bulk of the tree trunk, satchel open, holding a brass telescope against his eye and glaring to the west. He perks when he hears me settle nearby and turns to me, checking that I’m mounted and stable before returning his eye to his telescope and searching to replace his aim. “I could have lifted you up, y’know,” he says, a teasing grin plucking up the corner of his lips.

I roll my eyes, “Sure.”

He laughs- partially at himself, but covers the humility and says, “Have you never climbed a tree?”
“Of course,” I say defensively. Father hadn’t been pleased about it, but what little boy could properly resist such a temptation. “Just...Carolina oaks are much more...forgiving- lower branches and such.”

He hums in sympathy, “Can’t say I’ve ever seen one,” he muses. “But, palm trees- you have those, yes? I used to love those, they practically have handles to climb. The only time I ever see men up in trees around here, they’re hunting.”

“Is that what we’re doing?” I say, teasing lightly. I know he cannot divulge our purpose here.

He just laughs me off and I fall silent as he mumbles to himself, something about the layout of the land he’s seeing, searching for evidence of Howe’s camp. He sounds frustrated-insulted- that the horizon around Germantown lacks fortifications. I can tell the moment he’s found what he’s searching for as his mumbling grows more frantic and he begins counting what he sees.

He drops the telescope and rummages in his bag for a field pad, arranging himself to brace the paper on the thick of the tree. “Looks like two divisions- a few small redoubts on the bluff against the river and at Luken’s Mill, but...I don’t see any fortifications,” he says, jotting it down. “Mostly cavalry, but some dragoons, grenadiers, and hessians, I think.” He glances up and passes me the telescope, points in the direction to aim it. “Your friend’s got a good source.”

I take the brass scope and freeze, looking at him hard as he returns to his work. He’s just admitted that we’re spying...he wasn’t supposed to do that. I already assumed that we were here to confirm Major White’s report, and I had known he wouldn’t divulge the information, but if he had orders against it, he shouldn’t have said it at all. If he was going to tell me- he should have done it before we left. It’s hard not to assume that he’s only being honest now as repayment for my indulging his climbing antics. I don’t want to be paid for my friendship. “Of course John White’s a reliable source…”

Alexander looks up from his note and glances at me, brow raised at my tone. “I know…” he says. “We don’t distrust General Sullivan’s man...I don’t distrust your friend, but his report was more than a little unclear, and General Washington needs to be sure of his plans before we disseminate them.”

“If we’re here to spy, you might’ve thought to mention it-”

“Oh, you already knew,” he says, cutting me off and turning back to his notes. He’s right and I know it was obvious but his dismissive tone frustrates me. “Don’t be so womanish.”

I snap my mouth shut, boiling in frustration. If I protest his treatment, he’ll only have more cause to dismiss me as emotional, so I press the looking glass to my eye and search for Howe’s camp in the distance. The scratching of Hamilton’s pen overcomes the rustling in the trees. We both fall silent.

I focus on searching the distance. The horizon is beautifully colored in autumnal hues, golds and auburns, fleeting green pastures draped in speckles of red and yellow. I miss the colors of Switzerland in the fall, the rolling hillsides drenched in an impossible shade of orange, trees that seemed to glow like sunsets. When the telescope falls on Howe’s tents, it disrupts the melody of the landscape, makes the hues of the trees stand out like bloodstains on buff lapels and blue fabric. I slowly, meticulously count out the forces camped there, identify hessians, dragoons, artillery, and confirm Hamilton’s report.

He finishes writing it slowly, carefully setting his things in his bag before facing west. “John…” he says as I start checking the western horizon for Cornwallis’s camp. He waits for me to hum in acknowledgement before he says, “If I thought you weren’t aware of my mission, I would have dropped it. I had orders not to tell anyone, and I probably should not have asked you here, but I wanted-”
“It’s fine,” I say, keeping the brass pressed to my eye.

He’s silent for another moment as I search the horizon before he says, “Also...I met your father in Philadelphia as he was leaving.”

I hum.

“And...I suppose, as I’ve had the privilege of meeting yours and you know nothing of mine, it’s only fair that I tell you something of my father…”

I pull my eye from the rim of the scope and look at him incredulously. More bartering in knowledge. Does he think I’m angry with him? He’s too private to consider his past a bargaining chip and the offer is unsightly. He had divulged to me that he was orphaned and I would not have him speak on such a personal subject as a deceased parent. I feel insulted that he would think I’d want it. “You don’t have to,” I say.

“But, I should.”

“Alex-”

“He is a noble Scotsman.”

I stop. Is...present tense? A noble?

“The fourth son of a distinguished family, raised in a castle among parties with royals and the wealthiest names in Great Britain.” He leans back against the branches he’s perched on, doesn’t meet my gaze, looks beyond me to the horizon, and I recall my early assumptions that he must be born of cold nobility. It doesn’t feel right or vindicating to have that suspicion confirmed. “He made a business venture to St. Kitts,” Hamilton continues, “met my mother there, she had a good family, I suppose…” he shrugs. “So, when it comes to parentage, you might not guess it, but I’ve got more to brag about than most those pomp fools like Walker and Harrison. That’s all there is of it. He’s still in the Caribbean, so it’s not as though you’ll meet him.”

I don’t fail to notice that Hamilton still talks about his childhood like most men talk of battle- vague and impersonal and he finishes his explanation dismissively, forbidding further inquiry. I’m glad for it. I’m eager to be rid of the subject. I am shocked to hear his father’s alive- having thought him an orphan for so long, but I’m more shocked with myself, that I don't want to know more. Nothing of how I see him has changed- and I don't want it to.

“What do you think of this planned attack on Germantown,” I say instead, raising the telescope back to my eye.

Hamilton goes silent, considering the abrupt change in subject. He shifts his seat, shuffling lower and raising his legs to brace on a branch above him, leaning back casually. “Necessary but dispicable for its necessity.”

I glance at him, brows drawing. He’s speaking plainly because we are alone with no one else to think him treasonous. His honesty almost seems an apology for his personal secrecy, but I’ll accept it.

“In what way?” I ask.

“We should not have lost Brandywine,” he says, “And we should have done more to protect the people of Philadelphia…Washington doesn’t know how afraid they are now. He didn’t have to see it.”

“In his defense, there wasn’t much choice in the matter,” I say mildly. It vexes me to voice an
opinion against one that I agree with, and I haven’t seen the panicked state of our capitol like he has so I’m bound to respect his resentment, but some level of innate loyalty to His Excellency compels me. “Washington could either protect our supplies based around Reading, or he could protect Philadelphia, and it’s like Lafayette told me, it'll be good if the British take Philadelphia.” He hums in deference as I speak, “It'll be a logistical nightmare for them to hold -”

"I know that’s true,” he admits, interrupting my argumentation. “Especially with the lack of supplies that I've presented them... The tory filth that remained in town'll have to pay exorbitant prices for foodstuffs...and the governing body is always at fault for prices...” he spices his tone with obvious self-satisfaction.

I cannot help but grin at his cheek, "They won't be so disaffected by the revolution when they can't pay for British bread."

He settles his weight more fully against the branch he’s perched upon, gazing over the horizon without the aide of his telescope. The aging sunlight catches his face just right to exaggerate the cut of his jaw and the hollow revines under his eyes from working diligently. “I admit that His Excellency acts in prudence to make the best decision amongst many bad ones, but on principle...something in me rebels against the idea of sacrificing our place of government,” he admits as if he’s speaking to himself, but I don’t feel I’ve intruded on his thoughts- or that he would mind it if I had. “Even if it’s done in preservation of our army.”

Considering the losses we would have sustained had the British taken Reading instead, and I can’t help but tease him, “I would never imagine you to value politicians over soldiers…”

He turns to me and baulks until he notices my taunting grin, “Rome was built on sword and toga, Laurens,” he says, half-chiding. “And I would expect the son of the President to be more invested in our government…”

“And what a shame! We could revive the fashion.”

I settle back, content that he’s sturdy, flattered that my simple wit elicited such a giddy response. I’m prone to attribute it to a mutual enjoyment of company over any actual humor, and a flare of warmth fills my chest, “Patriarch or Plutarch?” I goad while he’s agreeable. “I think togas went out of fashion a few years ago- if you’ve been keeping up with such matters.”

“He guards his face with his arms, hooking one leg under his tree limb for balance, “Or, perhaps something more flattering to my figure,” he continues, laughing now at his own humor, “Like a tunic- tunica laticlavia, of course, I’m not some mangy peasant.”

I raise both brows, “The senator’s tunic?”
He straightens his posture dramatically, “Of course!”

I laugh under my breath, “Alright, but you consider- a soldier’s tunic would show off the shape of your legs quite nicely,” I say. “What a shame it’d be to hide them under cloaks.” I grin when his mouth stalls at my flirtation, hangs open, disarmed.

He doesn’t respond in words, just lifts one leg in taunting sensuality, somewhat offset by the inelegant boots that reach his knees and do nothing to show off said shape. He traces a hand up his thigh and throws me a salacious look.

I throw more leaves.

We take several minutes to laugh at ourselves and relax into a comfortable silence, sated of our agreeable foolery.

It has been weeks since I’ve felt at ease within my own mind, thoughts that had been strung through turbulent waves of concern for my friends and my father and the coming battle and my duties, fall pleasantly quiet. I study the spindling veins that spread along the body of a leaf that I twirled between two fingers idly. The petiole, apex, midrib, stipule...it had been worth learning the anatomy of plants if only to capture them more accurately for identification journals.

“What are you thinking of, dear Laurens?” Hamilton says, and I feel his curious gaze against my cheek.

Glancing over, I smile honestly, “Nothing.”

He hums in response and leans back against his branch, propping a booted foot against a higher branch to slouch against the tree pensively.

I know his mind is not so carefree, and I indulge myself and watch him thinking- the way the light reaches him in patches through the cover of leaves, making his skin seem to glitter when the wind rustles the tree and lifts his hair to brush his cheeks. His balance is so precarious yet stable, he seems perfectly at home among the branches, lithe and nimble like some gaelic dryad. He folds his arms over his chest, locked in silent debate with himself, and could I do it, I’d reach in and pull him from his thoughts.

There’s no need for it when he shares them, saying, “I’m thinking I should apologize properly for our encounter- after General Stark’s victory, when I cornered you like that.”

*Our encounter...* I recall his fingers tracing the inside of my thigh, his hands pulling, urgent against my waist, pressing me into the wall of the alley and grinding... “You really don’t have to...”

“But, I should,” he insists. “If you’re pledging me your friendship, I would have you know that I’m not some rakish fiend who doesn’t care about affiliation or sex when he picks his bedmates, and I wasn’t simply acting *propter vinum*. I know we were both well-watered and perhaps not at the best of our restraint, but I should have had more sense to understand your rejection.”

“I wasn’t exactly clear about it,” I admit, recalling how my body had fallen open to his lips against my neck...how badly I had wanted to allow it—everything he would do to me. I shift uncomfortably. He hums his agreement with a tinge of sarcastic intonation as though I’ve understated it. I’m sure I have. “Honestly,” he says, “I was over-eager to have my desires reciprocated— you see, every time a man’s been so attracted to me, the feeling was never mutual. I thought that, if that was your cause for lavishing such attention upon me, I was more than pleased to oblige it... I’ve never enjoyed the attention of a man with...your charms.”
I’m flattered into an unsightly blush, but I find it unbelievable that someone with such fine, delicate features would have trouble attracting a fair partner of either sex—both had always shown appreciation for his looks as far as I had seen. I assume he discounts those who would never act on their attraction, but his pool for picking must still be large, even excluding them. It strikes me to blush deeper when I realize that the only qualification that would discount all those men would be very high standards...to think that my looks would meet them makes my throat tight and I feel giddy.

“Of course, I understand your position as a gentleman, and I’d not have you think me dishonorable or depraved…if anything, I was impassioned,” he says. “Something in me always attracts the grisly sort when it comes to my own sex, so you must imagine how excited I was to have a clean, fit, handsome young man responding to my advances.”

Under the excessive flattery, I understand his meaning too quickly to restrain a belt of laughter and he narrows his eyes. “You attract the fop-mongers!” I exclaim.

He gives me a look so dark I fear he might push me from my perch, but instead he says, “What does that make you?” with such venom that it nearly stalls me.


He does shove me then, and the action of throwing himself across to my branch unbalances him and he falls forward into my lap, letting out a loud, unmanly shout and grabbing for my arms desperately. I bark a frightened yelp and one of his arms grabs my waist, the situation quickly losing humor as I clutch to get a hold on him. He doesn’t hesitate to lift himself into my lap with far more trust than I merit, pulling me forward before I can detach an arm from my clutch and catch myself. My stomach drops out as we’re suddenly both falling and there’s a loud thunk above me then a hard tug at both arms, jerked above my head, and my feet are kicking at empty air.

I grunt. Above me, Alex lets out a low groan.

I look up, horrified to see my friend’s hands clutching to the fabric of my coat sleeves, holding me in a full dangle. Glancing down, I’m too far from the ground to let go, so I quickly kick a leg to hook onto a branch and pull myself upright.

Once I have a stable seat on a lower branch, I look up. Hamilton is flattened against the limb he landed on, chest pushed to the wood and arms limp where they’d been pulled too harshly. He must have hit the tree as we were falling and caught me, and I realize how that must have hurt. “I’m so sorry…” I say.

He shakes his head dismissively, wheezing, and I move quickly to climb his branch.

“Do you need help?”

He shakes his head again, sliding both legs to one side of his branch and slipping off to start climbing down. His movements are uncharacteristically clumsy, arms visibly shaking each time he lifts them and breath hissing. His swordbelt and satchel had fallen during our scuffle and were sitting in the leaves at the base of the tree. He jumps down and joins them, sinking immediately to the ground.

I follow slowly, collecting the items that had fallen out of his bag and crouching beside him.

“You’re much heavier than you look,” he huffs weakly, smiling with relief.

I chuckle, holding his sword out to him carefully. He hit the branch hard and I ache with concern, but I know better than to coddle him. “And, you’re not so much of a fop,” I tease. “Too brawny for that.” He begins to form a hoarse protest, but I hear a sound in the distance— the crunch of
leaves...and voices. “Wait...do you hear that?” I whisper, leaning into him.

His eyes widen and he goes silent; realization spreads over his features, the patrol. Our shouts must have drawn them. “Run!” he hisses.

My stomach lurches under the order and I’m shaking my head before I’ve even thought against it. “Alex- come, get up.” I pull him aright and he sways, biting back a shout of pain when I tug his arm.

He shakes his head, wheezing, “Can’t yet- go ahead. I’ll follow.”

He can barely breathe. “I’ll carry y-”

“No,” he says emphatically, voice cutting on a hard edge. “Too slow...we’ll both be- caught.” He huffs and falls back to the tree, eyes dropping to the satchel that held his vital report for General Washington.

I don’t want to move for fear of crunching leaves underfoot- while we’re silent, we’re safe, but I realize he’s right. His mission is more important than both of us. Someone has to carry the intelligence or Washington’s generals will hesitate to carry out his plans at Germantown...we’ll lose another opportunity.

This campaign is more important than our lives.

His momentary weakness is my fault- an injury he’d taken to protect me from falling. I want to insist that he make the run with me- or let me carry him- I want to lie and promise that I could protect us both, but his hands are clumsy and trembling still; while he’s still winded, running poses a greater risk than keeping quiet and hoping the patrol passes. Hamilton grabs the fabric of my sleeves, “I’ll hide,” he promises, but there’s something false in his tone- something conditional...

He picks up the satchel and puts it over my shoulder and I realize his terms are my own safety. His eyes meet mine, bright and determined even as he winces with the effort of lifting his arms. Neither of us can be seen by a patrol lest Howe know his movements are compromised, so if my run catches attention, he’d expose himself in my defense. It’s preferable that we avert the patrol altogether, but if one of us is caught, well...the dead cannot testify. He smiles and steps away carefully, forcing his feet to fall lightly in the leaves.

But, I won’t allow it. If he tries to create a diversion at his own expense, I’ll make myself a more attractive target. And, I won’t get caught.

He sinks down against the base of the tree, flattening his body into the leaf cover and watching down the hill for any sight of the patrol where I still hear their voices. I crouch beside him to whisper against his ear. “Stay here,” and he looks up confused. If he’d thought the plan was to meet up where we’d stowed our horses, I won’t hear it. The thought of both of us, openly exposed, running off in different directions, feels too risky. He would be the easier target, more liable to capture. “I’ll bring the horses to you when they’ve passed...otherwise we’ll never find each other- and you know the way back to headquarters...”

The understanding passes between us.

Before he can raise another protest, I kiss the top of his head with a promise to return, and take off down the hill.

WHEN I REACHED THE LAWNS OF FATLANDS MANSION, the patrol was long in the
distance and Alexander hadn’t made any loud noises behind me, so I assumed my motions were not spotted. My rushing heart was beginning to settle, but my fear kicked in full force when bright red passed my vision, moving unhurriedly against the white backdrop of the sprawling mansion. There were several bloodbacks, walking the border of the building and talking in casual tones and gathering around lawn tables to have tea. If I squinted, I could make out gold epaulettes with stars demarking a British General, and I dropped instantly behind an evergreen shrub along the edge of the property, tucking myself into the thistles and watching through the needles.

I couldn’t see far enough to identify the officer, and no matter how hard I strained my senses, their voices were too distant to understand.

Behind me in the woods, Hamilton was hiding in a dangerous clout, waiting for me to return with our horses to make a grand escape, but here I was, trapped by proximity. If I risked making a run in either direction- forward or back- and got myself caught, I would expose our reconnaissance and abandon Hamilton to waiting atop that hill fruitlessly, captured and useless to him. Time passed like molasses, stretching from a spoon under the slow pull of gravity. I waited and prayed, thoughts rolling over a constant mantra of ‘go away, go inside, just go away’, glaring at the officers and willing them to leave.

By the time they finally moved their party indoors, I was leaning against the base of the pine tree, reading over the notes Hamilton had taken for Washington. I looked up and saw them walking inside.

And I rushed into motion, seizing the opening to sprint the border of the property, ducking behind shrubs when possible and slowing to a comfortable pace only when I’d reached the protection of the treeline and disappeared into the woods once again.

I loathe this spying business.

THE HORSES ARE GONE when I reach the gully where we’d hidden them to graze. Panic rises in my chest and I search the ground for tracks, for characteristic broken twigs or any features to track them by. The ropes we’d bound them with are totally gone, and I suspect that they were untied by human hands…

The most likely conclusion to draw is to blame the British patrol, but they didn’t notice me- and Hamilton had not raised any noises as I ran, I had skirted their search with a wide berth- of course, perhaps they had found our tracks...but there was a high element of skill to credit them with in such a suspicion and they would have to be profound trackers to make such a distance with such accuracy as to find our well-hidden horses. I cannot imagine it-

Something sharp presses to the side of my neck ceasing all my frantic rationalizations...cold...metallic...a sword.

“Ut si ille no revertisset..."

The Latin startles me more than the sword against my skin. But, I instantly recognize the bright timber of the voice, my tense posture slouching in relief.

“-moriendum esset ipse."

Without turning, I can feel the smirk on Hamilton’s face in the ring of his words. I must admit his pronunciation is impeccable and the recitation is flawless- even as it takes me a moment to recognize
the story. I don’t turn until I’m sure of it- “...Damon?”

His grin nearly splits his face when I meet his eyes and his sword is discarded into the leaves as he drops it to throw his arms around my neck and climbs to hug me. The embrace pulls me to stoop against him and I grab his waist in relief, sweep him tighter against me. “Pythias returns!” he laughs by my ear.

“You couldn’t wait where we were as I told you?” I say, meaning to admonish, but I’m smiling helplessly.

“I wasn’t sure you’d come back…” he says, and his relief is too tangible to allow that earlier dread to seep into his voice, but I can imagine how he’d felt. I know my absence was obnoxiously protracted, and were our positions switched- I cannot say I would’ve waited. “I feared for what would keep you…” he adds, dropping his hold around my neck, fingers brushing the skin, drawing a shiver.

I’m hesitant to release him from the embrace, but he’s backing up to stoop and retrieve his sword and sheathe it. Our horses plot idly a ways behind him in the woods, untied but calm, far enough behind the brush that I had not spotted them, and he turns back for them. The conversation is far from over, I can tell, but we’ve wasted too much time already- we must return to headquarters to deliver the report before Washington’s meeting.

I follow behind him, absently rubbing the back of my neck where the blunt of his sword had pressed. “You have a knack for the theatrics,” I complain.

He chuckles and I watch his shoulders shake with it as he walks, “Small retribution for the fright you caused me,” he says, and we reach our horses. He grabs up the reins of his and glances at me as I do the same. “What kept you anyway?” he says curiously.

I consider. It had been a distressing predicament, frustrating to be so trapped in place, but in hindsight it seems humorous to hide in a tree for so long while the enemy drinks their tea and chats idly. I laugh to myself, “A tea party.”

Hamilton gives me a wary look, anticipating my story.

DUSK IS ARRIVING as we stable our horses at the Paulin’s mill house, returned to Headquarters safely with our report. I’ve explained in entirety what had kept me from returning to him at our lookout post, but beyond his initial excitement to have me return alive, Hamilton grows more morose as we approach headquarters. He is uncharacteristically reticent as we make our way to the front path, watching the Pennypackers mansion like a convicted man watches the gallows.

Could I tell what troubles him, I’d give reassurance, but he is difficult to read after a week’s separation. His thoughts have seemed conflicted throughout the day and returning to Washington’s presence agitates that confiction somehow. I would assume he’s troubled by his time in Philadelphia, but he seems unbothered by the civil injustices he was ordered to commit- as though he’s rationalized it with ease.

He quickens his pace, pressing his hands roughly into his coat pockets as we walk, “The cold’s come on quickly this season, hasn’t it?” he says conversationally.

I hum in mild agreement, matching his stride. “I took a patrol down near their camp at Chestnut Hill two mornings ago- first frost of the year.”

“Think we’ll fall into winter quarters early?”
I shrug, too inexperienced to make a judgment. This will be my first winter with the army in America; I assume his question doesn’t expect a response, but for him, I can muster a theory, “A lot of the men don’t have the clothes or shoes to withstand battle if it’s to be frosted soil— even with your acquisitions. We may not be able to avoid turning in for the season,” I say. “...After we take back the capitol, of course.”

He digs his hands deeper into his pockets and lets a huff of breath escape his lips, lightly visible in the air. “His Excellency wants to leave for the assault forthwith- the earliest possible march,” he says. “All the reports we’ve received convey omens in our favor- Howe’s movements to split his army, his lack of fortifications, his weak patrols...and now that I can confirm the verity of those reports...” Hamilton doesn’t finish that thought, just looks up from the path towards the Mills, wistful. “Do you think this is to be the last fight of the year?”

“I don’t know...” There’s no way to know.

He closes his posture and marches forward, physically forbidding me to question his curiosity.

GENERAL WASHINGTON HAD CALLED A COUNCIL OF WAR to meet at Pennypackers Mill that night, thus all six generals had gathered, with the addition of Generals Forman and Smallwood who had brought their reinforcements from Maryland and New Jersey, amassing our numbers to eight-thousand Continental troops and three-thousand militiamen.

The Pennypackers’ dining hall is large enough to accommodate the party of fifteen, Generals and Brigadier Generals gathered- as well as their selected aides, every man done up proudly in his respective uniforms, blazoned in gold and medallions. Washington’s valet, Billy, brings a candle to His Excellency to illuminate his maps as we all settle in our respective places at the table.

Seeing the scaled illustration of Philadelphia and the surrounding townships marked with Washington’s neat annotations, I miss Lafayette’s enthusiastic scribbles.

General Washington begins, immediately drawing the room to hushed silence by the mere depth of his voice. “As you have been informed, over the course of this past week, I have compiled intelligence that Howe has established ports of, at the least, regimental strength along the Germantown Road, and Limekiln Pike in Norristown. I received a definitive report from General Sullivan that moving these forces effectively split his army from Cornwallis’s division by over fifty miles. With our reinforcements arrived, now is the ideal time for attack. Without the gratuitous delay that persistent votes on this Council require, I would have ordered this army into motion already—”

A few sour expressions pass over the room at this bold declaration, but before anyone can protested it, Hamilton chirps, “Sir, would it not be best to wait for the reinforcements that we’ve requested from the south?”

I appall at my friend. We had not been invited to speak...

Hamilton’s said it like a challenge, and Washington narrows his eyes. Across the room, General Stephen leans to whisper something in Sullivan’s ear. From the discomfited expressions across the faces of General Washington’s commanding officers, they were not told of these extra reinforcements requested, and now that they’ve been informed that we will be stronger in numbers to wait, they’re becoming disagreeable to Washington’s suggestion of immediate attack...

His Excellency is fast to reinforce his previous points, and I turn my attention to Alexander as the General speaks, nudging him hard with my elbow, questioning.
He throws me a glare and shoves back.

THE CANDLES ARE BURNING TO STUBS by the time the Council has come to an agreement. Vote after vote, the plan for immediate attack was denounced by the majority. Only the more belligerent generals, Wayne and Scott were eager to press the British back, as well as militia generals from the north- Foreman, Smallwood, Potter, and Ivrine. But, I suspect that Wayne only seeks retribution for the slaughter he endured at Paoli, and the militia generals fear the impending expiration of their soldiers’ contracts- and the subsequent loss of three-thousand militiamen.

The proposal is amended before it’s passed, Washington graciously agrees to push back the date of the assault to a week from today, and it’s a compromise that pleases all- as all were in favor of the plan if not the intended date. Washington had wanted to attack tomorrow evening...and if not for Hamilton’s interjection, his Council would not have thought to object it, especially not with the plan laid before them. His Excellency’s plan is bold- to say the least. Splitting our forces into four prongs to perform a complicated envelopment when half our men cannot even march a straight line...

But, of course, we already have the numerical advantage, and Howe direly underestimates us- enough to split his forces, enough to leave Germantown virtually unfortified. It took a great deal of gall for the British to split their forces at Brandywine, face down nine-thousand strong in the main effort of our army with less than four thousand to perform a complicated flanking maneuver. Now, their egos are plumed dangerously, and when we win, this flank will humiliate them...and abolish all doubt of our capabilities.

The plan is genius.

And I cannot fathom why Hamilton would protest it’s immediate employment- but I can speak with him later, demand my answers at a more appropriate time...in a more private setting.

“Greene...I’ll request your extended counsel,” His Excellency says with a calm authority as the Generals and aides all begin to pack their notes and order their papers.

“As always, it is yours, my General,” he says instantly.

I rise to follow my Generals, expecting to transcribe their planning and stifling my excitement as best as I can.

“Colonel Laurens- you come with me.” General Sullivan’s hand falls on my shoulder and turns me round to face him.

I raise a brow, “Sir?”

He doesn’t look at me, removes his hand in favor of adjusting the tuck of his shirt beneath his vest. He’s a man with a mousy sort of look, beetle-black eyes, a wide carved mouth and a pensive demeanor that makes his motion seem less vain than self-aware. “You’ve led several patrols near Chestnut Hill, yes?” he says.

It’s the road by which his division is to march into Germantown, flanked by Wayne and Conway. “Yes, sir...?”

Behind Sullivan, Major White is watching me, and I meet his eyes with glancing suspicion. “And, you’ve seen battle at the lead of an engagement? You understand the commands of marching through ragged terrain?”
“...Yes, sir.”

He nods like he expected this answer—like he’s read reports about me or received recommendations. “Then I’ll be glad to have your assistance,” he says. “...And, I do appreciate your testimony,” he adds as an afterthought.

It’s not a question—or an offer. It’s an order disguised in polite jussives, and I realize General Washington and Greene must have discussed this with him over dinner—while I was not there, reassigned me. I stall a moment to smile agreeably and assure him that I was glad to give the report—which I had been. But, I cannot say I’m glad to leave General Greene’s division before the coming battle—not while knowing that Greene will lead the final, most important charge down Limekiln Pike...

Sullivan pats my shoulder again and invites me to join him in walking back to his camp. I can tell it’s truly an offer in this case, and it’s one that I choose to decline politely, glancing at Hamilton where he’s standing before General Washington, hands folded behind his back and discussing some matter fervently.

I WAIT OUTSIDE while the generals and their small parties leave headquarters and make the walk to their respective camps, gathering long greatcoats around their shoulders to press in the warmth. Sullivan gives me a halting smile and a nod of recognition as he passes—agreeable if not sudden in its familiarity. I return it and watch him step off alone with my brows drawn. All the other generals have been flanked by the aides they brought...

“Are you waiting to speak to His Excellency?”

I startle, turn and relax when my eyes meet John White, his posture relaxed and proud as always.

He smiles fondly at my inquietude. “Because, the General’s somewhat preoccupied with your friend at the moment,” he says, in blatant understatement. His smile fades, “That was some nerve he had in there…”

I nod in agreement, though I loathe his disapproving tone. I don’t understand Alexander’s reason for raising the conflict of more reinforcements, and I intend to ask him, but “He’s privy to more information than any of us, I think,” I say. “Washington relies on him to raise such questions in counsel...though it was perhaps bold to do so at a Council of War…I’m sure he intended well.”

“He could have brought the entire meeting to a fruitless brawl of debate…” White says, narrowing his eyes.

I rear at his tone, “And is debate not the heart of a Republic?”

“A Republican government,” White says. “This is a military…”

Last I had seen John, he was hesitant to join the army, leaning heavily towards a more diplomatic approach to revolution...it had been my words that drew him to the field, and now— the balance had shifted in some way I could not place. I was unsure how to approach the debate. “They deserve to know the full scope of the situation…” I say. “Washington once told me this himself, and he constantly fights to instill democracy into his command. I believe he’d be grateful for the intervention if only to protect him from a lapse in his own command philosophy…”

John’s mouth opens to protest this, but he cannot. I’ve spent more time with His Excellency himself and John knows this— he knows I’ve placed my argument on personal connections rather than brute
fact, but it ends the debate and he relents his assault against Hamilton. “Well, it’s more gall than I’d ever have,” he says.

I laugh and shake my head. If only he knew the extent of Alexander’s gall...

My laugh brings him to grin and he claps my shoulders, squeezes lightly, “I’ve settled to have you share my tent, would you walk with me?”

I look back at Pennypacker’s Mansion where Hamilton is still in counsel with Washington.

Before I give an answer, John’s hands drop from my shoulders with a light pat, understanding. “No, it’s fine- you know the way, yes? I’ll see you later tonight.”

He smiles and gives me a brief hug before jogging off to set pace with his General Sullivan. I turn to watch his retreat, raising a brow and stuffing my hands into my pockets for warmth.

It is strange to have J White a presence in my life again. He is perceptive in a way that gives an immediate sense of comfort. We have never been especially close- I cannot say I’ve been especially close to anyone since Francis- but, our distance was never for lack of compatibility. He seems to look at me and see the void, my desperation for intimate friendship, and we both know that he would not fulfill the need for such devotion. He would rather keep many friends of a more shallow depth than to attach himself to the fleeting few. So, we remain friends at a more distant bound- for both our comforts.

I love him all the more for it.

WHEN HAMILTON STEPS FROM THE HEADQUARTERS, his face is flushed red, fists clenched, and he pretends not to see me as he huffs past. I’m quite sure his quarters are within the General’s dwelling- within the mansion he’s stomping away from. So, I raise my voice, “Where are you going?”

He doesn’t turn, “Dinner.”

I’m also quite sure that Pennypacker’s Mansion has a full staff of servants ready to prepare a meal for any of the officers… “Where?” I say, stepping in behind him, jogging to keep up.

“Your camp,” he replies, turning to me as if it may have been a question- though I know it wasn’t.

I raise both brows then, almost laughing at him- if I wasn’t so concerned for what’s gotten him flustered. “Well, I’ve been reassigned to Sullivan’s division,” I say, stopping in our tracks until he turns and his set jaw slacks in brief confusion. I jab a thumb in the proper direction, “That way…”

His lips press thin before he relents, “Of course you were,” he says and motions for me to take the lead.

I HAVE ONLY BEEN to General Sullivan’s camp once. We passed through his field as we returned from our raid on the twenty-second. I still recall where his cooking fires were built- the highest ground, driest soil, and I guide Hamilton to collect what’s left of the night’s rations. Officers are typically served first, then retreat to eat in a mess tent or at their stations to continue working, but as we both missed our meals with generals Washington and Greene- and meal call itself, we pick up the scraps of bread and ladle the dregs of broth that remain.
The only men still by the fireside are a servant and a sleeping soldier—passed out where he had taken dinner. So, we situate ourselves on the far side of the dugout pit and sit with our pewter dishes cradled in our laps, using the fireside for warmth and light. It’s not until I take a bite of hard bread that I realize how hungry I truly am.

We’re silent for several moments, training our attention on nourishing ourselves fervently. I’ve taken many meals with Hamilton, but always in more formal settings and he throws our stuffy manners to the wayside in favor of dipp[ing his bread roug[hly into the broth and tearing at it with his teeth. It doesn’t bother me— if anything, I’m more comfortable without the pleasantries— enough to begin the conversation bluntly to match his manner of eating, “Why are you upset with General Washington?”

Hamilton doesn’t look at me. Doesn’t look up from his meal or stop eating it for several moments, and I grow impatient and return to my own. Ignore him in return. After several minutes, he’s scraped his bowl clean and drops his spoon into the dish, laying it aside and stretching his legs in front of us both, letting his feet rest over the dip of my calves. He leans back on his arms and watches me while I continue eating. I glance up and meet his eyes. “Do you wish to be an aide, Laurens?” he says.

My brows draw at the diversion and I shrug one shoulder, “Yes? It’s an esteemed position.”

He nods and gives a low hum of agreement, draws his legs away from me slowly and balances an arm on them, watching the fire crackle in its confines. “True—Washington takes only men of pedigree, I’m sure it looks quite good, but…I miss the action of command,” he says. “This...feeling that I am held aloof and safe while others risk themselves, it pains me—this separation from battle, I loathe it, do you understand?”

“I think I would,” I nod.

He lets out a breath, visible in the air, and slides one foot back out to touch my leg, tapping a restless rhythm against my stockings, “I had arranged to lead a raid near Limekiln on the fourth and Washington had approved of it, but…” he shrugs both shoulders, “That’s not to happen now with the attack that morning. I requested placement in this division— as you’ll be fighting in the alert scrimmages to agitate Howe’s patrols. Washington had said he would consider me for such a position if plans were changed, but…” Hamilton’s teeth grit and he huffs a small breath of frustration, fingers tugging fretfully at a root by his hip, “he gave it to Tallmadge. He does not trust me to restrict myself to acting within orders...”

I purse my lips, comprehending quickly the source of all Hamilton’s frustrations. To have a subordinate officer selected for a command position over you—after completing such difficult missions as Hamilton had recently been assigned—his acquisitioning in Philadelphia, spying on the encampment near Germantown, writing to the Council of War…this seemed an act of punishment for Hamilton’s recent stretches on his authority—a way to rein him in.

I toss my dish aside, “That’s outrageous, Alexander,” I say, already moving to climb to my feet. “You’re an asset to any logistical effort— and His Excellency should know we need experience and skill on our raids. If you tell General Sullivan then he’ll—”

He grabs my arm as I lean forward in standing, tugs me back to the ground with a wry smile, “—he will go complain to Washington on my behalf? And what will he say that I’ve not already?” I allow his pull to settle me closer to him so we can speak more quietly between ourselves. “And, why should it change Washington’s mind coming from a general?” his smile fades into a fonder one. “I won’t be a man who cries his woes to his superiors.”

I lean back onto an arm. If he refuses to further his protests or allow me to add my voice to them, I
have nothing I could do for him.

But, he knows this, and a fondness lingers at the corners of his lips.

I settle back to the ground, and we sit, warming by the fire for several minutes, thighs and shoulders touching. I tip my head back for a view of the stars, placing several navigable constellations that I traced impatiently each night while John White and I had sailed back to the colonies. The skies have changed with the season, but I can make out *Pegasus* and *Cepheus* - the king. Thinking of myths and heroes, it strikes me what to say. “Y’know...Achilles’s mother held him from battle in disguise for years to preserve his life. It was never dishonorable for him not to fight- and it made him no less *Aristos Achaiou* …I’m sure Washington is saving you for greater things.”

Hamilton’s silent and I fear I’ve misspoken, harkening back to a secret he told me in confidence- his childhood game. I’ve never brought up his past, but his lip quirks and he glances at me. “Are you suggesting Washington is acting as my mother?” he says, leaning back and gathering both of our bowls into his hands to take them to the washing pot. My eyes follow the sway of his limbs in momentary surprise before I follow into motion.

“No,” I say, ambling behind, “but you might put Achilles to shame in a dress.”

Before I can regret my words or flinch away, Hamilton’s splashed me with the washing suds and a startled laugh chokes from my throat as I recoil. I pull my wet uniform shirt away from my chest with a shiver, laughing harder.

He shoves me as he passes to gather his sword belt where he’d set it by the fire, but he’s not-quite suppressing his amused grin. I’ll have to have Berry wash my uniform now, and Hamilton has already situated himself in wait to accompany me to my tent, standing with a hint of that haughty posture he holds. I touch his shoulder to steer our direction, stepping around him to lead the way.

“Does this mean you’ll be my Patroclus?” he says as we begin the short walk to the aides’ tent near General Sullivan’s quarters. “I could use one tonight.”

I tense.

Achilles’s lover…

It takes me a moment to fully understand the innuendo. Such words as *erastes* and *eromenos* chase my mind into a dazed muddle where I can only think of his hips pressing between my legs and his lips against my neck, Martha and regret, blood and blonde hair, and I want to be angry with Hamilton for bringing rise to such thoughts again when that tempest had seemed to settle. I recoil from him where our shoulders are brushing with familiarity, unable to conjure an appropriate response.

I give a tense chuckle, laugh it off in an obvious rejection.

He drops the subject.

WHEN WE REACH MY TENT, my bags have already been moved inside and I recognize the orderly manner in which Shrewsberry piles bags, largest to smallest by the right bottom corner of my cot. John White’s rack is neatly made and currently unoccupied, and I assume he is in counsel with General Sullivan.

Hamilton teeters at the flap of my tent, holding himself without and glancing at White’s cot. In
consideration of his unexpected visit- this small plea for friendship and his obvious desire to be away from Washington, I brush aside my previous discomfort and offer him to share my cot if he wishes. We have done so, so many times before, it should mean nothing. But, he glances at White’s cot again and withdraws for the night, giving a smile and wishing me a good night.

I loathe the strange tension that has slipped into what had felt like a comfortable day, so I follow him to the flap, “Alexander,” I say.

He turns from his retreat and gives his attention.

“If you find you need a break from His Excellency’s headquarters- you know where to find me.”

A slow smile presses between his lips and he nods, pushes his cover to his head, adjusts his belt, and is gone.

I turn back inside, move aside my bags to find my letterbox, and sit at White’s desk to begin writing the necessary pieces of personal correspondence- Martha first, my father, my uncle, my sister, the Mannings. J. White returns from General Sullivan’s tent after a few minutes, letting out an excited hollar to find me already settled. He throws himself onto his cot, adjacent to our shared desk, and begins talking of an (unnecessary) tour he’d like to take me on around camp, the officers he’d like to introduce me to, and his plans for our raid in a few days.

There’s still much to be done, but I cannot focus.

There will be more time in the morning...when John is asleep.

I drop my quill into my inkwell and blow on the beginnings of a letter to Martha to dry the ink, setting it safely in my stationary box and getting up from the desk. “I think I’ll turn in for the night,” I say, silencing my friend inadvertently. He is well-used to my dismissing his babbles as he spent several weeks on a ship with my unsociable tendencies. “It’s merely been a long day,” I explain.

He shakes his head and motions away the notion of taking offense, “Of course, of course.”

UPON WASHINGTON’S ORDERS, our days moving into position near Germantown are spent on patrols and small raids. It’s a blessed release from the drudgery of writing and carrying correspondence all day- though we do that as well, Hamilton’s return makes a distinctly noticeable difference in the amount of work required of Washington’s other aides, so I rarely make visits to His Excellency’s office and Hamilton rarely emerges from it.

As I am not officially assigned to Sullivan’s command until the march commences in three days, I’m placed where I am most needed. And, I have the privilege of organizing our raid under Sullivan’s subordinate, Brigadier General Conway. He’s a gangly-shaped man with sloped shoulders, a hooked nose and the distinct expression of someone who’s tasted something sour. He makes it quickly obvious that he’s well-educated in matters of western warfare, of gentleman’s code of conduct, orders of marches, and rules of engagement.

But, he’s a blustering bloviate with no loyalty to his chain of command. General Sullivan introduced us first thing in the morning. He offered no hand to shake, no word of greeting, just pointed me to a platoon of men and ordered me to begin their drills.

Perhaps I should have paid more close attention to the drills that Hamilton led in Philadelphia. I was wrongfully confident in my own abilities, trained in England to call march by British officers. I called orders on the wrong foot, with a poor rhythm- too loudly. Perhaps, I deserved to be
admonished for my performance...but to do so to a fellow officer in front of men he’s expected to lead is just…

It’s poor form.

I did not hesitate to object. Loudly. In front of the platoon- to the tune of snickers echoing behind me.

I am released by the Brigadier General to unpack my traveling bags to the tent which has been erected for my use while we are in the field, moved to Worchester. Major White from Sullivan’s division and Major Tallmadge from Washington’s staff join me in these quarters. I can tell from their expressions as I complain of the encounter, that Conway has already aroused a similar frustration in them both.

“This is not my division, John, these men don’t know me, and now they’ll think me inept,” I say, throwing myself fitfully onto my cot.

My friend is running a lint brush over the fabric of his uniform, as he hangs it, unperturbed. His hair is loose around his shoulders as he’s just washed it after our morning exercises. “Jack, you worry too much,” he says. “No one calls drill properly on their first try.”

Major Tallmadge leans back on the chair where he’s shaving, hair tucked over his shoulder, face a blur of white cream that brings the blue of his eyes to a cold shock. “If anyone’s lost faith in you for Conway’s petty fit, order them to call drill- let them embarrass themselves. No one will think twice of questioning you.”

“Besides, knowing you, all the men’ll love you within a week,” John says, grinning.

I fall back into the fabric of my cot, pulling the trifold cover over my face and letting out a huff. I appreciate my friends’ support, but I need a flame of fury to match my own, not words of comfort.

THE RAID PASSES IN A BLUR of violence. General Washington’s intention is to warn Howe of the attack, provide him ample opportunity to ready himself and his inferior forces to defend their positions- as is only fair. And, we accomplish this intent through small skirmishes against the British patrols- but, as those are so infrequent and scantily-manned, our raids dip deeper into enemy-held lines than His Excellency intended.

My platoon chases a patrol of six men on horseback into a Hessian camp just beyond Chestnut hill where we kill twelve men and leave the rest to carry word back to their superiors. We rendezvous with Tallmadge near Mount Airy, and return to camp.

Shrewsberry winces at the stains on my uniform.

WHILE CAMPED IN DORCHESTER, I learn several things of my tentmates.

During the scant months of our separation, my John White has become something of a Francophile. Though I cannot fault him for having made a dear friend, his close relationship with the Chevalier de Mauduit borders on preferential, unprofessional. I had never thought John was capable of such intimate friendship, but I’m beginning to realize he’s simply not capable of it with me. I suspect that John has been lonely since the death of his wife, and I know that I do nothing to assist him in that regard, yet I still envy the loyalty of their relationship. J. speaks in French at every opportunity, tells
me unwarranted stories of French officers he’s had the pleasure of meeting, throws disregard against the general frustration most of the army feels for the flux of hopeful officers bombarding our shores. The Chevalier spends a good deal of time in our tent, sharing stories of other officers and bringing J. to giggle loudly as I work at our desk.

I’ve taken to kneading wax and stuffing my own ears.

Their conversations become unignorable when I overhear stories of my Gilbert, rumors of a clumsy childhood, poor dancing skills, an embarrassing disguise as he made passage to America. Apparently these stories are famous in the French courts. Every protest I raise is dismissed as a lack of humor on my part. I don’t know the verity of the claims- or have any authority over rumors that pass through the French aristocracy, but I can leave the tent projecting obvious disdain against my friends.

I take refuge from Rumor in a tentative, occasional friendship with Major Tallmadge. What I learn of him comes more from his secretive behavior than from his actions themselves. Like Hamilton, he diverts personal inquiries of his past with crude humor. When I asked of his studies in New York, he spoke only of the pretty girls he had bedded in college. When I asked of his parentage, he threw sly wit against the church where his father preached. When I asked of his previous stations, he shrugged me off entirely- tossed the subject back to me until I had to admit my own lack of experience.

Tallmadge spends most of his time at Worchester with Sullivan’s division in absentia, and when he does return to camp, it never seems that General Sullivan has work for him. He never transcribes orders or answers to Conway, he rarely even takes dinner with the other officers in Sullivan’s mess tent.

But he does hold frequent meetings with Hamilton.

ON THE MORNING OF OCTOBER SECOND, I am returning from a patrol at early dawn, about to open the flap of my tent when I perceive hushed voices inside, a familiar timbre muffled behind the canvas. I stop- think to listen in secret out of curiosity, but I realize that Hamilton never lowers his voice in such a way and what I’m considering is eavesdropping.

I knock against the flap of the tent.

The voices fall silent inside and after a tense moment, I’m shuffled back on my feet as the flap is thrown open and Hamilton meets me with a bright smile. “Laurens,” he greets, “Come- we were just discussing a piece of intelligence Tallmadge has picked up- tell me if this sounds true,” he backs up to allow me passage inside and I follow obediently until the tent flap closes soundly behind us. From the weary look that Tallmadge has fixed me with, this was not a subject he was expecting the Lieutenant Colonel to share. But, Hamilton doesn’t pause to begin reading the report aloud, “Colonel Stirling- 10th and 42nd British regiments- detached. Fort at Billingsport New Jersey reduced. 23d Royal Welsh Fusileers- marched to Chester.” Hamilton looks up from the sheet, brows raised at me expectantly.

I glance at Tallmadge again, wondering when he collected this information, “Who’s the source?” I say.

Hamilton hums.

“You cannot have a name,” Tallmadge says sharply, “It’s a reliable source.” His arms are clenched tight over his chest as if he’s restraining himself from making a grab at the note in Hamilton’s fingers.
Alexander pretends not to notice the Major’s discomfort. He hums under his breath, “As chief of intelligence, Tallmadge manages all Washington’s best sources- this one happens to live in the occupied city.”

Behind the Lieutenant Colonel, my tent mate makes a high noise of panic in the back of his throat, clenching the sleeves of his coat tighter, and I throw him a shocked look... chief of intelligence.

Hamilton passes the note to me, and steps to my cot to pick up a book that was lying on my sheet-not my book. He makes himself comfortable on my bed and opens it, flips a few pages, “Are you quite sure you’ve gotten the coding correct? Chester’s quite a march-”

“It’s correct,” Tallmadge says sharply, stepping to me and snatching away the note just as I had glanced down to see it. All it read were numbers...code. “I’ve told you it’s true- all of it!” he says. “Howe’s further degraded his forces- he’s seen our raides, been warned a dozen times over and he’s willfully denying that we pose a threat!”

“Then there’s no more reason to wait,” Hamilton says, throwing me a sharp look. “I’ll bring the message to His Excellency, suggest an immediate attack. The plan is on for tonight.”

Tallmadge gives a satisfied nod and drops heavily into our desk chair as Hamilton stands from my cot and steps fast to the entrance of the tent. He’s gone before I can raise my voice in question...what had just happened? I don’t need to demand answers to realize the secret that Hamilton has just divulged to me- Tallmadge’s job, the nature of their relationship, an explanation for his strange behavior when he had seen I’d touched his belongings back in Evansburg- tackling me in defensive fury.

Tallmadge has slouched against the desk, shoulders tucked with an uncomfortable sort of exposure.

“So...that item you took from Hamilton’s letterbox when my back was turned,” I say. “He said he’d be strangling you for it...was it that book?”

Tallmadge turns from the desk and studies me, comes to some conclusion from the mould of my expression. “How long have you known?” he says, voice tight and surprised and accusing.

“Known that Hamilton was involved with Washington’s spy rings?” I shrug. “A few weeks- he confided me that, but that you were chief of intelligence...hadn’t mentioned that piece.”

“He only receives the intelligence,” Tallmadge says, still eyeing me warily. In all the time that I had known him, his countenance had always been so composed and impenetrable, but he’s dislodged now, uncomfortable and flighty. “He introduced some useful connections to General Washington in New York...but, he doesn’t collect the information himself.”

I raise both brows as if this is news to me, recognize a false claim, and I wonder if Tallmadge knows of the scouting mission Alexander had brought me on- the spy work the Lieutenant Colonel did himself- whether he’s lying to protect Alexander’s orders from being exposed, or if he truly does not know the orders that Washington gives directly to his right-hand man...either way, he certainly must not know what I know…

Alexander invited me along.

HAMILTON RETURNS TO MY TENT JUST AFTER SUNRISE with general marching orders from Washington’s headquarters. “You write faster than I can,” he says, “and I need thirty copies of this draft by noon for your division...”
Thirty copies … “Bring it inside,” I say, holding the front flap open for him.

WE WORK EFFICIENTLY in good company, chatting occasionally, but more focused than anything. “Have the other Generals received their orders?” I say, finishing my fifth draft.

“Harrison, Fitzgerald, Walker, Tilghman, and Meade are all dispatched to be doing the same,” he replies, motioning to his pen as it moves to copy the orders.

I hum and we work on in silence.

Until Hamilton begins mumbling aloud, “This army, the main American Army, will certainly not suffer itself to be outdone by their northern Brethren,” he laughs to himself, a smirking vindictive thing, and I glance over, but continue writing. His eyes lift briefly to me and he drops them back to Washington’s orders, lowering his voice as he talks to himself, commentary about this allusion to General Gates and the northern campaign, Saratoga and Brandywine, Washington’s orders to keep him off the field, his experiences in the north. I listen to his words curiously. He had never done this at headquarters- talked to himself as we work, but if it helps him to concentrate, I don’t mind it.

We work too quickly, and as our progress draws towards completion, I realize that he will have to ride off to deliver these orders once they’re finished. I write fourteen copies before stopping, leaving the rest to Hamilton so as to keep his company longer, and his quill slows against the paper. I pretend not to notice.

Instead, I transcribe my assignment from Sullivan for the Chevalier de Mauduit, and glance at Alexander- too focused to notice my attention. I slide my foot gently over his toes, a familiar caress, soothing and secretive...disarmed of its threat as he had used it against me initially. Over time, the context of this affection felt changed. I watch his face until he slowly smiles, keeping his gaze trained on the notes before him. I turn my attention back to Sullivan’s orders.

I HAVE BEEN WORKING since dawn yesterday morning, up all night on patrol, and returned this morning in time to arrange the men for Conway’s rifle drills before taking up my regular assignments. The demands of preparing for battle call me to continue my service throughout the day. At noon, Conway comes to General Sullivan’s field tent where I’m working and requests me to check that each man has cooked three meals for the march as per General Washington’s orders, that each man’s rifle is fit for use and they have been given their portion of musket balls, that each man’s injuries have healed enough to lend him to battle. It’s not the job of an Aide to work so closely with enlisted men, and I am quite sure it’s punishment for my failure at calling drill.

I had no problems with my commanders in the Northern army, but Conway…

I would complain of it if anyone were there to support my protest.

Hamilton carried the orders that we transcribed that morning to General Sullivan and the Brigadier Generals in command of each column. Major White and his Chevalier brief the Sergeants of each platoon on the order of march, giving them the task of disseminating the orders to the enlisted men. Tallmadge reports to Washington’s counsel, and I assume he’s needed throughout the day because the task of organizing his regiment falls onto me in his absence.

That’s where Major White finds me in the evening, squeezes my arm and orders the men to have their dinner and await Major Tallmadge, brings me from where I had been ordering the
deconstruction of tents and draws me back to the center of camp.

“Have you eaten?” he says.

When he sees how the question startles me, he groans and drags me towards Sullivan’s tent where a cooking fire is billowing smoke and voices are muffled inside with the clacking sound of silverware and pewter plates. Apparently all other officers of General Sullivan’s staff had already begun eating—if they had not already finished.

A few of the officers offer a casual greeting as I step inside and pull up a chair, receive a plate of bread, greens, and pork from a servant. My entrance doesn’t interrupt the conversations at the table and I tuck into my food too eagerly to contribute to the discussions. I finish eating prematurely, sit and absorb the idle thrum of familiar voices around me and the novel feeling of a full stomach, lulling in comfort and complacency until my eyes struggle to focus and I’m slouching against my control...drifting...

A hand clasping my shoulder jolts me aright and I turn, realize quickly that the entire table is staring at me, and General Sullivan’s chair is empty, his fingers digging into my shoulder, “Colonel Laurens...if you find our talk so drull, you are welcome to be excused…”

I had fallen asleep at his table. I stand instantly to my feet, giving a short bow, “Sir, my apologies, I-”

Sullivan halts my words with a deep laugh, backs from my chair, wiping at his hands with a napkin he had brought over. “You’ve offended no one, your constant work has been exceptional these past few days- a pleasure to have on staff,” he says with a fond grin. My eyes dart to Conway, but the Brigadier General is glaring at Sullivan’s empty chair. General Sullivan doesn’t notice the impulse, “If you need rest, please- be relieved of your duties until the march.”

“No, sir, I was merely sitting for too long, I-”

“To your tent, mister Laurens, please.”

I recognize the order as one that Washington delivered against me and Hamilton while we were stationed in Philadelphia, and I do not fight it. I leave my plates for a servant and bid the other officers a good meal and strength on our march, and I am dismissed to rest.

THE SUN IS DIPPING below the treeline as I reach my tent, casting long shadows and peeking between gaps in the cover of leaves. My feet crunch in a seasonal blanket of detritus, twigs and leaves that reach even the open clearings of camp.

The candles at our desk are already lit as I come inside with a sweep of canvas, duck into the tent and find Major White returned to take a similar reprieve before we must dismantle these quarters and lead the march. He looks at me and glances at my cot where a curled form catches my eyes and my brows draw.

Someone has taken my bed...

“I’m sorry,” White whispers, “he came looking for you about half an hour ago and I told him you were at dinner. I believe he intended to wait, but…” he shrugs.

I step fully into the tent and recognize Hamilton fast asleep in my bed once my eyes adjust to the low lighting. “Ah…” I say, lowering my voice, and I drop my satchel onto the floor by Tallmadge’s
pallet. White settles back into his task of writing what I assume is a letter to one of his three sons, and I stoop to take out a few pieces of parchment and walk to our shared desk to complete my own pieces of correspondence for my wife and father- I had begun them that morning and never finished. I pass my cot in careful silence, knowing Alexander to be a light sleeper.

As ever, my friend’s sleeping form so nearby is something of a distraction- vivid and calm, but I have grown more used to working in the presence of his light and I force my attention to my quill with J. White’s company. Our words scratching against paper becomes a silent language of our careful thoughts- our difficulty to find the proper things to say to those we love to describe our sentiments should we not return to them. Perhaps I’m too exhausted, but I cannot think of anything to write, and I don’t feel any desire to try. Mostly, John writes and I sit, drowsing against the desk.

Our silence is disrupted when the tent flaps draw open and Tallmadge clatters inside, collecting his swordbelt and calling White to assist him in checking the rifles of the men that I’d ordered for him. John gives a short protest but rises to his feet nonetheless, and as they leave, I get up from the desk and move to take my friend’s cot to rest.

“...Laurens,” comes a grumble from against my side of the tent as I sit on White’s bed.

I turn, meet Hamilton’s eyes as he’s blinking the sleep from his vision, and he smiles at himself and begins to apologize for taking my cot.

“It’s fine,” I laugh. I cannot help but laugh, too exhausted to feel frustration. “Major White said you were looking for me?”

He hums in confirmation but doesn’t elaborate his causes, just shuffles until his back meets the side of the tent and he’s left space under the blanket which he holds up in obvious invitation.

I smile, “No, you’re fine-”

“Please,” he says, raises the blanket.

I realize the offer wasn’t made as an apology for occupying my space- it’s something he’s asking for in earnest. *I do prefer to share.* I hesitate a moment until he shifts and pulls the blanket back against him, leaves a space empty, and I get up, step to my own cot and put a knee to the frame, “Someone will be coming to dismantle this tent soon…” I say in warning.

“I’ll wake you.”

I’m too exhausted to question my immediate trust, and I accept his promise by dropping heavily beside him, pressed close to his chest in the small space available. The blanket falls over my side as he drapes an arm around my waist and shifts behind me until his arm is comfortably tucked under our necks.

It’s a familiar embrace. It had haunted me awake while we were yet strangers, his gentle fingers agitating my heartbeat with expectant caresses against my chest, but I feel differently now, and Hamilton doesn’t tease me with touch. I had a glass of wine with dinner, and exhaustion has my mind fogged, but I am not drunk or feeling sentimental as I was the last time I shared my bed with Hamilton. Things have simply changed. It would be easy to sink instantly to sleep, but, “What did you need?” I mumble, recalling that he had sought me out for some purpose other than sleep.

Hamilton’s hand at my waist shifts and tucks into the lapel of my coat, holding over my heart. “I wanted to tell you- you have to be brave tomorrow. In my stead,” he whispers. I feel his forehead press between my shoulders and his voice is muffled in my clothes, no less forceful when he says, “If
I cannot be out there with you in the battle, you have to be great…” His grip tightens in my clothes. “I need every soldier in this army, and every soldier’s son and sons’ sons talking about how gloriously John Laurens fought in the Battle of Germantown… I need them to know you.”

Heavy words.

I cannot speak, cannot find my voice to respond, and if I had it, I would not know what to say. Hamilton is talking about glory- the immortality of fame, and it’s something I’ve always been warned against desiring, something I had never stopped thirsting for, and knowing that he wishes it for me…

My hand finds Alex’s against my chest, fingers covering his knuckles until my friend’s grip loosens and shifts, fingers winding around mine until both our hands are held against my heart.

Whatever this means, he accepts it as a response and I relax, letting my eyes fall heavy and giving in -finally- to exhaustion. As I slip into unconsciousness, I imagine lips pressing lightly to my right shoulder.

I’m sure I imagined it.

THE MARCH TO GERMANTOWN BEGINS long after the sun has set, the night drenching the fields in inky blackness, cold dew covering the grasses and tents packed up onto carriages to be carried behind the walking army. Our march follows Washington’s orders directly and we approach Howe’s stronghold as planned- if not a little later than ordered, but it took some time to establish a command in each division and Sullivan’s men could not move forward until flanked on both sides by Wayne and Conway.

I take my place on horseback, at the head of Sullivan’s main effort, leading the principle regiment with Major White as we approach the township. Our march plods through a muddy path, lit by moonlight and lamps held at the fore of each column. General Washington had warned all his commanders that the march would be long through the night and they should prepare their soldiers accordingly with all possible comforts as food and water and fresh shoes- if such were available.

Still, by dawn, as we are arriving on the misty ford at Norristown, many of the men are swaying on their feet. It does not feel sufficient to hearten them with words alone. But, as the order echoes through our ranks- a complete halt- I hear a bellowing voice calling out over our division. In the distance, approaching our columns, General Wayne is shouting at his own men- drawing them to raise shouts and fists into the air, shaking their musket bags with a metallic clatter.

Wayne rides to our ranks, aloof in his saddle. I cannot hear everything he says, even at the fore of our lines, but his energy- his rage is infectious, invoking the same violence in my gut that longed to punch a desk as General Washington received news of Wayne’s attack at Paoli- the same rage I fall to each time my sword has passed sharp into the flesh of a British soldier…

Hamilton spoke my mind just hours ago, a vainglorious desire for fame- to be remembered for this cause, the only means of justifying our existence. He is right- that we live in a time for action- for opportunity that we cannot ignore. If I don’t use my life for this revolution, no matter what my name is or who my father, I know I will be forgotten to the world. I should be entirely this. A soldier. But, I need to be a great one. History will not remember me if it sees me as I am- I have to take my fame, shape myself for seizing it, direct my darkness to reflect the light.

Howe’s men are waiting over the hilltop.
The march resumes with an eerie silence.

All is still, a stepping rhythm to our march, calm, monotonous for the duration of our path, carrying weary men forward to heights of anticipation. In the glorious days of ancient kings and grand battles, armies would not go gently into the field, holding ranks and allowing bodies to shed. They fought a clattering mass- a dead-run charge to meet the enemy in the middle, shattering the bulk of an army with sheer momentum.

I blame gunpowder and musket. The impersonal, distant nature of a direct fire weapon.

But, I left my rifle with my tent.

The enemy is still without range when the first volleys of cannon fire break the silence- a crescendo. The fatigue drains from our step, excited by the danger, hearts jolted to more fervent action. The soldiers move closer, collide with the enemy, fall into a clash of violence, rifles precariously blocking bayonets, men slip from their lines, fall into the mud.

I kick my horse into action, into the thick of battle, knock lines low where I can, strike through flesh and bone, reduce life to rot. I roll into the beat of my horse’s hoofs, to the frantic thrum of my heartbeat, vision focused sharp on each target, perception quickening to block and parry, slash and tear.

They pull back, we press them.

Conway’s columns were assigned to flank our main effort, but he breaks away near Mount Airy, engaging a patrol. The low visibility among fog and a wet dawn confuses our command until we cannot be sure whether we are facing a thousand men or four times so many. General Sullivan is calling his aides to disperse orders to more distant commanders to bring reinforcements.

I follow General Wayne’s columns into the height of battle where the men are fighting furiously...perhaps recognizing faces from Paoli. The Pennsylvanians turn to savagery in revenge for the massacre, and around me, other officers, my tent mates and friends, are urging compassion, pleading with our men to stop the slaughter, attempting to restrain the rage…

I don’t.

I’d felt it before, and I feel it now- the giddy peace with myself that comes in harnessing one’s true talent. I do not need to love war to recognize my strength in this realm- glory in it. I could live for the charges, a cohort of men, thundering around me. For years of a helpless station by my father’s side, beneath his name and expectations, this is mine. Like a yearning racehorse, too long penned, finally free to run… Amidst stabbing bayonets and swords I can finally- finally fight back. With fevered fervency, I fight off ten, twenty, thirty men. Each foot of ground I seize is taken by force, but it’s mine.

This at last, is what I can do...

“Mister Laurens!” someone shouts.

I don’t take heed, ignore the address in favor of chasing down a soldier.

A second shout seizes my attention, and I waver in brief confusion, snapped from a reverie by Major White’s voice.

Looking ahead, the retreating redcoats were running fast to a single structure, tucked among tall pines and a manicured lawn, dotted with statues and fountains. They’re pouring through the door
into the building, taking up positions in all the windows and fortifying the walls from the inside-among the blasts of cannons in the surrounding fields, I can hear the scraping of furniture from inside the building. A strict memorization of this region’s map has my mind reeling for nomenclature— the house...Cliveden.

GENERAL WAYNE AND SULLIVAN’S DIVISIONS both march on past the house after some deliberation, some shouting orders and organizing the raging Pennsylvanians back into civilized lines. The encampment of the 40th British regiment was just visible through the fog of humid air and gunsmoke. Major White holds with me among the reserves from Sullivan’s force as I call them to halt, demand as much information of this situation as possible. Several officers had been close enough to Cliveden to estimate the number of British that had taken the house as a stronghold, somewhere near one-hundred twenty soldiers.

“We cannot just halt in this track,” a thickly accented voice pipes from behind where I’ve stationed myself by John’s side.

The Chevalier de Mauduit trots beside us, recognizable in this low light only by the glint of medals on his coat. He’s said nothing we all did not already know. “I agree,” I say, “but, we also cannot leave this structure a stronghold in our rear-”

A colonel rides to our front—Pickering if I recall his name. “Gentlemen, report!” he shouts.

We all turn, and behind him, General Washington himself is galloping to survey our predicament, Alexander riding fast by his heels with Captain Gibbs behind. I feel his eyes locked on me.

I throw a glance to Major White and the Chevalier and I straighten my shoulders, as His Excellency approaches. They shuffle atop their horses, so it’s to be me. “Good morning, sir!” I say to Pickering, “The second light infantry and 40th have taken refuge in this house—Cliveden on our maps. General Wayne and General Sullivan have moved ahead with the main force.”

General Washington arrives and receives a similar report from Pickering with the addition of some news of Sullivan’s advance and information from Proctor’s artillery company. His Excellency listens keenly, frowns, and calls his commanders and aides to council.

HAMILTON TOUCHES MY ARM as I walk from our horses into Washington’s tent. His breath is coming heavy as though he’s run to meet me in urgency, “You’re hurt?” he says.

My brows draw and his eyes catch my attention, darkness touching his deep violet. I follow his gaze to my breeches where blood had soaked through the fabric at my thighs where bodies had sprawled against my leg where I was mounted. I understand his concern, bewildered and breathless. “Ah—it…it’s not mine…”

He hums, smiles, gives no further comment.

THE SUN IS RISEN with enough light that Washington’s map is visible without candles and we gather around a temporary field table. I had explained my concern of leaving Cliveden occupied in our rear to Alexander, received confirmation that my fears were well-founded and logical, and as His Excellency opens his counsel to suggestions, my friend does not hesitate to raise my concerns.
“Sir, the main effort of the army has already moved ahead with success,” Hamilton says, “but leaving over a hundred British soldiers in a fortified stronghold to our rear cuts off our withdraw route and brings our rear to exposure...snipers, cannons. Sir if our forces are reduced enough, one-hundred fifty men could even envelope one of our divisions."

Captain Knox, one of Washington’s favored tacticians and artillery chief of General Sullivan’s division is quick to agree with the Lieutenant Colonel’s diagnosis of the situation.

“Sir, if I might, I would suggest a continuation of the forward assault through Wayne and Sullivan’s forces, but to envelope the house in the rear with our reserves,” Hamilton says, and I can see the hard set of Washington’s mouth tightening as my friend continues to overstep his authority. Alexander presses forth, “Led by those officers that are irregular to command positions- therefore not required by the main effort...such as Colonel Pickering, Major White, or Lieutenant Colonel Laurens,” he motions to me and I suppress a grin.

The idea perturbs His Excellency and his stoicism holds back a perceivable tension. We will be losing valuable numbers to expend such a force around Cliveden, and maintaining a reserve unit is always ideal when leading an assault, but Captain Knox passionately reinforces Hamilton’s suggestion, offers to design the effort himself, and Washington relents.

He will leave Cliveden to my discretion.

As His Excellency takes counsel with Captain Knox, I return to Hamilton’s side, touch his sleeve, “Thank you,” I say.

“For what?” he says.

“Your recommendation- to suggest me for command, I do appreciate the consideration…”

He smiles, an indulgent thing, but condescending like he believes I’m being slow, “Laurens, you are drenched in British blood,” he says, turning to face me and take one of my hands in his, gripping my shoulder in the other. “I’ve heard nothing but praises of your performances on patrols, raids, skirmishes, all matters of field work,” he squeezes my arm, “You’ll be great.”

THE WALLS OF CLIVEDEN have been reinforced inside in the manner I had suspected. The redcoats pushed furniture against the windows, wooden structures, doors, and any other space that was not reinforced strongly behind stone walls or brick.

Cannon fire does nothing to breach the structure.

Major White rides to my side, “Jack!” he shouts over the thunder of cannonading. “Jack, we’re wasting our ammunition- this is fruitless.”

I agree- loathsome- but I agree. I call a ceasefire and bring my friend to speak behind a classical fountain- one of many intricate carved structures in the yard of Cliveden. We’ve taken several of them and mounted cannons upon them- used others for shelter.

“Jack,” White says, “we won’t take this house by force.” He sheathes his sword by his waist, “We can come no closer with the cannons lest we put our artillerymen in range of their muskets in the windows. We’ve blown out every structure that would fall, but it won’t force a surrender. To attack the building- superior numbers or no, we would simply raze ourselves needlessly-”

“Then what do you suggest!” I snap, and I know my voice has gone harsh.
John is patient with me, “Send a truce- meet them as gentlemen,” he says.

I purse my lips, but give my attention.

“If we attack the building in earnest, their command must know we will kill them all in time, but we’ll lose many of our own- it’s a loss for both sides,” he says reasonably, grabbing my arm gently, “No one should die for something so needless.”

I want to fight- this is my chance to fight- to claim the glory Hamilton promised...but John is right. I feel myself relenting.

“Send a messenger with an offer,” he says. “If they disarm entirely and surrender their weapons, we’ll leave them alive and move on to rejoin General Sullivan…”

I nod.

A SNIPER STATIONED IN A SECOND-FLOOR WINDOW fires an expert shot through the neck of our messenger...a young man of sixteen- enlisted. He falls like a rag.

The bombardment begins at once.

I raise a furious scream, Captain Knox fires up artillery on the south wall, five lines of foot soldiers charge at the principal door in a coordinated formation- several falling before making it across the lawn. I shout orders for the next line of barragement, but before I can call their charge to commence, a hand grabs my coat and pulls me back.

“Monsieur Laurens...use this,” the Chevalier says to me in French, pressing an oil lamp into my hands- one that we had used during the march to guide our step…

I understand at once.

I confirm the proposal with Captain Knox. He’s glad to have a plan that will preserve his cannonballs, gives his blessing, and I call the next lines of men on me, bring them to a half-circle to hear my commands. They crouch in the grass- some dropping to one knee and others standing informally, leaning on one another, but they all hear my plan- to gather hay, kindling, twigs and leaves as would serve as good fuel to fire, deliver as much of this detritus to the border of the house as they could before making their attack.

I and my officers would be behind to bring the flame…

“THEY’RE WATCHING US,” Major White says, arms folded at his elbows and gazing at the second floor of Cliveden where the windows have been destroyed by our cannonading. British soldiers inside are gathered at the opening, staring and whispering among themselves as the men in our reserve force scatter about the front lawn, collecting whatever dry kindling is available on such a foggy, dew-drenched morning. “...They’re frightened,” he whispers.

“Good,” I say. The redcoats can do whatever they want to try and defend themselves- throw whatever water they have stored inside on the fires we light, shoot us down in our approach, press us back from the doors. We will take this house.

Beside me, John’s lips press thin and he fixes me with dark eyes, “Can we not take them with a
proper charge?” he says. “Burning them alive…” his expression twists in disgust.

"Complain to your Chevalier de Mauduit if you disagree with our plan."

I step away to check on the progress of spreading the flame from our one lantern across several torches, leaving my friend to wallow in his sympathies. There’s no time for that. General Sullivan and General Wayne are miles ahead by now.

The Chevalier calls the preparations to a close, and I agree with his judgement, begin spreading his orders myself, repeating his strongly-accented commands loud over the reserve soldiers. We arrange our force back into columns. The men will break and rush the house in pairs- disperse themselves to make the most difficult targets as possible, and attempt to throw themselves at the door. At the least, they’ll deliver their dry kindling to the front step before laying down to die...and if their running mate falls before them- deliver theirs as well.

Each pair of men leaves on my command, a sharp, “Go! ...Go! ...Go!” and the bodies begin pressing at the house. Some join the corpses already scattered across the cannon-blown lawn, fall into the mud and crawl as far as they can- some reach the side of the building by sheer will and die there against the wall.

All my formal tactical training in Europe feels thrown akilter, shunned and wronged as I call to my officers to make our direct charge with torches and brands. There’s no time to square the wide open lawn, and charging through a flat field in the view of enemy guns goes against everything I’ve been taught.

My heart is leaping into my throat.

I choose to leave my horse, safe behind our makeshift fortifications, charge by foot. It’s nothing like running into a line of opposing soldiers- nothing like running exercise drills, though I’m shouting with all my breath. The destination of my charge seems an impenetrable wall, and when I reach it, all there is to do is throw myself against it, press my brand to anything wooden- anything flammable, and hope.

Beside me, a captain has his horse killed under him within three yards of the house. I see a man get shot through a grate from the cellar as he got close and tried to throw an armful of burning straw he had collected off a corpse- he presses on. At the principal door, my men are prying it back, tearing at the door to press inside. Just beyond their grip, redcoats are nudging bayonets out to skewer all those that would come too near. Corpses have jammed the door so they cannot close it safely.

I see the opportunity.

“With me, J!” I shout, pointing my sword at the door, and Major White falls in behind me as I run for it, focused so intently that I cannot feel my legs, all motion becomes periphery as I leap over cleaved heaps of dirt and bodies that have fallen before us. I have to get this brand to the wooden frame of that door- burn them back from the entrance.

“Back, back!” White yells as we approach, and the useless throngs of soldiers that have clumped the doorway move aside to let us press forward.

We climb over the mass of writhing, straining bodies, coordinated in our urgency. Packs of straw and twigs and leaves are piled around the base of the door, but the redcoats have thrown water over the mass, rendering it useless. The frame of the door itself is dry wood though, and I press through the throngs, shoving and slashing aside arms sheathed in red fabric. Beside me, John is acting my vanguard, carrying his own torch, but blocking stabs that come at me, pressing swords and bayonets
away like pesky branches in a forest of weaponry.

My men push us forward from behind, occasionally shouting encouragements, assisting our advance or blocking slashes in our defense. I have never felt more in the heart of anything.

The arm in which I hold my sword erupts in pain, goes slack and I nearly drop my weapon, letting out a shout. Someone had shot...a musket- the redcoats, someone had shot...a musket went through my shoulder- my right shoulder.

I sway.

I cannot breathe for the pain of it- I hadn’t thought...I never believed this could happen, and I cannot fathom how Lafayette had continued to ride with such agony, but there’s not time to dwell on it; there’s bodies pressing me from behind, forward into the line of enemy defense.

If I’m to die from this, I have to use this time expeditiously- I have to be great.

I still have my feet and I can still hold a sword. The pulsing sting through my shoulder, tugs my neck, hitches my awareness all the way into my mouth and eyes, making all my blood seem to throb to its attention, all other branches of my body become periphery. I ignore it. It’s easy to ignore in the rush of my actions- the necessity of my attention to the task still at hand.

John is shouting at me and I realize I’ve shoved forward, pressed my brand into a man’s cheek and he’s howling in agony. I don’t care, press him harder.

“Jack, you’re shot!” he says.

“Yes-” I say impatiently, pull back my brand- shove it to the door. The man falls backwards.

“We can get you out,” John’s saying, but I’m not listening to him, trying to bodily break the door off it’s hinges with my weight- several men beside me are assisting in the effort. The effort is most important. “You need to retreat, Jack, you’ll-”

A hot spray of mist hits my neck and cheek and John’s voice chokes off.

I’m pressed against the door beneath two soldiers, one man perhaps twice my weight, but my senses are not so clear as to judge it. I’m sure that I cannot get out from this entrapment, and beside me, the side of John’s face slides down my shoulder. I have to struggle to turn my face towards him, but...

His mouth lulls open and a bloodback slides their bayonet from my friend’s throat where he’d sheathed it in his mouth, clean through the back of his head. John’s eyes are pinched shut in a final wince, his voice giving one pitiful gurgle as the blade pulls out, and...he’s dead.

He’s dead.

MAJOR WHITE IS DEAD. My friend is dead where he had been blocking slashes against me. He’s gone from my side. With a musket ball in my sword arm and my fingers irreversibly gripped around a brand that is not taking flame, a blade sinks into my side where I cannot feel my body to defend it.

I look down at myself long enough to see the blade miss a fatal mark, dragging out a stream of blood as it withdraws. It does not matter. Nothing matters but the mission. I think of nothing else-thoughts lull behind the rush of the fight, the bite of pain, the endless mantra, ‘take the house, he’s
dead, he’s dead, take the house- God, he’s dead …’ rolling through my mind.

I don’t feel the constricting fabric as I tie my sash around my shoulder. I don’t feel strain in my left arm as I switch my sword and continue my press. I don’t feel it as I elbow my way bodily over the corpses that jam the door ajar. I don’t feel it as men drag me out of the fight…

But, somehow, I’m out.

The open air feels too light after the constant pressure of men pushing me against the door. I sway even with my good arm hoisted against another officer’s epaulette. I get my feet under myself, wobble, but find enough energy to protest, “Take the house- I have to…”

“Montez votre,” the man snaps beside me, “putain cheval!”

It’s ridiculous- the idea of leaving the field. I laugh, high and hysterical, shove at the frenchman’s shoulders. I won’t mount my horse. I’ll die here.

But, the Chevalier is stronger than me- uninjured and presenting an imposing wall to surpass. I don’t want to cut him with my sword in my left hand, cannot maneuver it where it’s draped around his shoulders, so I attempt to shove him aside with my bad arm…falling against him more than anything.

I don’t know how he grabbed me- or forced me atop the horse that Hamilton had stolen so many weeks ago- or how I rode two miles along Chestnut Hill in such a state with such low visibility, but I know that I was not alive when I reached camp and was pulled off my horse. I heard voices, but I was not alive. I couldn’t be.

THE SOUND OF AGONIZED SCREAMS must make sense, but something selfish and righteous in me denies that this should be my fate. I know that I deserve punishments for every sin available- lust, pride, sloth, greed, envy, murder...for trapping my Martha, for desiring the male form, for disobeying my father, for negligence...but, surely I had enough good in me to counter these faults. I have always been conscientious, repentful, self-aware- I’m sure I have. I should be allowed to present my case to some divine justice- plea for a term in purgatory at least...

Two hands grip my shoulder, and a cold metal prod flashes my eyes open as it pushes into burning flesh, opens the wound. I can’t move my hands under their restraints, feel my fingers pop at the knuckles with the pressure that I dig them into my palms.

My vision closes off again, sounds muffle into blackness.

I hope there’s a death after death.

WHEN I WAKE AGAIN, I feel fantastic- aloof and numb, and I would think I had been granted my prayers, been given some opportunity to see judgement and atonement, perhaps that my brief stint in hell had been sufficient punishment.

But, I recognize the Chevalier’s dark brown eyes and round lips and I know he survived the battle. I’m sure he must have. I’m confused how a living man would visit the afterlife, but I don’t have the energy to question it- or to protest when the Chevalier reaches for my hand and grips it.
OVER THE NEXT FEW HOURS, I learn that I have not been admitted to any heavenly host, any cohort of the damned or field of shades. I had been given laudnum and operated on, soldered and sewn shut.

The reserve force had taken Cliveden in my absence, and the army as a whole had been routed for poor visibility and confusion in our assault. The plan had failed.

But somehow, spirits are infuriatingly high in the hospital tent. The soldier stationed beside me is missing an arm from the elbow down, but he jokes with a visitor about his early release from his service contract. They laugh until I snap at them to stop.

The assault failed, but came close enough to success for the army to plume it's pride and mount false laurels.

I sleep through the day and demand to leave the hospital by evening mess call. I'm strong enough to walk, so I'm strong enough to work.

General Sullivan won't hear it. Even Conway dismisses me to rest.

My tent is empty...all my own now, I assume. The camp servants have set it up with one bed. Major White’s belongings have already been collected, the letters he wrote to his sons handled by his dear French friend- my unwanted savior. Tallmadge has returned to Washington’s headquarters, and he left a short note to convey this on my desk. I appreciate that he bothered to tell me, but I’m too frustrated to forgive the desertion yet. Though we had not been close, I think I would enjoy his company now. If only to distract me from the feeling of laudnum slowly wearing off.

My cot is freshly made in the back left corner of the tent, but I don't want to lie down any longer. I have spent all day in bed, and though my side aches where I was punctured, the satisfaction of standing on my own feet is all I have. I choose to dwell on it, pacing the length of the tent and holding my sword in my slinged arm, cleaning it with my left hand. I don't know how long I work at the task mindlessly, but it's dark outside the tent when the flaps open and admit a gust of cool air.

"John?"

I know it's Hamilton. His voice sounds hesitant, concerned for me, and I’m not sure what he knows- but "John’s dead," I say hoarsely, not bothering to look up. The words have repeated through my mind countless times, a mantra I had clung to as if it may eventually make sense, but I had not said it aloud. It feels strange to.

"What?" Alex says, brows drawing. "God, I heard you were injured, are you alright, what...what are you-?" he stops, eyes widening. "...John White."

I draw a shaky breath. I wish I hadn’t said it- I’m not sure why I did. I haven’t spoken much to anyone since waking- have avoided the subject of casualties...this specific one in particular.

He steps closer but does not move to touch me as realization spreads over his eyes. "Oh...oh, Laurens...I'm sorry. I- I'm so sorry..."

I had refused to mourn, wanted to move beyond such a state directly to the numb acceptance that comes with time, but Hamilton invites me to take his empathy, and it breaks me, draws me to explain this frantic feeling, "He didn’t want to rush the house- he shouldn’t’ve been there- I led...I convinced him to- I convinced him to join this forsaken revolution- he never- never would've come here if I hadn't suggested it, he would've stayed abroad, would've stayed with his family, would’ve got a career and I convinced him, I brought him, I convinced him, I-" I choke off, my breath hitching as I...
inhale too deeply to release it, then I’m gasping- and gasping and-

I feel the tears break my control, sword slipping from my fingers to the dirt with a low thud. I curse it. My weakness is embarrassing, but Hamilton doesn't touch me or pity me or blame me for my emotion. He watches me with bright eyes, lips thin with understanding. "What do you need?" he says softly, expression a blank mask over a low glow of earnestness.

I have no answer, I still cannot breathe properly- still gasp and hitch.

He takes no more words, lacing one arm behind my waist and tugging me abruptly forward, jolting my lungs from their tormentous rhythm. It hurts my shoulder, but it breaks the cycle of my chanting thoughts. *I convinced him, I convinced him, I brought him, I-* he presses me to the cot, a rush of air cushioning my good side and pressing from my chest; he lays me out and follows, curling himself around me so my nose presses into the hard bone between his ribs, hidden under the layers of his shirt. In the numb shock of emotion, I fall heavy in his arms without resistance, grip the fabric of his uniform and burrow there until my mind can make sense of the loss.

*No one should die for something so needless...*

I've held Hamilton's body close before, been held in return, seen him as bare as he could allow, and I take comfort from familiarity- his scent, the rhythm of his heart.

I try to feel alive.
The Appointment

amor ch'a nullo amato amar perdona

I AM SEVEN YEARS OLD, fingers dug deep into dry sands, warm and giving as I sift my fingers in the sensation. The ocean crashes in a comforting rhythm, constant and reliable, and I close my eyes and let the sun warm my forehead.

When I look down, I see a face in the Charlestown sand, a curved nose and smiling lips, bright eyes, a face I could never forget, forgiving, endlessly gentle...mother. I move to grab the expression from the sand only for my impression to lift from the ground, eyes rolling back and she recedes from me into the air, draws upshore and rises to full form like a spirit.

There’s nothing to do but chase her as she draws away into the treeline of oaks, and I mount a branch as she continues her ethereal ascent, climbing with unnatural ease for such a small child. I chase her as far as the tree branches reach, and I perch myself among the spanish moss and knobby branches, reaching for her as she rises into the light, beckons me to follow impatiently...just out of reach, just-

I WAKE TO FIND my breath stuffed with pitiful sniffles, mouth lulled open to draw air. My body is stiff and aches sharply everywhere- my knees, shoulders, arms, neck, and I’m brought to blistering awareness that the vision was a dream and the warmth on my face was not sunlight. A pressure against my forehead marks the place where my face had tucked into Hamilton’s collar and I absorb his body heat. I draw away far enough to see his expression still slack with sleep, neck stretched to grant me a place beneath his chin.

As always, he is striking, brows drawn with a concern that had held his face until he fell asleep wearing it, lips closed gently, curved like a tightly-strung bow.

I’m immediately discomfited.

In all the times we had shared a bed, he had always awoke early and left by the time I roused. I wish he had left me on this morning as well.

Waking in this sore state has me sobered. I cannot explain myself- cannot face his pity should he wake and hear the way my nose has been stopped up with phlegm from weeping against him through the night. I cannot begin to consider why I had so readily sought comfort, nor can I condone the idea of continuing to exploit Hamilton’s sensibility. He’s not a man given easily to such brazen displays of emotionalism, instead saving his passions for arguing his contrivances. The man’s first instinct had been to dodge my friendship, and I should know not to selfishly distract him from that path by presenting myself so pitifully. He’s too foolishly kind to the pitiable. I’ve taken advantage. John was right to keep a distance from me.

He should have stayed further.

The idea of pulling away is daunting, but it’s necessary, and a task that I go about with care. I gentle Hamilton’s arm from around my back and retract carefully from where I had laid my head in the crease of his shoulder. It’s a stiff, excruciatingly painful business. He grumbles restlessly, and my
thoughts freeze into a blank fear of what to say should his eyes open, but Hamilton just furrows his brow and shifts, curling his arms in towards his chest to hold the warmth that I’ve stolen away. He does not wake.

I gather my uniform coat and dress quickly, clumsily stuffing my injured arm into its sleeve and re-wrapping the sling that I was prescribed. It’s a painful business, biting back a shout when the motion tugs on cauterized flesh, but I keep quiet and find my boots, discarded by the desk, tug those on one-handed. There’s nothing to be done to tidy my queue- I certainly won’t wake Hamilton for assistance.

The morning is still dark and frosted as I step outside, and I close the flaps of my tent behind myself to hold in the warmth for Hamilton to sleep comfortably. I pull my coat closed with my uninjured arm, and make my way with a brisk pace to General Sullivan’s field tent, toes sinking into soft soil, crusted with ice. The stitches that sutured my stomach shut tug with each step, but so far as I can tell, they’re holding.

As I come inside the tent, I’m met with silence, the soft sound of a quill scratching paper, and a single chair occupied- by Brigadier General Conway.

Were it any other officer, I would be impressed with their dedication, working at such an hour, but it’s Conway, and I’ve learned since our introduction that all impressive things he does- he does with spite. I instantly raise my posture, straighten my shoulders, brace for scrutiny, “Good morning, sir,” I say, glad when my voice comes sturdy. “Is General Sullivan awake yet?”

Conway doesn’t bother to look up from his parchment, doesn’t grace me a glance of attention. Something defiant in me roils. “You’ve not been called to report, mister Laurens-”

“I know this, sir, but I-”

A sharp look from the Brigadier General cuts me off mid-protest. “You were shot not even a day ago; your orders were to remain in your tent.”

I cannot deny that General Sullivan had cleared my schedule of duties, but I would be fine to work if they would just grant me a task. “General Conway, I was not ordered to rest, and I am fit to work for-”

Conway doesn’t allow me to begin the correction, “Mister Laurens, I have been exceedingly patient of your lack of discipline- your obscene neglect of bearing.” Lack of discipline! “But, I will hear no petty squabbles against this judgment, your absence can be suffered for a few days in this office.”

My hands have clenched into fists at the seams of my trousers- posture so tight it could be confused for a position of attention. Since my arrival in this division, Conway has become increasingly belligerent against me and all the arrogance he believes I embody. “I only offer my services, I’ve never claimed to be vital to-”

“No, but you loved to think it!” he says.

“Sir-”

“And, this is exactly my meaning,” Conway says, rising to his feet, “Interrupting your superior and disregarding his judgments? Sullivan would give you a medal, I’m sure- all you Americans are the same, so desperate for attention.”

I can feel my frayed frustrations tearing, coiling to snap. I clench my hands into fists so tight my nails dig into the flesh of my palm, “And you Frenchmen, so desperate for promotion- whether it is
merited or not!” I should regret the words, but I don’t, and as the Brigadier General opens his mouth to shout at me, I raise my voice over him, leaning into the table, “Conway, if you believe your personal squabbles against my character have any hold over the value of my work, you are mistaken! I don’t know of your service in France, and I don’t care of it. You’re an officer in this American army, and I’ll leave this office because you ordered me away, but I will have you know that I was requested here to perform the same work you now deny me.”

“...Requested here by a man that’s now dead,” Conway says simply, giving me a dark look and taking his seat gracefully. “General Sullivan is reticent to the proposals of his favorite aides, and Major White spoke highly of you...” My throat feels constricted, stomach heavy. I clench my jaw as Conway continues, locking his eyes on me. “Cliveden, yes? The commands were yours, were they not?” I know he can see that he’s caught me and I cannot speak to defend myself. “So, you have your trophies, and your tragedies to tell. Go back to your tent, grieve your friends, receive your sympathies- you so obviously wanted.”

I have never understood the phrase ‘head rush’ until this moment. Rage fills my senses so completely my vision swims and think I might faint- or scream- or fling General Sullivan’s table into Conway’s ugly face. “I never -!”

“Mister Laurens? Petit, for why are you out of bed?”

Before I can start at Conway, J’s friend has entered the far side of the tent. “Chevalier, I...” when the Frenchman’s presence draws me to falter in my frustration, Conway smirks and returns his attention to his orders. I clench and unclench my hands, wanting more than anything to storm a tirade so petty and furious that he would have to demote me or- at least hear me. But, the Chevalier’s expression is cut in genuine concern and his eyes are trained on my shoulder, and I recall how he’d held my hand tenderly, how his lips had trembled when my vision had blurred and eyes rolled back. I know I’m cruel, but I am not so pathetic to accept his concern, “I...was seeking General Sullivan, I...”

“He was just returning to his quarters,” Conway says, and he doesn’t look at me. Smiles with infuriating self-satisfaction.

THE THOUGHT OF RETURNING to my tent and crawling back into the tangle of Hamilton’s arms passes like a whisper, a sinister plea from a selfish piece in my chest that would pursue a drunken fantasy of reaching out for its match. Returning to bed would be seeking comfort. I know I could find it there, return to a cot, pressed with Alexander’s warmth, and he would forgive me for having left. I could bury my face into his collar and heal my heart with delusions of affection and importance.

It wouldn’t be fair.

Nothing of the way I feel is fair.

I had only ever wanted to avoid being beaten by him, but I’m fooling myself- and troubling everyone with concern for me. I won’t ask any more.

I had stalked to my tent, but upon reaching it, I turn away and rush past rows of sleeping tents, undisturbed, feet falling against frosted soil, black with the darkness of morning before the sun has risen. My breath comes quick and clouded as I dodge through the forest path, jumping over collected puddles and fallen logs. I know the path well enough that, even in such low light, colors drained from my vision, I walk with confidence.
His Excellency always has a surplus of managerial work, ration divisions, files for organizing, dozens of tasks that would only require one arm.

I am sure he could use my service, and if I arrive before the other aides are waking, I’m sure there will be a task for me to claim.

“NO, ABSOLUTELY NOT.”

“Mister Harrison, if you would just allow me to speak with His Excellency, I am sure that-”

“He won’t hear it, Laurens.”

The older aide turns from me and sets his attention back about arranging General Washington’s study for the other aides to begin their duties as soon as they begin waking up. He’d spent the past several minutes, lecturing me of the dangers of infection to an open wound, and now he’s walking away from me dismissively. I start after him, raising my right arm in demonstration, “Harrison, this is not so bad as I received at Brandywine, and His Excellency had me back in the field at Goshen just a few days later-”

“Where we broke the engagement for rain,” Harrison says dismissively. “Besides, your injury then was what- a bruised ankle?”

I stare at him, incredulous. “...A contusion by cannonball!”

Harrison’s lips thin and he straightens a stack of blank parchment on the General’s desk, “Yes, well this is a musket wound- and afflicting your arm no less. You won’t be much use to write.”

“Writing is not my sole capacity!” I protest. “I can provide military counsel, translations, tactical designs, logistical supervision...I could stand to be on my feet, please.”

Raising a brow, Harrison looks at me, expression impatient. “Laurens,” he says, “Washington will not have you exhausting yourself to fever under his supervision. He cares only for your good health and safety- for obvious reasons.” When his eyes meet mine and find them unchanged, untouched by understanding, he explains slowly, “Your primary charge in this office is to win the favor of your father for General Washington. He needs strong support in the Congress, and if he allows you to over-work yourself, your father will hear of it...”

It takes a moment for me to comprehend what he means.

And it cuts me deep, draws me to clutch my hand over my punctured stomach- the highest insult- totally undeserved and abrupt, but Harrison says it with so much simplicity and frankness that I cannot raise a protest or feel the sting of the attack...just the forced acceptance of a fact, long avoided. Hamilton had spoken to assure me of my merit, but whether I have merit or not, Harrison is right to say that my best purpose is as a political bridge...since having arrived in Washington’s services, I had written to my father and the Congress more than I had performed any military work. It was foolish to believe that my invitation had nothing to do with my father- when my father had sent a letter of all his ‘best praises’ to secure me this position...and, now I understand why I have so often missed key pieces of General Washington’s plans- not because I could not comprehend the scope of our situation, but because he had not told me...I still remain a volunteer on this staff-unofficial in my position. If I have been suggested for the title of ‘aide’ solely for my political connections...

I cannot bare to think of it just now.
Harrison seems to understand that his words have pierced me, and his brow draws. He steps towards me and raises a hand to clasp my shoulder, but I back towards the door before he can touch me. He withdraws it. “Please go rest,” he says.

As I walk from the General’s study, my pace is slowed. I cannot force myself to return to Sullivan’s camp with any feeling of urgency. And, as I step from the threshold, Meade catches my arm with a grin.

“Laurens!” he greets. “By God, it’s good to see you aright and kicking! All the boys took a fright when we heard you’d been shot!”

I force a smile to recognize his friendly demeanor.

“What the hell are you doing here?” he says, “You should be resting— a shot wound’s no glancing matter, you’re lucky to be alive! It may have shattered bone or infected in the field!”

With his eyes so focused on the sling that holds my arm, I don’t know if Meade was informed of the additional stab wound I received, but I decide not to mention it. “I had thought His Excellency may have work for me,” I say honestly, past-tense...I had thought...

“Did Hammy send you?”

I realize that the other aides must know that Hamilton came searching for me if they all received the news of my injury at once. When Hamilton had arrived in my tent, he had been breathless and urgent— I had not considered it until now, but I must assume he ran to see me. “No,” I say, “I had truly just wanted to return to my work...I was turned away.”

Meade laughs and turns his eyes down to a stack of parcels in his hands, “Well, it’s no wonder he’s taken to you,” he muses with a grin, fingers dancing along the edges of the papers as he searches out a particular parcel. “You could be twins sprung from Leda— I swear I’d never believed men like Ham existed, but it seems you’ve made his match.” He smiles when his fingers catch whatever he was searching for. “I figure you’ll see him again before I do, so give him this for me. It arrived just today.”

Glancing down at the package, I immediately recognize the looping letters of my dear friend.

It’s a letter from Lafayette.

I throw the parcel into Hamilton’s lap, letting the flaps of my tent close behind me. He jolts awake with a startled flail, arms flying up into a defensive position over his face, and he quickly takes in his bearings, “Laurens,” he says, voice rough with sleep and confusion. He looks over to me, “Is everything alright...?” his voice drifts as he realizes that I’m clothed and he’s alone in my bed, “Where were you?”

“Headquarters,” I say shortly, point to the package in his lap, “That came for you.”

He glances down to read the parcel, but ignores it in favor of pushing back the covers, leaning over my desk to light the lantern, then rising to meet me in the center of the tent. He reaches for my left arm, fingers clasping around my elbow and eyes searching my posture for any signs of pain. He seems satisfied that my physical injuries are not an immediate threat because his tone implies an emotional concern when, “Are you alright?” he says slowly.
I step another pace back from him, and his gentle clasp at my arm drops without protest. “Of course, I’m always alright.” I say reflexively, a standard answer and a familiar lie. I pointedly look up at his face and not at the parcel from my Gilbert...who hasn't written me in two weeks. I shouldn’t feel so selfishly slighted when Gilbert is right to distance himself from my clinging affection.

Hamilton casts me an impatient look, tugs at his collar where I had wept against him last night. I shouldn’t be surprised that he sees through my lie, and I know what pain he is implicating. So, I explain, “John is hardly the first friend I’ve lost. And, I cannot expect him to be the last, can I?” I unclasp my sword belt and begin unbuttoning my vest one-handed. If I’m to be confined to my quarters, there’s no need for stuffy uniform dress- though undressing informs Hamilton of my dismissal from work, and I can see his lips press thin in sympathy as I struggle with it. “We deal in a bloody business for liberty,” I say forcefully- damn these buttons “-to fight for freedom we risk dying for it, and it’s a fact that John had accepted,” because I convinced him. “And, I’ll mourn him to have lost what we shared and whatever noble deeds his future held, but I won’t dishonor him by letting grief on his behalf render me incapable of performing my duties-”

“Just as you won’t allow a shot wound to hinder your movement?” Hamilton says, and I can feel he’s mocking my clumsiness as he steps to me and works his fingers over the buttons of my vest, but I cannot deny that his assistance hurries the painful task.

It frustrates me to be treated with pity, but my frustration is equally focused on the buttons of my vest, so I relent to his hands. “I haven’t taken help undressing since I was a child,” I say in weak protest.

“And I’m not a servant, ordered to undress you,” he says dismissively. We fall silent and he assists in removing the sling from my arm so we can push my coat off gingerly. Any motion of my arm plucks a sharp cord of pain, ringing a note of agony down my back and forcing me to wince. I cannot meet Hamilton’s eyes just now, not as he’s studying me in concern. I should know better than to accept his kindness, so I step away as we’ve removed my coat, sit on the edge of my cot. Hamilton frowns and follows, hands folding into the fabric of my vest. “So, I assume you got up and dressed to offer your service...and the fact that you’ve returned must mean you were sent away,” he pushes the fabric off my shoulders and traces his fingers back to my cravat. I can feel from the gentleness of his touch that it's intended to comfort. “Consider,” he says, “...if we are to make another attack this year- you should want to be healed for it, yes?” His hand settles over my heart as he stoops to slide my vest off, warm and heavy and I can tell he’s not speaking only of my shoulder when he speaks of healing. “Some wounds require attention- and rest- to heal. You shouldn’t exert yourself…”

I don’t want to hear affirmation that my choice to try and work was a mistake, and I do not need reminding that my heart grows fond too fast. It would be easy to submit to reason and agree to rest, to submit to comfort and agree to mourn. But, my frustration makes it easy to grab his wrist and pull his hand harshly from where it had settled against my chest.

“I know the limits of my own body,” I say simply. “And, your time should be better-spent in Washington’s office. He has plenty of work.”

Hamilton frowns then relents, “Will you first let me change your bandages?” he says, sliding his wrist free from my hold. “Shot wounds are so easily infected, and you’re not the only one who has had some training in medicine.”

He tries a reassuring smile, but I recall treating his injuries at Parker’s ford. I recall how he's repaid my every kindness as if to rid himself of some perceived obligation, and I hold his hands further from
my body, “You’re not indebted to me for friendship,” I say, voice clipped. And, I would feel ungrateful, but I know that experience dictates…my friendship is not a blessing.

His brow draws in confusion- then frustration, “You misunderstand- I am offering my service-”

“And I am telling you I don’t need it!”

I didn’t realize I had shouted, but Hamilton raises a brow and straightens his posture abruptly, all but folding his arms over his chest. I can tell I’ve insulted him, but I don’t have the energy to ameliorate the slight just now- if I ever will. “Then you intend to report to a doctor?” he says.

“I’ll see to it.”

Hamilton gives a hard grunt of assent, but I spoke dismissively and he doesn’t raise another protest. He seems to recognize that I’m disagreeable, and though I know he’s done nothing to deserve this coldness, I cannot help it, or convince myself to soften.

He dresses with a hard forcefulness, snatches his favor from Lafayette, and leaves me in silence.

THE SOLDIERS THAT REPORT to the hospital tent are there by necessity- in immediate danger of fading into shades, and I feel out of place, entering on my own strength. Nurses are short-at-hand and I’m not in immediate need, but I receive immediate attention for the stars that mark my shoulder boards and I’m eager to hurry the nurse away as soon as my bandages are exchanged.

THE DAY PASSES BY in a crawl of idleness. I send Shrewsberry to Sullivan’s tent to retrieve me some reading material, but it’s difficult to focus on the words- and I’ve never had any trouble with focusing my attention, so I dismiss the task and I draw a map of the land that I had reconnoitered with Hamilton nearly a week ago. It’s comforting to put pencil to paper, and I had promised Lafayette maps to annotate.

While I’ve received no favors of his friendship, I cannot forget that I pledged him my own. I’m sure, in time, he’ll realize, as J White had, that I am a void and I will pull him in should he bound too close. The Marquis is an intelligent man. Perhaps he already knows.

Shrewsberry tends my needs throughout the day. When my focus drifts into a familiar blank stare, he draws my attention to my maps by asking questions of what the land had looked like in specific regions, and I return to memories of riding behind Hamilton in a rush of autumnal colors. They’re pleasant thoughts, far from the dim chill of the tent I’m confined to, and I appreciate the distraction.

Berry entertains me with company and comes with me to retrieve my dinner from the officers’ mess tent, if only to help me carry my plate. I feel no shame in baring my weakness to him, and openly accept his assistance to remove my uniform and prepare for bed that night. His hands are gentle and familiar and I can tell he recalls the days he had done this for me when I was young; it hangs between us with the heady weight of an unspoken remembrance. I don’t know if he missed my presence at Mepkin while I was studying abroad, and I’m sure I’m much changed from the boy who had left home nearly seven years ago- more grown, developed, conscientious of the implications of this imbalance between us. I wonder if it shows.

I wonder how much the battle has changed me.

Thinking of Cliveden, my intentions for the soldiers who had hidden inside, I sleep restlessly, dream
of flames, the smell of burning flesh- of a curdled scream as I press a brand into a man’s cheek. I
dream of hysterical laughter, deep and dual-intonated...something dark and demonic and it’s
congratulating me for my cruelty...

Shrewsberry wakes me roughly and I throw away his arms, yelping in pain when the motion tugs my
injuries and brings me back to bleeding.

He redresses my wounds and stays with me throughout the second day of my forced respite. Until
this injury, I had been too occupied with work to have paid Berry much attention. When I was
injured at Brandywine, Washington’s servants- and the servants of the houses we visited- had tended
to my needs, and I freed Berry to work with the other camp hands to keep himself occupied. But, at
camp, in my own tent, I’m left to care for myself.

So, I coax out stories of his work with the other camp servants outside the services he provides me,
and he gives anecdotes of the less-glamorous labors of military effort. He divulges his method of
removing the blood from my clothes and admits that he had taken the matter to one of the camp girls
who taught him a mixture of salt water and fuller’s earth to soak the fabric before rubbing it out with
a thistle brush. I realize that he must be the cause that my uniform coat’s fabric is wearing thin and I
scold him for taking the liberty of abusing my clothes. We talk about the layout of camp, the quality
of the food, what we expect must be happening in Mepkin right now, what my father is doing in
York with Congress, whether he’s received any of my requests for more supplies...

Berry asks for a new coat- his old one has grown thin with wear, and the idea of writing to my father
for a favor he would surely deny introduces an abrupt fear to my breast. All his recent letters have
been filled with cynicism and complaints of the state of the Congress and his feet- the gout’s
troubling him again, but there’s no actions I can offer in assistance, so it only distresses me to hear
that he’s in pain. He had worked so ardently to deliver me a position of distinction- and I cannot ask
more of him. I never wanted anything from him.

I’m not sure how our comfortable conversation deteriorated into a lecture, but I find myself shouting
at Shrewsberry. I realize it was uncalled for- ungentlemanly and cruel, but I cannot bring myself to
apologize, and his company is abruptly uncomfortable. I can tell he wants to leave me, but he forces
himself to stay until dismissed, and I realize his friendliness up to that point may have been provided
solely out of pity. My emotions are ragged and I know I’m short-tempered, but he had bore through
it for my sake and his compassion is unbearable.

I dismiss him and return my attention to sharpening my sword.

When I’ve struck the blade nearly too thin, I spend the day attempting a letter for my Martha. She’s
written to me of her happy business ventures in England, of our daughter’s good health and
good humor, and bringing out her letter of last week to read again, I can imagine innocent smiles and
babish giggles of a child I had created- I hadn’t intended to feel fondness for some infant I’d never
met, but somehow knowing she is mine forces it. I can imagine Martha’s plans to join me when the
revolution has ended, holding a baby swaddled in cotton blankets, and I had never imagined that the
thought would comfort me…

But, I need intercourse with an optimistic partner, and her wishes are more optimistic than I could
ever hope. To think that the daughter of a well-bred English family would be given easy passage to
live with her husband in the rebel nation, an officer of the Revolution- Martha has always had lofty
desires...it’s something we shared dearly, a commonality that I used to court her. I considered her
foolish and naive, but pleased in the grand stories she could create, the worlds she could imagine. I
know that I’ve ruined her happy fantasies, infected her with my hopelessness by confining her fate to
mine.
But, I do miss her friendship if not the wretched tension that grew between us when we turned a miracle into a misfortune. But, I refuse to think of how we sullied the life of our daughter, our Frances, with an inherent sin, and I can hope that the letters I wrote to my uncle, explaining the girl’s ill conception were properly destroyed.

I would prefer to love Frances without reservation.

IT’S GROWN DARK ENOUGH to have lit candles and I’ve crawled under my cloak when the tent flaps open and admit a single silhouette. I sit up on my cot with a restrained wince, pushing my cloak off.

Tallmadge straightens aright in the entrance, holding a lantern, “Laurens,” he greets, steps inside without invitation. He sets down the lantern and unfastens his cloak, draping it over my desk chair before taking the seat for himself. “I’ve finished my work for the evening,” he explains.

I raise a brow at that, lips falling open without anything to say. Then, blandly, “Am I to congratulate you?” I say.

He presses his mouth tight, “I’ve come to visit,” he says, fingers clenching and unclenching in his lap, an unconscious tell of discomfort.

Does he think I’ll turn him away? I consider- should I? I should at least offer a warning, “I’m not much good for entertainment right now.” I lift my injured arm in demonstration of my limitations.

Tallmadge hums and shakes his head, “That’s no matter, we can talk,” he clasps his hands together so they’ll stop wringing in his lap. “How are...your affairs just now? Are you...doing well?”

I almost cringe for this disaster of discourse, and I realize quickly from his forced friendliness that Major Tallmadge must have been ordered to check on me. “No,” I say, “I’m not much good for conversation either.”

His eyes squint a moment in frustration with me, and he slouches back in the chair, “Look, Laurens, I'm only here to break the horrid tension you've caused-” he says, and I open my mouth, but before I can question, he explains quickly, “Lieutenant Colonel Hamilton came back to Washington’s office with a quick temper a few days ago, and he’s made the office a nightmare to enter, and the boys tasked me to trace the issue; I learned you'd tried to come to work that morning and spoken to Harrison, so I asked him what he'd said and he admitted that he may have attacked your pride or degraded you or something of the like, so I came to either reassure you that whatever was said wasn't properly meant or convince you to speak with Hamilton so he won't be so ruddy with the rest of us, but y’know- none of this is actually my business and I'm certainly not here to apologize for another man…”

He stops briefly to breathe and I stare at him in shock.

“Do you wanna go get a drink?” he says.

I'm sure my agreeing is a favor to him more than anything.

IT’S A SHORT HIKE from my tent at Sullivan’s camp to Washington’s headquarters at the Keely’s, and from there it’s another small ways into Reading where Tallmadge has scouted out the nearest tavern.
As we step inside, the tone of the room is nothing like the bars that I’ve visited since returning to the continent. It’s quiet, sparsely populated, and the few patrons that are stationed inside share more of a spirit with mourners at a funeral than drunken soldiers. It does feel more fitting than the celebrating amputees of the hospital tents, so I step to the counter comfortably and order our rounds while Tallmadge selects us a table.

“So, I assume you weren’t bullied into coming here,” I say, balancing both our drinks in my left hand, “I mean, I know the boys can be relentless when they find a taunt to amuse themselves, but I’ve never seen them target you before- I can’t imagine Hamilton doing so.” I slide his glass to him and he nods his thanks, running a hand through his hair warily. “And, asking to drink- moreover, asking me to come drink...that’s irregular.”

“I didn’t think you’d need an explanation to join me for a few rounds,” he says.

I choose not to take offense to the insinuation that I would seem like a drinking man. Nearly every man in the army is. But, I won’t touch a hard drink without company to share it. Too many years I’d watched my father take scotch with mother’s meals and seen the way her lips pressed tight while we waited for the drink to strike him with either rage or exhaustion. He never approved of drinking heavily, but it never took much to fluster him.

“You thought wrong,” I say simply.

Tallmadge takes a wide gulp from the draft I’d brought, considers me and relents, “Alright, no- I wasn’t chased from the office to comfort you or apologize for Harrison- though I believe he should apologize. I’m taking a break.”

He says this with such heaviness, and so many men are choosing to desert- I think to ask, “From work or from the army?”

“Work,” he laughs wryly, shakes his head, and watches his own fingers dance lightly around the rim of his glass. “Work,” he repeats. “It’s stifling around the aides just now- I find I don’t want to report. In truth, Laurens, the most troubling tension you’ve caused strikes each of us internally.”

I feel my brow crease and I haven’t touched my glass, but I reach for it in anticipation of some explanation for that riddle.

“All the staff knows Major White was your friend,” he says bluntly, and I bite the urge to wince, “They won’t say it- as proper gentlemen ought not, but we know he died to follow you into battle, we’ve all read the report.”

I want to slam the table, jolt away or run, but I know it’d only confirm what he must suspect- the useless, irrational guilt I feel. I push the rational thought to the fore of my mind- this isn’t an accusation. Tallmadge had gone silent to allow me a reaction, and he seems satisfied to take my inaction in its place.

“It touches us all,” he continues. “That he’d fall in loyalty to you and the cause of freedom. It's not a bad way to go.”

I drink.

Silence settles between us, and from the few times I’d interacted with Major Tallmadge, I know he’s a man of few words. He makes the ones he chooses meaningful and I spend some time considering what he’s said, judging whether or not I’d agree with his statement. John died defending me- and I’d nearly gotten myself killed anyway- so was his death truly worth the cost? I’m not a man worth
dying for...

I'm content to share company in silence, mulling through considerations.

Until, “I would be a schoolteacher,” Tallmadge says.

And I glance up.

“If not for the revolution- it's what I'd been employed for- the life I would’ve lived,” and I can abruptly picture it- him standing at the head of a class of pupils, writing in chalk and explaining a lesson- grammar or mathematics. He has the stern voice for it. “At school, my friend Nathan and I planned for it,” he explains. “We graduated together and applied to teach at the same boys’ school in Setauket. He was a wise man, Laurens- I've never told you of him,” he shrugs. “It’s hard to speak of the dead- it always is. Especially a dear friend. But, I read of it in the papers, and y’know the last thing he said?”

I cannot answer.

“I only regret I have but one life to lose for my country.”

I recognize the quote as Tallmadge recites it. I’d read it from a clipping of a newspaper my father sent while I was in England. Spoken by Nathan Hale as he faced down the gallows in York City, said to comfort the weeping masses that had gathered to watch a gentleman hang for serving liberty. It had struck me as poetic, ignited something warm and righteous and patriotic in my breast-

“It’s a load of shit, isn’t it?” Tallmadge says. “One life to lose. Nat was smarter than that- if it was so simple as giving our one life, anyone would do this job.” He takes a drink, and for a long moment, I don’t know what to say, so he presses on, “Laurens, you’re new to battle- and don’t protest this, I’m not intending to insult- just...listen. Someone wise told me- we risk more than our lives when we march into the field, we’re risking our sensibilities- our capacity to remain vulnerable to loss and sorrows because it’s easier to draw away from something ugly and painful. You’ll meet officers who hold themselves aloof from attachments because they fear the pain of loss- and all that does is waste our time for enjoying the pleasures of a life that may not be there for much longer.

Nathan died carrying a piece of intelligence for Washington that I requested. My request lost him his life- one note tucked in a boot- one life to lose. But, I know I didn’t string his gallows, and I know I enjoyed his life- what I could share of it.”

Something soft passes over Tallmadge’s eyes and he seems to be fighting back tears of remembrance. I had never felt so close to him. If not for this public setting, I'd pull him into an embrace and call him a friend.

“When I die,” he says, “I won’t be losing my one life, I’ve lost too many friends to consider that my only loss- haven’t we all? But, I’ll be sure to have lived my life for many others- for friends like John White, and for my country.”

He gives a smile and tips his glass to me, and I think to do the same, but I realize first that my eyes have grown wet and I reach up discreetly to press the back of my knuckle to dry them. I tip my glass in return, “You’d’ve made an excellent schoolteacher,” I say.

He laughs and drinks to that, moves from such somber matters to more light-hearted anecdotes about the boys on staff, and as we talk, the tavern fills with patrons. The din of voices covers our conversation and we speak freely, tongues growing gradually more loose with drink.

Fitzgerald had spilt a pot of ink on a letter as he was taking it from the General, and Washington had
(reportedly) nearly broken his composure. Meade’s taken to imitating the General’s tight expression when Washington’s attention is focused elsewhere—much to the amusement of the other boys. Ben’s friend Caleb’s most recent experiments with new forms of weaponry had moved into the realm of archery—and he fancied himself a ‘trick shot’, though he couldn’t hit anything smaller than a tree at about ten paces. As we continue to drink, our talk moves to speaking discreetly of his work with intelligence gathering, and back to more somber matters.

The prisoners of war, being held in Philadelphia, are suffering.

Tallmadge explains a report he’d received from his man inside Philadelphia who had described to him the desperate situation that Howe’s army was facing. It has only been two days since our attack on Germantown, just north of the city, and the report must already be obsolete. But, with short supplies and no access to the Delaware River to bring relief, the people of Philadelphia were already struggling to ration what food they had.

Feeding prisoners of war has not been a priority—and at least one brigade of our army had surrendered to encapturement in the capital. With this report having arrived, Tallmadge is sure that our soldiers held by the enemy have not been well-treated—starved or tortured. Previous reports of such abuses were numerous—and after General Washington’s bawdy attack, aimed to embarrass the enemy…it’d be foolish to think British officers wouldn’t seek retribution on any prisoner they could keep.

My own woes and pains feel small again.

It’s comforting to remind myself of the larger picture, to consider my own insignificance.

But, a familiar head of auburn waves steps through the tavern doors and interrupts the calm that has gripped me, swirling back into conflicted tumult. I avert my eyes quickly to my own drink, focused on maintaining this bearing when my own senses are growing dazed with drink. The tavern has not grown so loud that I cannot hear his footsteps approaching us, and the steady clack of his footfalls has my fingers tightening on my glass.

Noticing this, Tallmadge turns behind himself and stands instantly upon sighting Hamilton. “Sir,” he greets, “please, have a seat.”

And, to my discomfort, Hamilton accepts the invitation, though apparently it was not the first Tallmadge had made, as Hamilton sits, eyes me warily, and says, “You did not tell me we would be sharing company?”

It’s quickly apparent that Washington’s spymaster has covertly arranged this meeting when he stands as soon as Hamilton is seated, “Ah— I must apologize that I’m not sharing it, sir,” he says—entirely too polite to be honest. “I invited you both as I know you’re dear friends and I’m afraid I must retire early tonight— I had hoped Colonel Laurens would entertain you if the hour grew so late.”

If looks could kill, I would murder Tallmadge with a glare, but as it is, I don’t know how to articulate my protest as the Major excuses himself from our company and leaves me sitting awkwardly across from a friend I’ve direly slighted. I’m not ready to face his cold blue stare, but as I turn back to the table, I’m abruptly caught in it and my hands fumble to raise my glass back to my mouth. I fear I may have already drank too much as all eloquence has left me. My father would not be pleased.

Hamilton doesn’t speak for several long minutes and I turn my eyes everywhere but on his. He relents and summons the serving girl to request a drink. We settle into the most uncomfortable silence that has passed between us since before Brandywine—since sleepless nights I’d spent avoiding the lusts he’d loved to spark.
“How is your shoulder...?” he tries- after his whiskey has arrived and he’s taken a couple deep gulps.

“How is your shoulder...?” he tries- after his whiskey has arrived and he’s taken a couple deep gulps.

“Fine.”

“You saw the doctor?”

“Yes.”

He’s silent for another long moment, then, “And your stomach?”

“He tended to both.”

“And both are healing?”

“Yes.”

“Good- that’s…” It’s unlike Hamilton to trip his own words, but he stops to slow himself and take a drink. “That’s good.”

I nod in agreement, but we both fall tense again and look away from one another. If I could grasp what needs to be said, I would say it, and I feel in the periphery of my mind that Tallmadge had tried to prepare me for this conversation, but my drunken thoughts run too slow and I fear I would speak too honestly.

I cannot continue to request his friendship in such a state as I currently am...and while I had believed he was growing to extend his affections in the way I had fervently desired, I cannot expose myself to hope that it would be so stubbornly impressed that he would be immune to my attempts of repelling him.

I don’t know how to express such an idea- that I would want him to fight me if only to bring me closer. If I tried to explain it, I would surely convince him it’s not worth the trouble.

“-the honorable Congress, in many cases, has been too much led by military men!”

A low cheer raises from a table in the corner behind Hamilton, and it catches my attention as they speak of Congress.

“I believe that Washington, the bastard of Brandywine should be flogged for his failure,” a petty officer reads, standing at the head of the table, a pamphlet pinched between his fingers.

The table laughs.

My gut drops in recognition of the papers in his hands and abruptly, all my frustrations- with the nature of our orders, the cruelties against our prisoners, the underhanded spying, the ignorant stupidity of the common men, the hopelessness of protecting the people I love-

I don’t realize that I’ve stood from the table until I’m abruptly raised on my feet and my torso feels numb with alcohol. “Did you share a joke?” I say loudly, cutting through the noise, “Speak it louder so we all can laugh!” Something crazed has possessed me and it reaches my voice, impending violence, and beside me, Hamilton’s chair scrapes wood- the only sound in the tavern, all voices hushed. “I could use a laugh! Go on- share it!”

The petty officer’s smug grin had dropped and he eyes me and my slinged right arm warily- then resumes bravely, “It’s entitled ‘Thoughts of a Free Man’, sir, and it’s no joke!” His tone is taunting- as if he’s assessed my injury and believes my sinister strike should be any less aimed. “Washington
is a despot- and it’s no laughing matter,” he shakes the pamphlet, “this is rational argument written in a logical hand:”

“It’s treasonous filth!” Hamilton snaps beside me. I had not felt him at my side, but knowing he’s there draws me to lean towards him in support. “And you’d better watch how you speak of your commander!”

“No commander of mine,” the officer snorts. “Your General’s lost his edge-”

“Excuse me-”

“Even with Germantown, we’re set to lose under Washington- and some of us are wise enough to see it!” The table around the petty officer raises a cheer as he continues, “He treats us like a professional army- and hasn’t seen a victory for it yet! It’s one thing to take pride in your men, but Washington’s delusional-”

I want to leap at him, but Hamilton is ahead of me, biting in words like a growl, “And who would you have in command?”

His response comes as no surprise, “General Gates! His victories in New York speak for themselves, and his army is better kept and happier all-around, allowed to take...feminine pleasures off-duty!” His friends cheer again and spur him on. “Washington has his commanders restrict us even our comforts in camp- just because he has no need-”

“Gates can’t even claim his own victories!” I snap. “His subordinate generals make all his best decisions for him-” My frustrations rise, disgust with the conduct of this army and the men, and I feel sharp in this rage. I imagine this man was among those we had castigated in Philadelphia for harassing the women in the city.

“Then it’s a good thing his General Lee is coming to relieve us!” one of the petty officer’s friends says.

I recall the name. Lee had led a gloried-victory in my Charlestown just months ago before disgracing himself by hiding from a battle with a whore- Gates’ man whom Hamilton had warned me of. “Oh, yes- perfect for men like you- Charles Lee, captured in the act with a tavern wench!”

“Yes! Captured and held- and escaped on his own!”

“With his breeches round his ankles and cock-out like a dog, you should relate.” Hamilton’s tongue is sharp and satisfying and he’s right behind me, mind quick and following mine.

The petty officer barely scoffs, “At least I’ve got a cock- two sons to prove it, Tomcat- none of us wonder how you haven’t wretched a litter of bastards with how many women you’ve tried!” Alexander trembles with fury, but the officer turns to me and says, “But, at least he tries, poor barren George, just collects his little boys, like yo-” and I’ve punched him before Alex could move to stop me.

He falls back in shock but rebounds quickly, grabs the lapel of my coat to pull me into his clout and land a punch to my jaw. I take it and grab the arm he’s hooked onto me, so ready for this fight, but Hamilton’s at my right arm and he tugs it to hold me back from returning the hit, and I scream.

Something feels torn- or tugged, and my vision swims in agony.

“Laurens, I’m sorry! I’m sorry,” he says desperately, repeating it several times until I wave away his concern, wheezing.
I’m given several moments of reprieve to find my breath. The petty officer’s backed off me when I can see again, face caught on something like concern, but as I come to clarity, his expression returns to that cocky look and his friends have gathered round him to egg it on, “Laurens? Oh, you’re the president’s son!” His friends laugh. “Already injured, see, Washington cannot even keep his own officers under control- or maybe you’re just so desperate for attention without papa here to-”

Hamilton’s left my side and leapt at the man, binding his legs in a tackle and throwing him to the floor with a clatter of chairs as his friends jump to avoid the fray. Hamilton grapples the man, gets a position straddling him to throw punch after punch until one of the petty officer’s friends grabs his queue and tugs his hair back and he yelps, but I grab the man’s arm and dig in my nails, drawing him to look at me so I can bash my head into his, and another of the boys leaps at me from the side but I keep my hold on the second man until we’re- all five of us- sprawled on the ground kicking and scratching and punching and the other two onlookers recognize the advantage and join the brawl, and I realize- as a boot connects with my stomach over two-day-old-stitching- that I’m in no shape to be fighting, even with Hamilton at my side, and we’re losing this badly to hit after hit after hit and no one’s stopping it, no one’s-

A sharp whistle pierces over the shouts and grunts of our brawl, high-pitched and ringing and just familiar enough that I let my head drop to the floor in relief, chest heaving painfully, vision swimming.

*General Greene.*

I LOSE CONSCIOUSNESS sometime during Greene’s brief lecture, just after, “*What in hell’s name is happenin-*”

A DAMP CLOTH is dragging carefully over my cheek when I begin to wake and it takes several minutes for me to regain my bearings enough to recognize the deep blue eyes studying me with brows drawn. “Laurens,” Hamilton whispers in greeting and I let my eyes slip closed again, lean back against the wall where I’m propped in a chair in the Keely House kitchen, being tended by a doctor at my flank. Hamilton’s hand had paused in it’s ministrations but he resumes, wetting my hair back out of my eyes. The doctor’s hands are working carefully at my shoulder, tying a new bandage- it is blindingly painful, my head pounding.

“Wh’ happened?” I mutter.

There’s a beat of silence before Hamilton explains, “Someone ran to get General Greene and we carried you to headquarters- he’s speaking with Washington now-”

“I mean to those men,” I say slowly.

“Ah...they were militiamen,” Hamilton explains. “Their contract would have ended next week, so Greene dismissed them early. I’m sure they had plenty of jabs they had wanted to make at this army before leaving it, but that will be their last, I hope…”

I still feel somewhat drunk, but it’s faded, drifting against the ebbing throb in my shoulder and side. Reaching up, I grab Hamilton’s wrist and lift his hand off my face, “Did he really call you cockless?”

I open my eyes in time to see Hamilton’s grim expression break in amusement and he’s smiling until
the kitchen door opens with the sound of heavy boots entering.

General Greene steps in with a frown, “We’ll see you now,” he says.

Hamilton seems to understand what this means as he rises immediately to attention and turns back to me, all traces of his smile erased. He reaches down, and with the help of the doctor who had tended me, they pull me to my feet and I stumble across the kitchen between them.

Washington’s office is lit in candles and the General sits alone at his desk, Billy stationed behind him in repose. As we enter, he studies his own hands folded atop it, lips pressed thin and eyes hooded with the weight of some heavy decision. It's unnerving to be the subject of Washington’s concern.

When he speaks, his voice is so deep I can barely differentiate his words, “You are both aware that I'm disappointed at the least,” he says. “And, you are aware of the position you have placed me in-acting in this manner.” Beside me, Hamilton is so tense I fear he might bolt or lash out violently. “I granted you this office, and you behave like children-”

“Because you treat us like your own!”

I startle at Alexander where he’s snapped beside me.

Washington does not flinch at the outburst, just studies Hamilton with a calm expression, “I entrust you with the most difficult tasks of my position-”

“As a father would his son-”

“-Do we have a problem, Hamilton?”

Alex is slow to speak and his voice is tight when he says, “No, sir.”

“Good.” Washington continues as if he was never interrupted, eyes trained pointedly on Hamilton, “This is not the first incident I’ve suffered, and I cannot continue to ignore the reports. Who began this brawl?”

The room falls silent as I attempt to find my voice.

“I did, sir,” Hamilton says beside me, voice forced firm.

Washington nods as if he had expected this answer and planned to address it. He unfolds his hands and gets up from his desk to collect a piece of parchment, “Very well, Hamilton, you are dismissed. Mister Laurens, General Greene will escort you to the hospital tent after we have discussed the matter of punishment.”

Greene begins walking to the General’s side and beside me, Hamilton steps back, falling out of attention and turning for the door rigidly, moving as if his limbs were tied to strings.

I realize the tension that has crept between the General and his first aide recently, and Hamilton’s rigid posture speaks to a primal fear of permanent dismissal. Punishment. The word holds connotations outside conscious control; I have seen hangings for treason, and I know insubordination is not so dire, but I still fear what Hamilton has accepted- what he’s provoked by shouting at the Commander in Chief...

I don’t move. I won’t- can’t find my voice, but I can feel it coming.

His Excellency looks at me hard when I fail to leave as ordered, “Wait outside, Mister Laurens-” he
“-Sir…” my voice catches, but there’s no avoiding it now. I have to speak, “Mister Hamilton is acting in my defence- as he did during the fight...I threw the first punch, I engaged the discourse first and he wouldn’t have spoken to those men if I had not confronted them- I provoked it, I-”

“Laurens,” General Greene stops me.

I watch Washington, but the General’s expression doesn’t move. He considers me, and “…I see,” he says, “now…” and motions gently towards the door where Hamilton’s already retreated and frozen and I can feel his stare sharp at my back.

“Yes, sir…”

“ARE YOU OUT of your mind?” I snap as soon as the door has shut behind me, voice hushed and eyes trained against Hamilton’s stare. “You just yelled at the General- again!”

“Am I-?” he appalls, pauses, recoils, “John, you just destroyed your chance of ever attaining this office- you could be court-marshalled…”

“What?”

“You heard the General- he knows about Parker’s Ford- and now this. Striking two officers on separate occasions- one of them your superior, I’ve seen good officers go for less-”

“Washington wouldn’t do that.” -I am sure of it now, for the purpose that Harrison explained- my connections to my father. Perhaps I’ll be dismissed from his service, but Washington would not sever himself of a political ally.

“Wouldn’t he? You shouldn’t have done that-”

“Told the truth?” I hiss, voice rising incredulously, “I shouldn’t have told the truth? It’s the proper thing to do!”

“Not in this circumstance- I would’ve taken the blame-”

“And it would’ve been a lie.”

“Not truly a lie- in that instance. And, it would’ve been what was expected,” Hamilton says and he steps back so I realize at once how close we had drawn to argue between ourselves. He seems tired, and at this distance I can see the dark bruises blooming against his jaw where the ones that had decorated his skin from our last fight had faded. It seems fitting to find ourselves here again- fighting our peers and then fighting each other.

“Expected or not, I won’t have you punished for my actions,” I say, voice hard.

“John, I was as much a part of that fight as you, and I have rapport with the General, several years of battlefield experience, and months of service in this office…all you have is a good reputation and a high-bred name…It would’ve been much wiser to let me sort this.”

His frustration sparks mine to snap at him, “I don’t need your protection!”

Hamilton’s mouth opens as if to say something sharp, but he reconsiders. His lips pinch shut and he turns away from me, exits the kitchen and turns for the stairs.
It doesn’t strike me until he is gone- that I’m not sure whether I was speaking of the fight or the blame of it.

WHEN GENERAL WASHINGTON enters a room, all rise to attention. This etiquette holds- even in a hospital tent, long before sunrise, it seems. Those who are awake and can stand do so immediately as His Excellency throws back the flaps of the tent and steps serenely between the rows of cots arranged in ranks on either side.

I’m on my feet, facing forward when he approaches me, my shoulder freshly wrapped and slung, the sutures at my stomach checked and cleaned. I know I make a pitiful picture, all wrapped up in bandages and half-undressed, but His Excellency does not comment. I assume he must be here to dismiss me from his office, assign me back to a field position, and while I had thought it was my ardent desire to take such a station, it would mean a demotion from the distinction of his office...a separation from all the joys I had taken in the camaraderie of the boys.

...A disappointed letter from my father.

When Washington holds silent, I let my eyes slide to his face curiously, and it takes a soft moment for his expression to shift, a small smile pressing between his lips. Something brushes my hand, and I look down, startled.

Washington’s hand is extended to mine, pressing a sheet of parchment against my fingers. “Take it,” he says.

I obey, lifting the paper to read and...my heart skips, jolts between battered ribs and I blink.

An Aide-de-camp. I am officially his. Our fates entwined, and the realization drops in my chest like lead shot. “...sir!”

“I wrote it when you left my office,” he says quietly, clandestine, unable to hold back his secretive smile. “Hamilton told General Greene about the things Foreman’s officer was saying...about me- about my army. I heard enough.”

I know His Excellency does not mean to condone the brash actions we took in the tavern- even in his defense, but something in his expression seems familiar- a tightly suppressed pride, and I know I’m given. I would do anything to earn this feeling- this great man’s approval.

I’m grinning like an idiot and it draws His Excellency's eyes to light. He puts a hand on my shoulder, anchors me back to the earth, “You promised me your loyalty,” he says, recalling our first meeting, “and, I am glad it was given honestly. I’d be a fool to dismiss a man of candor and action- if I hold his favor. But, you will have to hold yourself as a gentleman, and you will not do that again.”

I nod, unable to muster my voice to respond.

Washington steps back, training his face stoic again, but I can see his eyes still lit, “Report to the office when you’re dressed,” he says, and tosses a questioning glance to the surgeon who had tended me- who nods his approval. “I shall see you there.”

THE AIDES MUST ALREADY KNOW of my official appointment. A rowdy cheer goes up through the Keely House office, a few ‘whoop’s of congratulations, and I grin, brush back the
humility that would have me blushing for the praise. *Don’t be modest.*

I sit at the General’s table once again, taking a station across from Tilghman and beside Meade who claps his arm around my uninjured shoulder, and the boys start speaking excitedly over one another, words of congratulations and welcoming, until the office door creaks again and a sharp voice catches my attention from behind them.

“Sir, the amended rations list has been distributed, a courier came with these packages, and I’ve your report from Count Pulaski about the horses stock here-” Hamilton steps in, speaking quickly, addressing everything to General Washington as if he had not expected the other boys to have taken their stations yet- as if he had not returned to the office yet this morning. He stops himself in recognition of this discovery, eyes finding me and a grin splitting his face mid-sentence.

So, he has been informed as well.

“And what of the hound that Wayne was keeping?” Washington says, catching Hamilton’s attention again.

He breaks from my gaze. “General Howe’s dog, sir?”

“Yes- did you forget? Is it returned? We don’t need a mascot.”

“He was hoping you’d forget, sir,” Meade chirps, and a few low chuckles go through the room. Washington himself almost smiles.

Hamilton’s shoulders stiffen, “Sir, I’ll see to it now.”

He leaves the room after one last glance to me...and a strange, unsettling grin- self-satisfied.

Confused, I turn to the boys with brows raised, “What? What’s so funny?”

Meade shakes his head, still chuckling, “We picked up General Howe’s dog- chased us back from Germantown. All the boys wanted to keep the hound, but Hammy certainly fought the hardest for it.”

I allow a small smile, imagining the scene Hamilton would’ve caused for a pet. “Is that why Washington’s sent him to see it returned?” I say, lowering my voice and leaning over the table.

Tilghman takes up the response, “No, he’s not that vengeful- he’s been keeping Ham out the office so there’ll be work left for you.”

A few chuckles passed over the table again, and I can sense from the tone of Tench’s voice and the response of the boys, that Hamilton’s being given a gentle ribbing in his absence, “I’m sure there’s plenty for everyone,” I say.

“You would assume- but he’s been in one of his moods.” A low rumbling of agreement rises from a table of Hamilton’s affected comrades who had been dealing with the brunt of the frustrations that Tallmadge had described.

“His moods?” I say. “You complain of a productive one?” My voice takes an unintentional edge, and the subject drops with a few eye-rolls. I ignore those.

MEADE INSISTS that we all drink to celebrate the occasion of my official appointment. So, after
our work for the General has been completed, all my dearest compatriots gather on the step of the Keely House, and we exchange haphazard ideas, casting thoughts and discarding them in a tumult of poor planning. For the sake of defending Washington’s opinion of my character, I don’t speak of the fight. To avoid the subject arising without my control, I suggest we collect bottles of wine from the army’s own storehouse and celebrate in camp- far from the tavern Tallmadge had brought me the night before.

It seems a humble celebration, but in execution, drinking wine and lounging in comfortable chairs around the Keely hearth feels more luxurious than anything I’ve indulged since leaving Mepkin to join the army- including the gala parties that Washington’s patrons held. I’m certainly more comfortable among my peers of the army.

The General has taken the night to survey his camps, and will be staying in a field tent, leaving Harrison in charge of the house as his senior aide. The Keely family had been lodged in their guest house to grant the General more space in their office, and with the house totally empty, our celebrations make a rambunctious din.

Cheeks grow flushed and Fitzgerald and Meade raise their voices in a clumsy rendition of “Clare’s Dragoons” until Walker throws the deck of cards he and Harrison had been playing with across the room- some squarely meeting their target and slapping our Irish brothers, but most scatter across the floor near the hearth.

As the wine takes effect, I am keenly aware of the constant weight that had pressed my heart in the days that had passed since Germantown. It's unmanly to avoid this grief, and I know I have wronged my friends by impressing the weight of my worries onto their shoulders. They're merry tonight- in celebration of me, but I want more than anything to seclude myself in a corner with a single friend for company and confidence, and Alexander is notably absent of our festivities. Even flushed with drink, I know I would regret divulging my guilty feelings to any other.

I try to not allow his absence to render me forlorn and unsociable, but I know that the aides have all been excused for the night, and Washington did not bring Hamilton to survey the camps with him. Hamilton had smiled at me this morning- with a certain pride in my appointment, but I cannot banish my suspicion that his absence is in avoidance of me...and that I should not fault him for his rationality.

As the wine takes its effect, it becomes more difficult to hide the trite mood that’s taking me.

I retire to bed early.
THE KEELY HOUSE is only so large as to afford the General’s aides three rooms to share, and I had not been assigned quarters in this house, so I take a small available space on the floor, drifting between thoughts, waking each time my consciousness slips into haunted echoes of recollection, clashing metal, the hiss of burning flesh, the gurgle of blood filling a throat. The thoughts should keep me awake, but somehow I always drift off again, unbothered.

I’m grateful when the boys retire in groups and wake me fully without meaning to. They leave me my pallet until the last of them come to bed- then Fitzgerald falls heavy behind me. Within minutes, his throat is rumbling vexatiously.

I’ve never heard a man snore both while drawing breath and exhaling it.

If Hamilton returned to headquarters, he must have retired to one of the other rooms. I would discuss with him my guilt for John’s death- and my compunction to dismiss it as Tallmadge suggested- in respect of my brave friend’s wishes, but I’m not sure that I could express my grief without that guilt- and I know my friends must believe that to be all I should speak of so soon after the battle- outside of our work and my appointment. I should be grieving.

Lying restless is a waste of time.

Rising carefully from the pallet, I move furtively around the slumbering forms of my companions, coming down the stairs to get an early start on the day’s duties, setting my place between Harrison and Tilghman’s seats, at the far end of the table from Hamilton’s place beside the General, arranged so that I won’t be able to see him.

I work through my stack of correspondence and begin dipping into the work laid out for Tilghman before Washington’s valet comes into the house to begin waking the aides. He casts me a strange look as he climbs the stairs, and a few moments later, the boys report in varying states of disarray. They’re slow to take up their quills, laughing of drunken foolishness and teasing one another for their resulting morning ailments. Meade tries to include me, chuckling at the way I grip my quill left-handed, but his humor fails when I can only muster a weak smile. No one questions why I’m silent. They expect that I’m still morose in mourning- and I should be, but I’m not.

The silence of the Keely house in the early morning and the rhythm of the aides’ gentle snoring upstairs had provided me stillness and breadth for self-reflection. If I considered myself John White’s friend, I degraded the value of my love.

I can no longer blame myself for his death without disrespecting his decision to serve, and without that irrational guilt, I utterly lack feeling. John White did not provide me anything that, without him, I’ve lost. I still have acquaintances of equal or greater value and… I can ‘allot his portion’ to others. In fact, I couldn’t recall a single time I grieved the death of someone I loved without instead grieving the things in them that I valued for myself- my mother’s indulgent affection, little Jem’s infectious optimism…

I had wanted to believe I could be capable of disinterested love, but as I try to muster emotion to grieve my friend, I have to accept that I did not love him- because I was disinterested in him. I
consider, I have probably never genuinely cared about anyone but myself, and I cannot decide whether it is worse to have been heartless or to have been dishonest in pretending the opposite.

If I’m morose, it’s in apathy- and a strange juxtaposition of concern that would keep me from imposing that on others. What should my dear friends think of me if I’m incapable of grief?

I should focus on the work, my best purpose.

We transcribe accounts of Germantown from subordinate Generals’ aides...reports of cowardice in our commanders, treaasonous lack of bearing during the engagement. We write dozens of condolence letters on behalf of His Excellency, apologize to families whose sons died valiantly in service of their country and assure them that their sacrifice will not be forgotten.

By the time the sun’s risen, I cannot recall the names of the fallen officers.

When Washington steps in, he announces that we will be leaving to oversee a funeral in Kulpsville today then moving our headquarters when our luggage is packed. He motions for us to be seated.

Hamilton follows the General to his desk, leans to receive some order from the man before stepping to the table and picking up his letterbox. His jaw is still laid with bruises he collected in the brawl I had incited, and from the dark skin beneath his eyes, he hasn’t been sleeping.

I press my attention back to the note I’m transcribing from a French engineer stationed on the Delaware, redirecting my focus in translation until a leg kicks up over the bench across from me and Hamilton’s setting his papers about the table around mine.

“Enjoying your new position, dear Laurens?” he says, smiling magnanimously, as if he expects me to understand some piece of a joke we had shared, but I know that I was not so drunk as to have missed him coming to my celebration last night.

I raise a brow, “Yes, of course…”

Hamilton gives no reply but to grin with his strange, disquieting smugness, satisfied with my response- though I cannot understand why and I feel vaguely insulted.

I huff quietly and order my papers so that they don’t mingle with his.

He settles into writing for a few moments and I nearly relax, but then, he gives a familiar tap against my foot under the table. I throw him a warning look and remove my feet from his reach, dipping my quill pointedly and returning it to the paper. His hand holds frozen against his parchment, eyes trained on my set brow before he slowly resumes his work.

THERE ARE ONLY TWO ROOMS to share at the Wampole house, and not enough space for all the aides, so two of us will have the option of sleeping on the floor or residing in tents with field officers. I volunteer to bunk with the general army- dismissing protests from Harrison, Meade, and Hamilton. It’ll be nice to have my own cot. I don’t need concern for my thrashing restlessness.

I lend my service to unpacking my brothers’ carts into the house. Extra hands expedite the process- though I can lend only one. Hamilton and Tilghman man the wagon that carries General Washington’s personal effects, handing off trunks of clothes and boxes of papers. We line up to carry them in several trips and I am careful to take pieces from Tilghman so as to avoid Hamilton’s sympathy for my injuries- handing me only the lightest boxes, and handing them off gently. On the third trip down, all the luggage has gone but one familiar chest, large and unwieldy.
Hamilton lifts it and casts me a glance, brushing my arm as he passes up the front walk.

ON OCTOBER THIRTEENTH, a courier comes to Washington’s office to deliver a report of a major success by our Naval force on the Delaware River, preventing British shipping from supplying the capital with provisions.

Commodore Hazelwood, in command of our meager fleet, has led an engagement near Carpenter Island, resulting in two killed Redcoats and fifty-seven captured. The British opened a small passage in our defenses, but we still drink to the success of our fleet.

We drink to nearly any success at all these days.

Washington sends Brigadier General Potter and six-hundred Pennsylvania militiamen to prevent convoys from attacking our Forts from Chester- our Navy is too small to defend itself without additional ground forces and the army is pressed to protect their forts from Hessians and Dragoons. We are on our heels in the defensive and His Excellency is cognizant of our position, even as our men celebrate.

I drink to that.

AFTER ENTERTAINING THE PARTY for a few hours and drinking a bottle and a half of wine, I excuse myself to find Major Tallmadge's tent where I have taken up quarters. He is already aware of my melancholic state- and sleeps soundly through my nocturnal outbursts. He grants me a short welcome as I collapse into my cot, exhaustion clinging to my bones, limbs dense and unsteady with drink.

I have barely closed my eyes to sleep when the tent flaps open with a gust of night air and a haggard enlisted man steps in, carrying a rifle and breathing heavily as if having run from a distance, “Up and up, Tall boy, I’ve got something for you,” he says loudly and I jolt in the cot, stomach turning dangerously in protest.

The man looks at me, brows raised in surprise before turning back to Tallmadge who has already begun throwing back the covers to dress. “What is it?” Tallmadge says, “A report’s come in?”

“No…” the man says, eyeing me. “Just...come with me.”

Tallmadge pulls his coat on hastily and sweeps his boots off the floor, stepping to my cot and nudging my hip, “Get up,” he says. “Any work of ours is Washington’s business- and therefore now yours.” He looks up to his friend and gives a nod to which the man shrugs and dips his head, bowing back out of the tent.

I slip from under my cloak and fumble into my uniform, body aching still and my mind unfocused. But, I recognize that this may be an opportunity for involvement, so I follow Tallmadge from our tent and into the black of morning.

“Caleb Brewster,” the man outside greets as I step through the flap. I find his hand thrust forward to me in invitation and I offer a groggy shake, introducing myself out of courtesy. I know the name from Tallmadge’s stories. I assume he has not heard of me.

We walk in silence, and I am grateful for it- a chance to enjoy the stillness. Brewster guides us into a well-lit field tent stationed atop a short hill, removed from the rest of the camp. The flaps are all
closed securely and a voice speaks hushed inside. Brewster hits the flap and opens the tent for Tallmadge and me to step in, and the voice hushes.

I straighten up, taking in my bearings, eyes immediately caught in a dark blue stare. Hamilton.

“Laurens-”

Before Hamilton can begin to protest my presence, Tallmadge explains, “He’s with me; Caleb woke us- so he came,” and steps deeper into the tent towards Hamilton, around where the smaller man had stilled in surprise. Beside them, a soldier in a deep green coat is tied securely to a chair, legs bound and eyes wild.

A prisoner...

Tallmadge approaches him and Hamilton gathers himself hastily, sparing one last confused glance towards me. He grabs a rumpled piece of black fabric from the desk and tosses it to my hands. I turn it over and instantly recognize the crescent moon insignia of the Queen’s Rangers. “Captain Lee’s cavalry brought some foraging goods,” Brewster explains, directed to Tallmadge. “This one’s a Captain in the Rangers- there’re seven privates held in Sullivan’s tent and two Royal Marines.”

“And...you believe he has information for me?” Tallmadge says, throwing a glance to Hamilton who has cocked his hip against the desk and folded his arms over his chest in disapproving posture.

“He’s worked under the direct command of General Howe…” he says simply, throwing a look to Brewster. “We only know this by the markings of his badges.”

This is an interrogation...

I recognize that my presence in the tent is superfluous. This action of intelligence gathering is not my occupation, but Tallmadge had trusted me to observe and Hamilton is obtunded with my presence- which is strangely satisfying. It brings me to want engagement, “So, you know the numbers he still wields after Germantown,” I say to the prisoner, demanding. “You know the locations of his fortifications and the rotations of his patrols-”

Brewster is sending me an abruptly cold glare- as if I’ve blundered his protocol in addressing the prisoner directly. I stop my tongue.

The Ranger doesn’t respond to me. Doesn’t move at all.

Tallmadge steps around him and walks fast to Hamilton and his friend, dropping his voice, “I don’t need a prisoner,” he whispers. “Any information he may give is less reliable than what I could collect by my own means.”

Hamilton’s posture remains closed and he casts Tallmadge’s friend with a disapproving look, “I agree. Additionally, this man hasn’t divulged any information since we’ve been holding him. He hasn’t said a word-”

“He’s been to the capital,” Brewster interrupts, eyes lit with intensity, “one’a the privates reported it-no one else could have passed orders to your man…”

Tallmadge tenses- every line of his posture going rigid with repressed anger.

Some silent understanding passes between the two, lost to me, and Brewster nods.

Hamilton’s lips purse and he looks down and away- until the tension in Tallmadge’s shoulders snaps
and he spins in sudden fury, jolts away before Hamilton can grab his arm, and punches the Ranger’s temple hard enough to sprawl him- and the chair to which he’s tied- on the floor of the tent.

He pursues, Hamilton fast behind him, “Cunningham!” Tallmadge growls as the Lieutenant Colonel attempts to reign in his arms. “Captain William Cunningham- you know the name, I see you do!”

“Major!” Hamilton snaps.

“He starves our soldiers and tosses broth on the cobbles to watch them lap it up like dogs! They’re left to eat clay and lime, wood, bark- anything, and when they’re most desperate, offers ’m enlistment to his majesty’s army. Who ordered that?”

Tallmadge, considerably larger than Hamilton in height and breadth strains against his hold and I rush forward to assist, grabbing the Major’s arm as Hamilton grunts with effort and frustration. “Major, desist!” he barks, giving a sharp tug that pulls us all back a step until we fall against Brewster who I hadn’t noticed moving in behind me. “He won’t speak!”

“Then I shall make him...”

“We have tried all methods-”

Tallmadge persists with a snarling defiance, “Not all.”

He doesn’t say it- doesn’t have to for the implication to pass through the room- understood. Torture.

“Tallmadge!” Hamilton snaps, “We will not betray ourselves! We will fight with honor and defend our position as professionals!” His grip tightens and he jolts a burst of strength, tugging Tallmadge back and away from the prisoner.

I release my grip lest I jostle my shoulder in the scuffle, turning my attention instead to the Ranger, still sprawled on the floor and watching our exchange with apprehension- uncertainty of who will have the final say in his treatment. His foot taps nervously against the leg of the chair where he’s bound.

Behind me, Hamilton speaks on the merit of public opinion, on honor and the gentleman’s code of warfare. He speaks of the strategy of our campaign and it’s overarching importance over any tactical decision we might make.

Tallmadge growls a retort of the atrocities already committed against our prisoners held in Philadelphia- in New York.

The Ranger’s foot-tapping grows irregular...tap-tap...tap-taptap...tap-tap...taptap...tap-taptap...

Brewster edges Tallmadge’s anger forth, obviously having wanted to press for more drastic measures of interrogation.

Hamilton protests, drawing the power of his rank, “I will not allow it-”

“Then prisoners will never be useful to my intelligence- they will never fear men who won’t act-”

“Act in violation of proper conduct-”

“Only so far as he allows- the power to stop it is in the looseness of his tongue.”

“And you would disgrace us all-”
I’m sure I recognize the rhythm of the Ranger’s tapping...

“We disgrace ourselves with inaction!”

“Washington would not approve—”

“If he knew—”

“And to keep it hidden, you would do what? Kill this man in captivity?”

The Ranger makes a noise of protest.

If they would all just be silent, I could…it’s- “Che Fiero Momento.” I say loudly.

The Ranger’s eyes dart to me and Hamilton’s voice falls silent mid-rhetort. Tallmadge does not speak. I feel their stares.

“That’s the song you’re tapping, is it not?” I say, giving a nod to the Ranger’s foot, bound to the chairleg. “A piece from *Orfeo ed Euridice*. I saw a production of it in London…it’s a distinguishable cadence.”

The Ranger stares at me- more of a response than anything else had received of him. I can feel Tallmadge’s confusion and Hamilton’s awe. With all the attention of the tent focused on me, I’m struck with an idea.

“Did you by chance…see a performance there?” I say, formulating how to best carry out this gamble. “The music performed in England was much changed from Gluck’s- I know because I later heard the original rendition in Switzerland…but I do recognize the rhythm you just tapped. Am I wrong, sir?”

Slowly, the Ranger narrows his eyes, shaking his head. The wager is confirmed.

I throw in my cards, giving a friendly grin and stooping to lift his chair from the ground. Beside me, Brewster steps in to assist my injured strength and we pull the Captain upright. “When did you see it then?” I say. “There were so few performances, we may have shared an audience- and what a divine coincidence would that be.”

The Ranger gives me an apprehensive look, and I give him time to speak. When he doesn’t, I sit upon the desk before him, leaning close to his face- close enough to smell the stench of his dirty uniform. He raises his brows, unimpressed, face laid with scars, marks of fierce battle. The Queen’s Rangers are notorious for their ruthlessness, and from his build and the rugged fire in his eyes, I know that he is marked a warrior- properly tinged in the darkness of violence.

But, I know I’m the same.

His eyes dart to my slung right shoulder lighting with amusement. I ignore that. I say, “Alright, don’t indulge me an answer, but during the performance I saw- as I can remember it, Mister Bach himself played organ and the actress who performed as Amore was carried from the stage just after her finale, *Divo Amore*, having exhausted her breath completely…I imagine such a misfortune could not possibly have happened in other performances. Not in a professional theater.”

I can see from the purse of the Ranger’s lips that he shared these experiences and I suppress the urge to grin.

“Then you saw that show,” I whisper heavily- as if this is a revelation. The Ranger’s eyes narrow.
“A divine coincidence that we should meet here,” I say. “Could anything but the fates themselves have planned it?”

A long silence stretches through the tent and I hold the Ranger’s eyes as he hardens his gaze. “Coincidence,” he says finally, “has no relevance to me.”

I grin to hear his voice, leaning forward in my chair, “Which piece did you most enjoy? Was it _Che Fiero Momento_?”

Behind the prisoner, I can feel Hamilton’s gaze trained on me, impressed and approving; I can sense the growing frustration in Brewster and Tallmadge, and the tension of the silence they’re keeping. It’s distracting.

There’s a short exchange between them, voices hushed too small to distinguish, but I can see them in the periphery of my vision, Hamilton ushering his subordinates from the tent to grant me this conversation.

“GENERAL HOWE is dispatching his personal aide on a ship to the north to request naval reinforcements from Boston and New York,” I match Hamilton’s step. “His orders were to leave by this afternoon.”

He nods, considering me as we march smartly from Sullivan’s camp. If he is impressed with me, it’s undeserved.

“All the correspondence coming into the General’s office has regarded the defense of the ports along the Delaware River to be paramount, so I interrogated for the measures Howe is taking to open that channel for a resupply fleet...” I explain. “I divulged a personal anecdote about considering myself for naval service. We got to talking.”

Hamilton raises both brows and grins broadly. “Your method’s to be commended.”

I shrug off his praise, “A trap my father would use when he suspected me of lying- move around a subject until a man betrays himself.”

“We call it ‘elicitation’,“ Hamilton laughs, perhaps recalling how I had repeatedly attempted the tactic to coerce him to speak about our dalliance on Market Street in August. He had been wise enough to recognize it and divert; I imagine it must be amusing to hear the origin of the trick. “_Che Fiero Momento_?” he says. “How did you recognize the song- no, how did know that he was in the same audience?”

“He likely wasn’t,” I admit, “I knew the performer who fainted. She did so after every finale.”

Hamilton laughs again, eyes lighting and cheeks dimpled with infectious glee. He grips my shoulders, giving a friendly cuff against my arm and skipping up ahead of me.

It feels strange to smile, but I can’t quite help it.

WE CARRY THE REPORT to General Washington’s office and, as soon as His Excellency arrives at headquarters that morning, Hamilton delivers all the details which I had divulged, highlighting the importance of intercepting any resupply efforts that Howe’s aide can bring.
Philadelphia will not be a trap if Howe can bring supplies in to feed his men. Alesian walls won’t starve the subjects into submission if food can be brought inside.

This report is news to General Washington—though he had already received his report from Major Tallmadge on his return journey to headquarters. As his interest had only extended to the welfare of our men held prisoner in Philadelphia by Captain Cunningham, I had shared only that information with Major Tallmadge that pertained to them. We had not discussed the intelligence I had gathered regarding our naval blockades along the Delaware.

“How can you confirm the verity of this report?” the General says once Hamilton has finished speaking. He’s reclined in a padded chair at the office desk, surrounded on all sides by mounds of correspondence.

“It comes directly from an officer of the Queen’s Rangers,” Hamilton says, “collected by honest methods— you have my word that the report is true.”

Washington’s brow raises infinitesimally and my throat feels tight with the trust Hamilton’s placed in my report. The General takes a slow breath and raises a hand to rub the exhaustion from his brow. “And, how many is Howe requesting?” he says lowly.

A beat of silence passes through the room and I clench my hands at my sides tensely.

Washington waits for an answer, but Hamilton doesn’t know. I had neglected to tell him this.

“Colonel?”

I wet my lips, fighting the low curl of regret and guilt in my breast for leaving Hamilton in such a position. “Sir...he’s sending for forty-five hundred soldiers from General Clinton.”

Cold blue eyes fall on me; the General’s face is unmoving. He takes a moment to study me and turn his gaze back on Hamilton slowly. “You can confirm this?”

Beside me, Hamilton stands sure, “Yes, sir.”

“Is this what you heard directly from the prisoner?”

“Anything that Colonel Laurens reports is true,” Hamilton says quickly, “...sir.”

Washington is silent, deathly still. When he moves it’s not immediate. He leans slowly into his chair and folds his hands over the armrests, “Well, this report will need to be carried to Commodore Hazelwood. I will set sources about confirming it, but true or not, our defences are being reinforced in manners with which you are well familiar-”

Hamilton nods as the General continues.

“And, I have ordered Brigadier General Varnum to send out two regiments of the Rhode Island militia to Fort Mercer on Red Bank under Colonel Green and Colonel Angel.” He looks to me and I meet his eyes steadily, a sudden graveness in his tone. “We must be able to draw naval defence before Howe can reinforce Billingsport. I’ve already dispatched a courier to carry instructions to Green, if you are well enough to ride fast, you may meet him on your way to Fort Mifflin and provide him this additional information-”

“Sir, Laurens shouldn’t travel in his state-”

Washington turns his attention back to Hamilton and frowns, “Mister Laurens also should not begin
brawls in his state- but you saw no qualm worth intervention in that case.” I wince, but the General continues calmly, “He’s shown himself capable of making due to write, and as it seems that he is most familiar with the information to be carried-”

“I’m fine to ride,” I say eagerly.

“Then he shouldn’t do it alone- allow me to go with him.”

As always, I’m appalled with Hamilton’s compunction to argue with the General, but I have no professional protest. I would accept his company for the ease it would bring- as he is far more familiar with the nature of the Naval defenses on the Delaware.

“I need you in this office,” the General says firmly.

“Sir, we would only be gone for-”

“I have made myself clear, Colonel.”

“But, Laurens is injured, sir, he should have someone present to ensure that he doesn’t-”

“If Mister Laurens says that he is fine to ride, I believe him. I have heard accounts of his return from Germantown and he is much recovered from that state now. He is quite capable.”

If this was not a dismissal against Hamilton’s assistance- which I need, I would plume with pride at the declaration.

But, beside me, Hamilton’s chest puffs with breath for another protest, and Washington is quick to dismiss it with finality, sitting up and grabbing his quill to begin writing my orders for the Commodore.

I glance to Hamilton again, weigh options, knowing that I don’t merit the trust he’s placed in me or the protective ness he still extends, but I selfishly need his professional help… “Sir,” I say evenly, “I am unfamiliar with the efforts that Commodore Hazelwood is engaged in along the Delaware… I can only speak to the information that I collected- which Colonel Hamilton has vouched for… I would be entirely lost as to how to proceed with this,” I swallow thickly, “I do need his guidance.”

The admission hangs in the air and His Excellency huffs a frustrated breath for my ineptitude, “Hamilton, can you brief Mister Laurens of the state of our river defenses before sunrise?”

“Not so quickly as to allow him a full understanding of our situation,” Hamilton says immediately, jumping on this opportunity I’ve provided, “Your courier’s already a day ahead, sir, and if we’re to catch up with him, we should be departing forthwith- additionally, there would be time along the ride to explain the mission and I can navigate around Howe’s patrols in the dark, allowing us to depart even sooner, something which Laurens would not be prepared to do having been injured and unfamiliar with the locations of these defenses and the course which Colonel Green’s messenger was ordered to take- which you should recall, I helped to map. The route will take more than a day and night to navigate- and even longer for someone, travelling alone and unfamiliar with-”

Washington raises his hand to cut Hamilton’s plea off mid-sentence and the Lieutenant Colonel falls silent. The General draws a breath. “...Fine.”

I resist the urge to throw a glance at Hamilton- just to witness the pleased expression he must be working diligently to suppress. I can practically feel the excitement radiating from him as I’m consumed with my own suspenseful guilt- for drawing Hamilton into a situation I myself am unsure of- and being so unsure of a report that I myself collected...
The further along Washington’s pen moves as it writes our orders, the more I fear that the officer had lied to me- that I will be another Major Spear, drawing our resources to the wrong front.

As soon as he has completed his writing, Washington hands me our orders, an official notice of his demand that Commodore Hazelwood hear my report and take it as truth. Hamilton and I fall to attention at the base of his desk.

“You’re dismissed,” the General says to me, “Prepare your horses. I’ll have a word with Mister Hamilton.”

I DO NOT WASTE TIME at the stables, loading two travelling packs I had gathered from Pennypackers’ Mill onto Hamilton’s horse and the one I still use. I see that the horses are fed and bring them hastily to the front step of the General’s Headquarters, anticipating- or perhaps hoping- that the words Washington has for Hamilton are short…

This interim of solitude grants me time to reflect upon the dangers of travelling alone with Hamilton once again. Our trip to Fatlands Ford had been so carefree, the quiet before a storm. He had declared me his Pythias, sought to deepen our friendship with new forms of trust that I now know I don’t merit.

My memories of that day provide comfort, but the implications that hold on how Hamilton still treats me, pierce me with guilt...

This excursion seems almost worse. If I was not convinced of its necessity, the haste it requires and my own inability to meet those needs myself, I would elect to go alone- to take the blame for it should anything go wrong. But, I remind myself that this is the job of an aide- to carry the General’s messages and his orders, and I know that I was right to request assistance- as I truly would be incapable of traveling this route without a guide.

I only wish my guide were not Hamilton.

His company has made me increasingly anxious these past few days. I should just admit that I’m too selfish and cowardly to feel even the brotherly love that he expects...much less satisfy the needs of his heart.

What does it mean of me, as a man, that I’m so inclined to make promises that’re impossible for me to keep?

When Hamilton steps out the front door of the Mill house, his face is flushed red and I can see him preparing to voice a complaint. I step in and press his horse’s reins into his hand before he can speak, “I will need help onto my horse,” I say imperatively.

He glances down at my slung arm and nods, “Right, of course,” he says, and drops to provide me a knee to raise my step.

Mounting in my saddle is a clumsy affair, but Hamilton assists patiently and follows with grace and haste. I check that he is ready to ride and set off before he can begin to share his grievance with me.

He rides ahead as he knows he must.

WE REACH THE EDGE OF NORRISTOWN by midday and dismount to plan our route around
Howe’s patrols through Audubon. Not having spoken since setting out, I guide our conversation diligently until we have agreed upon our route.

By the glare he has kept focused, Hamilton is not oblivious of the diversion.

He helps me onto my horse obligingly and I make the effort hastily so as not to trouble him.

Once I’m mounted, he steps back and folds his arms over his chest, narrowing his eyes at me. I glance down, now stuck on my horse and trapped as his audience. “Have I offended you?” he says directly.

“Of course not,” I say impatiently. From the tension that had been pulled taught between us- the air he carried of wanting to speak out in protest all morning, and his obvious disdain to bite his tongue, I can tell this will be a long discussion. We need to continue moving.

“Then, you do know that I didn’t intend to degrade your capabilities this morning?” he says, seeking clarification. “I had thought maybe that was how the conversation was taken and I know I would be offended. So, I want to assure you that I know that you could have done this on your own- and I honestly just wanted to come wi-”

“No,” I say, interrupting, “I couldn’t have gone alone because I honestly don’t know what measures are being taken for naval defense.” Hamilton’s mouth snaps shut and he backs towards his horse. “I asked you along to explain those matters to me- preferably while we’re travelling so that we waste no more time than we already have…”

I raise both brows imploringly, and Hamilton catches the implication, pursing his lips in frustration and turning sharply to mount his horse.

I wonder for how long he will continue to acquiesce to my command until I’ve pushed too far.

THAT CURIOSITY is answered once we’ve made camp.

British patrols through Audobon forced us to move our path west of Chester, adding twenty miles to our route. While Hamilton and I both are eager to press forth- me for avoidance, and I believe he for spite- our horses can go no further today. We will have to make the final fifteen miles in the morning.

I’m secretly grateful to rest...body aching terribly in the effort of keeping aright in a saddle with an injured shoulder and a knife wound at my abdomen. I cannot dwell on it.

I work about setting up a small tarp cover over our bedrolls as a slight sprinkling of rain is covering the moonlight and making it difficult to arrange a dry fire nearby. Hamilton works roughly at lighting a flint against the driest piece of kindling he could find, brow set and lips pursed, in a waspish humor.

I pretend I don’t notice, as I have all day.

Tarp set, I walk through the trees to where we’ve staged our horses, bringing out our small rations bag and carrying it to the camp circle to make supper. I crouch by the fire pit and watch Hamilton’s fingers struggling with the flint. After three strikes against the stone, I hold out my left hand to take it.

He slaps it sharply away.
I glare, “Hamilton, let me.”

He doesn’t respond.

I reach for the flint again.

“Stop,” he growls.

I ignore that and move to snatch the starter; he’s taking too long with it.

“Laurens, you’re injured, I won’t have you moving that damned arm, just sit!”

Hamilton barks the order and I obey—because I have to—but narrow my eyes. It’s possible that my aches in riding were more apparent than I’d hoped...but it’s also possible that Hamilton simply recognized pain in my posture. He sees me too well.

I sit on the dry end of my riding pack, watching as Hamilton takes several more strikes at the flint to get the kindling lit, and he drops to sit with a nettled huff, stuffing the starter into his travelling bag and poking at the kindling until the dry logs catch and provide some light.

Rain drops tap against the overhead tarp, in the distance, thunder is rumbling over the bay.

I unpack some flour and a skillet to mix firecakes and broth.

Across from me, Hamilton brings out a flask and takes long a sip, setting it by the fire and wrapping his arms about his chest to restrain a shiver. He shifts closer to the fire and watches as I mix the flour with salt and water. We stare at the warming dough as if it’ll bake faster with an audience. A long moment passes in silence, just the crackling of damp kindling popping. I hate the sound.

Then, “This whole damned army’s so chipper except you and the General, and I’ve felt none of their optimism but the brunt of both your foul moods,” Hamilton whines shuffling his feet closer to the fire. I raise my eyes and look at him as he lounges his back against a log, warming his toes. “And, I admit that their celebration’s unfit for the outcome at Germantown,” he says, “I can understand why His Excellency's been so surly, but…”

He meets my eyes, questioning, but he averts quickly back to the fire pit when I give no response.

He shakes his head to himself and picks up the flask, takes several heaving gulps and wipes his mouth against his sleeve, “Well, regardless, you offered to share my burdens, help carry my troubles or some such, and I know you’ll carry through that offer, so…” he takes another long drink and presses his back harder against the log he’s leaned against, drawing a breath to complain. “It’s General Washington,” he says, his tone of voice demanding. “He’s treating me unprofessionally-affectionately in a way that he does with some of the aides he’s had on staff longest, but they seem at ease with it and I cannot seem to follow.”

My brows draw to hear that Washington would be ‘unprofessional’ by any definition, but I don’t question it.

“I worry that it may just be me and I’m overreacting,” he says.

I still need to discuss our professional duties to Commodore Hazelwood, and the sooner Hamilton has voiced his complaints, the sooner I can dismiss the subject.

“It’s placed me in a position of difficulty,” he explains, “—whether to insult my General in defense of my pride or whether to sacrifice my dignity to appease my commander. I don’t believe he would be
offended if I protested, but I also dread whatever tension it may produce to draw his attention to the sentiment...or to express that it’s made me uneasy. It doesn’t make any of the other boys uneasy, I just...is there some deficiency in me that I cannot be politely affectionate? I’ve reflected upon this for months, but since you offered your counsel, I’ve been thinking of ways to express it and that’s the best I’ve thought.”

Hamilton is right that I offered my friendship, and despite my concerns, I promised my support and he deserves enough to sate his needs, but I must be brusque enough that he will not raise undue expectations of what I can offer him. He doesn’t know the worthlessness of my friendship just yet.

So, I consider his dilemma, pressing the skillet deeper into the coals, “When you say ‘affection’...?”

Hamilton’s lips press thin in thought. “…Fatherly,” he decides.

I hum and fall silent, recalling the shouted protests Hamilton had raised in the General’s office just before my appointment, the violent reaction that the petty officers’ taunts had earned of him. It is true that Washington serves a patriarchal role in his office, but while it had only ever seemed natural to me, it obviously distresses Hamilton...

“But, it’s a role he’s taken with several of the boys,” he amends quickly, “Tilghman, Meade, Gibbs-and none of them seem to have a problem with it-”

“Well, perhaps they honestly want that affection,” I say, shrugging.

Hamilton falls silent in consideration.

I don’t want my words misunderstood, so I elaborate, “The General likely means it as an offer. The army can be a lonely place for young men- and especially in the drudgery of aide work. Our General can’t very well be our friend and still command respect, but he can be...more than a General.”

Hamilton’s nose scrunches with distaste, “But, the moniker he uses, ‘my boy’- entrusting me tasks and speaking to me like he’s known me forever-”

“You don’t have to accept the offer if you don’t want Washington to serve such a role for you…”

“And, if I deny his affection? If I brush away his approval?”

“Then you’ve been honest of your sentiments…” I say simply, picking up the skillet from the coals as our bread’s darkened sufficiently, setting it aside to cool. “There’s no deficiency in that, and I’m sure you’re incapable of being cruel about it. It would be worse to humor someone’s genuine feelings just for a sense of obligation, right?”

A slow smile stretches over bowed lips and Hamilton leans over the fire to hand me the flask. “That’s what I had believed,” he says, nodding securely.

I accept the flask slowly, familiar with his tests, I have the feeling I’ve just passed one without intending to. “Then why did you need my counsel?”

He raises one shoulder in a shrug, “I wanted it.”

I watch the man warily as he pushes up from where he’d reclined and steps to my side of the fire pit, picking up the skillet gingerly to break our bread evenly. He sets the halves aside and picks up his canteen, pouring a bit into the pan to mix our jar of stock into broth, then settling down beside me- close...too close, letting our shoulders touch heavily.
I should move away- or press him to move, but his body is warm and his weight is grounding and I put off the action too long. He’s made himself comfortable against me.

This is why I had dreaded his company.

I take a wide gulp from the flask- whiskey. It’s sour and strong. I’ve barely dropped the container from my lips when Hamilton’s fingers find my wrist and I realize he’s reaching for the drink. Rather than take the flask when it’s offered though, he takes my hand and draws me to tip the flask against his lips myself. My fingertips just barely brush his jaw. I’m too dazed to draw away.

He catches me in his gaze and moves my hand back, “To friendship,” he whispers, pressing the metal to my own lips and tipping it back. His body feels heavy against me.

I let my hand follow the lead. I swallow.

The moment feels strange somehow, thick and guilty, but the stifling warmth dies down as Hamilton leans back, smiling chastely, “I do feel better,” he says decidedly. “I had thought it such a trifling matter that it wouldn’t need sharing, but it seems it did hold some weight on me-” he grins. “I feel lifted.”

“You’re drunk,” I say dismissively.

He laughs, “That as well.”

I lean forward to collect our dinners, startled when I return to my seat and Hamilton maneuvers to face me, leaning an elbow over my lap and sprawling there unabashedly. He sits up just enough that his face isn’t pressed into my thigh and he can eat with his arms bent.

“Hamil-” I begin to protest.

When I move to push off his affection, he holds tight, glares. “Stop, I’m accepting your offer.”

“What?” I don’t recall offering my lap as a plate.

“I’ve decided I want it. You pledged me your friendship, and I would have those things you detailed,” he says, biting heartily into his firecake, defiant.

For a long moment, this declaration is met with silence as I am entirely unprepared to have this conversation. Hamilton is patient, chewing thoughtfully and avoiding leaving crumbs against my breeches where he’s eating, but his patience is perhaps expecting an intelligent answer and I go rigid and cold, close off in response. It’s the most honest thing I can do- neither a confirmation nor a denial. “We need to discuss the defenses at Fort Mifflin, sir, and arrange our schedules for watches. Then, we both need sleep.”

Hamilton frowns deeply to this response, but he does not seemed surprised- rather prepared for it. “Which’ll come much easier in the company of a friend we trust.” There’s something admonishing in his tone. “Without whatever cruel coldness has been gripping you these past days- I’ll have none of that. We agree that it’s best to be honest about our sentiments, yes.”

It’s not a question, so I don’t speak.

“And, you meant what you said when you spoke of profound and productive love between men of a similar spirit and- and...and you asked me to know your heart and I’m trying to if you would allow it.”
Hamilton goes silent, staring at me expectantly, frustration rising in his voice, but I’m unsure what I should say in response. Nothing’s been asked and I have nothing to offer. “That...that’s not what I—"

But it was what I meant.

At the time. Things have changed. I’ve changed.

Hamilton’s gaze doesn’t soften. “It is what you said, and I know you still mean it but you’ve been wretched to me in some undue form of self-castigation, I don’t understand it.” He swallows whatever he had been chewing, holding his rations aside and reaching for my hand to grip it tightly. “Either way, I need to know if you retract the offer...”

I want to tug my hand away, but it would only confirm his accusation and imply that I do...retract it. I don’t believe I could. So, I’m left to wince against his touch.

The action doesn’t earn me mercy and Hamilton’s tone berates me like a fool when I fail to respond. “If you’re running in fear, trust me-I know what it is to be weary of loss, we risk more than our lives to fight as soldiers, but was it not you who warned me, fear of hurt won’t help the heart?” His eyes implore me, but I don’t know for what. “If you need time for grieving, I will understand your coldness and leave you to mend, but if you’ve retracted your friendship, tell me now, don’t be cruel or polite...”

I cannot respond in defense- I know his words, have heard them all before, and they should be comforting, but he says them with such hardness they sting instead.

Met with silence, Hamilton’s frustration expands, curling his lips into a sneer. “You’re being a coward,” he says and I flinch. His hand grips mine so tight my fingers crush together. “You claimed to understand that there is a cost for liberty...and yet you draw away and consume yourself as if your friend’s death could be your fault. How many ways have you lied to yourself? How many ways do you plan to injure me? I’d like to know before I—"

I shove back, tearing my fingers from Hamilton’s grip as it begins to hurt. “Stop,” I say, but my voice comes dry and weak.

“Laurens, please—” Hamilton’s anger is briefly snuffed in confusion, totally lost, and he seems unsure of how to express his frustrations- even more frustrated that he does not know how to cure my infuriating weakness.

I want nothing more than to stalk away into the forest, far from him and his blunt honesty. It’s obviously what he needs of me—before I injure him again. But he leans over where I’d fallen off my traveling pack. He’s too close to flee.

“You asked me to know you and I’m trying...” he says, voice low and abruptly gentle. “But, you pull away and hide and then accuse me of the same, and I know you’re injured and grieving, but I am trying and you cannot just brush me off. I must know you’ll stay if I return your friendship...”

I resist the urge to look away. “You don’t,” I say firmly.

His brows draw and he reaches to touch my cheek, “But, I might- and I want to...I want to know you...”

I strain my neck to pull away. “You only want that because I coerced you!”

“What?” Hamilton recoils with the shadow of a laugh- as if he believes I may be joking.

I’m not- far from it, and unbidden, the words pour from me, “I pursued your friendship desperately-
and you’re too foolishly kind to turn your back on desperation.” Hamilton’s face draws, lips pursed apprehensively. I explain, “You only care for me now as I’m pitiable and injured, and I knew you would— I unmanned myself in full knowledge of your sensible nature, advantaged myself upon your kindness and all but forced you to surrender your affection—”

His drawn brows raise incredulously, “You... forced me to...”

“Exactly,” I say hastily, “there’s no way you could have seen your own manipulation. I didn’t realize my own intentions until I reflected—on my expectations and my worth. Now, I’m sure that I must be demanding unfair loyalties—dangerous loyalties of you. The sort of affection I promised implicitly demands reciprocation and you were right to be wary of it, I cannot offer you a reason...and must warn you that your confidence would be misplaced in me...” I can see his anger rising with each word I speak, but I’m unsure how to retract my words or compound them in some way to quell his growing rage. “If I’ve been distant, it’s been for your own protection.”

“How...how dare you—” he laughs, breath coming short in indignation.

“I’m sorry. And you are right to be angry—”

“No! I’m not- you never- You don’t get to- you’re accusing me of naivety!” Hamilton’s words stutter and break and I have never seen him fumble in his anger, but he seems too surprised with it, unprepared to express it and too intoxicated to think clearly. He shoves himself up from the ground, nearly toppling into the fire pit. I jolt to catch him but he rights himself without my help. “Worse- you...you insult my judgement...of you of...of where I should place my trust! As if I’m too foolish to gauge the character of a man before—...I-I would’ve thought that you at least would know that I-...I don’t just—...” He shakes his head and paces away from me. “How dare you- how dare...” he stalks away mumbling to himself.

I imagine that conversation did not go as he had planned.

I FINISH MY DINNER and arrange my bedroll while Hamilton paces in the rain until he’s shivering. Exhaustion is setting in and the aches of riding all day have worn my body listless. It doesn’t help that I was roused so early without having rested last night. I cannot quite restrain a low groan of pain as I lower myself to my bedroll.

“Hamilton,” I say, calling into the drizzle of the forest, the sounds of leaves pelted with raindrops and boots crunching in wet debris. “We need to sleep, are you sober enough to take the first watch?” At the rate I’m fading, he may not have a choice.

He grunts— which is not a response.

“Hamilton,” I repeat.

He turns like a windstorm, “It’s fine. Go to sleep.”

“Are you sure?” I say, body already betraying me and falling boneless with Hamilton’s permission. “You’re drenched and swaying on your feet, you should dry off and have some water.”

“And your words are slurring more than mine,” he says humorlessly. “Sleep,” he orders.

“You’re the drunk one,” I protest.

He’s stepped closer and I hadn’t realized it until he’s crouched by me, dragging his riding blanket
over me roughly. “Not drunk enough,” he mutters.

I can barely keep my eyes open, much less question what he means.

“Just go to sleep my foolish, insufferable Pythias…” he mutters without a trace of fondness.

I’m too tired to question it...

I SLEEP TOO DEEPLY for haunted dreams and wake long before my body has rested, roused by the sound of stone scratching flint. I squint, eyes well-adjusted but crusted with exhaustion.

“Hamilton?” I grumble.

His eyes are black in the dark of early morning, “Apologies,” he whispers. “The fire went out...and the flask’s empty.”

Where his forearms are exposed, his skin is raised with gooseflesh and his body is shaking in shivers beyond his control. I would like more than anything to roll back over into the cover of his warm riding blanket and fall under once more, but his breath huffs clouds around his lips as he sighs with frustration against his own shaking. I won’t fall back to sleep with him in such a state nearby.

“The flint is wet,” I say, straining to sit up on one elbow. “And, it’s nearly daybreak- you didn’t wake me to take the watch?”

He glances over and drops the flint, brushing his hands over his arms to generate some warmth. “It’s no matter, I wasn’t tired.”

I doubt that. Ignoring his dismissal, I push back the blanket and strain to slide from the bedroll, “It’s warm still,” I say, motioning to the covers.

This catches Hamilton’s attention and I raise my brows. He presses his lips thin and schools his expression neutral.

“At least warm yourself,” I say imploringly. “I’ve already struggled my way up for you and the effort would be wasted if you don’t…”

HAMILTON SLEEPS for several hours, and I allow it- knowing he wouldn’t.

As soon as there’s light for it, I empty my canteen into my shaving dish and bring out my razor and hand mirror. We will be traveling to Fort Mifflin to meet the Commodore, and our appearance must reflect deference for Washington’s esteemed office.

I lather my cheeks and throat in shaving soap, working left-handed with my mirror propped against my riding pack. I cannot reach high enough with my injured right arm to pull my cheek taught, but I decide I’ll cross that obstacle once the shaving soap has softened my skin. In the meantime, I get up to feed the horses, returning to my seat after a few moments to begin the task of stretching my face at odd angles and sucking in my cheeks to try and make my skin tight. I run my razor over the stubble that’s grown in two days.

“What time is it? Are you shaving left-handed?”

I turn, startled.
Hamilton is propped upright on his elbows, brows drawn and eyes narrowed blearily. His tone is curious- unsure and groggy, but he doesn’t wait for a response, pushing himself upright. “You’ll cut yourself like that.”

I frown at his urgency, “I’m fine with my left hand, it’s no matter-”

“No like that,” he protests despite my assurances, “I won’t have it.”

I draw my brow, “We’re meeting the Commodore today, I cannot present myself unshaven and gruff-” not that Hamilton would understand the necessity for all the hair that he doesn’t grow.

“It’ll be worse if I let you show up with slices all about your cheeks, here,” Hamilton throws back the blanket and crawls to where I’ve seated by the fire pit, reaching out to take my razor from my hand.

I pull it back, incredulous.

“Let me help you shave,” he explains.

I know what he intended. I don’t move to hand over the razor.

“Laurens, trust me,” he says. “It’ll be faster and smoother if you let me- and we need to be moving by daylight.” When his reasoning does not earn my compliance, he makes a grab for the razor that has me leaning back and away to hold the device from his reach. When his attempt has him fumbling clumsily over me, I snicker and he huffs, but lightens, “I know it must look like I’ve no experience with shaving, but I can use a blade,” he says.

I give a skeptical look.

“I can brief you of our river defences while I do it,” he says reasonably. And, after a moment of silence between us in which I don’t budge, he says, “It’s only a shave...I’ll look bad as your superior officer to present you in poor hygiene. Let me help- for my own sake.”

HAMILTON’S HANDS ARE GENTLE in my hair and against my face, pressing my skin tight before drawing the razor carefully over the stubble there. I hold still, attempt to focus my attention on listening as the man stationed so near to my lap explains the mechanics of a **chêvaux-de-frise**.

From what I gather, it’s a river defense system established by our forts on Red Bank and Mud Island. Long pikes sunken under the water, designed to tear the hulls of ships attempting to pass through the channel. The British have been focusing their efforts on the destruction of the defenses, trying to tear holes large enough to bring ships into the river.

I feel I’m breathing far too loud.

I had argued against this attention admirably, but surrendered to the insinuation that I was insulting Hamilton with my distrust and insubordinance. I wish that I hadn’t.

It’s difficult to focus on the names and dates of specific events that had occurred along the Delaware River with Hamilton leaned close over my lap and his eyes trained steadily on my face. He finishes the flat of my cheeks and moves to the corners of my jaw, flicking the blade carefully beside my ears. That done, the blade passes just by my mouth and his fingers touch my lips, drawing the top one taught and nearly pressing into the crease of my mouth. If I nudged my tongue forward, I could taste his fingers...
“Do you have any questions?” he says.

I open my eyes. I hadn’t realized they were closed. I cannot think of anything I would ask. His fingers have left my face in anticipation of me speaking. “I…” feel unprepared to speak to the Commodore, “I don’t have any just now, but I will ask should I think of any…” I say.

He nods and wipes the blade of cream and stubble, rinsing it again before returning to my chin. We both fall silent as he gently nudges me to raise my jaw and bare my neck. I feel absurdly exposed. I’ve visited dozens of barbers and never felt nervous, and Hamilton’s shave has been close and meticulously gentle thus far. I trust him completely. I swallow thickly.

The skin of my throat pulls tight enough that he can draw the blade over it without pressing it flat, but his left hand still holds my jaw, thumb rubbing lines over the bone there. It feels...affectionate. I’m struck again with guilt— for allowing this to progress so far...

“I’m sorry to have offended you last night,” I say quietly when he pulls the blade away to wipe.

His thumb taps my cheek. “It’s alright. We all say foolish things when we’re grieving.”

This was not the answer that I had needed- or expected. It seems as though he’s dismissing what I had said...as if he already has dismissed it. “I...don’t retract anything…” I say to clarify, “and I’m truly not grieving.”

He had been raising his hand to draw the blade up my throat again, but he leans back and frowns. I peak one eye open. “Then you’re lying to yourself,” he decides.

I raise my brow and shake my head, “No, you’re wrong, I’m not…” I say honestly. We had agreed to be honest- and that’s why he’s been upset with me. I’m honestly cruel, “I’ve seen myself clear these last few days- given time to reflect. I’m not a good friend- not just a danger to protect, but...unfulfilling to keep.”

“I don’t understand…”

“It’s not only J’s death that’s shaken me, but...how his friendship for me outstripped mine for him,” I say bluntly.

Hamilton’s confused expression does not loosen.

So I explain, “We’d only been apart a few months, and I was glad to see him again, but...being reunited didn’t flare any loyalty in me. He passed his praises of me to his superiors, followed me into battle and trusted my decisions against his own judgement. He gave me every opportunity to return his sentiments and I withheld...I disappointed him, and I’m sure he died dissatisfied. I promised you depth and devotion, but I doubt that I’m capable of those, and I would have you preserve yourself and not give me the chance to disap-”

Hamilton laughs abruptly and picks up the washrag, brushing his hands of shaving soap, “Christ, Laurens, for a man who won’t accept protection, you protect your friends from a lot of imagined threats…”

“Imagined...?” It takes me a moment to understand Hamilton’s meaning, “It’s not imagined- I-”

“You think I’ll be disappointed by you?”

“I know you’ll be disappointed.”
Hamilton’s smile doesn’t fade, only grows fond and amused. He leans back to return to the task of shaving me, cupping my jaw imperatively. “Well then you’ve done a damn poor job of knowing me. Disappointment is not a danger, my dear...and I doubt it’d be possible of you.” I want to protest this, but he speaks before I can, “I admit, I envy Mister White…”

I’m appalled.

“You recognized his actions when he expressed his sentiments for you,” Hamilton explains. “You could tell that he was trying to be your friend-”

“Alexander, he’s dead!” I snap.

“Then I envy him the opportunity to die in loyalty to you.” Hamilton holds my chin steady in a tight grip as I jerk to look at him sharp. He presses my neck up. “All this shit you’ve convinced yourself of in ‘self-reflection’ is ruinous and I’ll hear no more of it,” he says forcefully.

I move to grab at his hand, but he draws the razor against my throat again and I’m in no position to move.

“Philosophy is a pretty toy if one indulges with moderation at the right time of life,” Hamilton says slowly, and I know that I recognize the parable, but I cannot think of what from until he says, “But, to pursue it further than one should, it’s ruin- and you torture yourself with these worries.”

“...Georgics?”

I can hear the smile in Hamilton’s voice more than I can turn my head to see it. He draws the blade under my ear. “Don’t estrange yourself, my Socrates. It’s not as if you’ll treat one man in the same way as you treat all others, and by doubting yourself and fleeing like a coward, you insult me. If I thought you would be anything less than devoted, I wouldn’t consider your offer, but now, as you’ve made it...I think it’s not your decision if I choose to accept.”

“How can I know that I won’t hurt you...or abandon my sentiments without meaning to?”

It is a strange thing to consider- or attempt to explain, but a very true fear. What if I wake up and cease to enjoy his company? What if I decide- as I did with J White- that we will never be close? What if I reduce his value to whatever piece of him I most fancy for myself?

“I would never allow it.”

That is not a comforting answer, “You would never mean to allow it, I’m sure…”

Hamilton turns my chin and flicks away the last line of cream from my throat, blade sharp under my neck, pulse jumping. The action is so swift and curt it seems almost a chastisement for my protests. Hamilton smiles and brushes his fingers over his work, checking the smoothness. “You’ll just have to trust me,” he says and picks up the towel, putting it in my hand.

WE DRESS QUICKLY, tying hasty queues and pulling coats on over worn underclothes. There’s no time for washing, powdering hair, or grooming our coats. Hamilton offers to change my bandages and I assure him it can wait until we’ve reached Fort Mifflin.

I don’t know that I’m ready to have his hands on me again.

Our horses are agreeable and we set a quick pace. It is not so easy to gallop without full use of my
right arm, but Hamilton takes the lead and the path is clear and mostly flat. Our rendezvous with Colonel Green’s messenger lasts only so long as it takes to pass off the parcel of instructions from General Washington for the regiments of militia stationed at Red Bank, then we resume our ride en route to Fort Mifflin.

By the time we arrive at the river shore, sailors are already bustling at work, oiling cannons and checking rigs, carrying barrels of powder and crates of mud and cement to fortify the base of the structure. The jutting walls of the outer fortification remind me of the Spanish naval fort I’d seen in Saint Augustine during a trip I’d taken with my father, designed so as to afford the most surface of the walls to be opened to cannons.

Inside, the white brick walls enclose a dirt lawn, brushy grass cleaved up from the movement of cannons across the field and the constant pounding of feet as sailors rush about inside, more confined and urgent even than those working without the walls. If the space were not so condensed, the Fort could be a city itself, so fast and clamorous, it would put a Charlestown market to shame.

I find myself edging to Hamilton’s side, unsure of my orientation.

I feel his hand touch my elbow and glance down, breath catching in anticipation, but the touch leaves too soon to take his hand and Hamilton raises his chin, eyes lighting briefly as he sets out at a fast pace, striding through the crowd directly.

I have no choice but to follow or lose him.

Hamilton guides to the furthest wall of the fort, stopping just before the white stone wall and placing his hands on his hips, gazing up to a man in a French uniform, a few years older than me by appearance, standing on the wall and shouting orders down to workers on the other side. “Monseigneur Teisseydre!” he calls.

The man whirls and looks down at us, confused before a grin splits his face and he turns back, shouts to a subordinate to take up his station and bends to jump gracefully from the rampart, landing a few feet away and stumbling just enough for Hamilton’s arms to raise instinctively should he fall. His hands hold there as the French officer rights himself and reaches out to draw Hamilton forward and kiss both his cheeks in greeting.

I’ve seen the greeting a thousand times- delivered it a thousand more, but Hamilton smiles so wide and bright, I look away. I’ve barely begun to wonder how Hamilton met this man when he turns and raises his hand to beckon me, “Allow me to introduce François Louis Teisseydre, Marquis de Fleury. Lieutenant to Brigadier General Pulaski.”

The Marquis gives a short bow and raises his hand to take mine.

I give it, “John Laurens- ah...Lieutenant Colonel...Laurens”

He gives a nod of recognition and turns his attention back to Hamilton who’s edged to my side, hand wrapped loosely at the scabbard of his sword as he does when he’s impatient. With the Marquis attention, he talks quick and sharp in practiced French, “When did you arrive here? Did the Count dispatch all the dragoons? I don’t recall seeing orders for such a movement -”

The Marquis nods, “Ah- There was no movement, only me. I’ve been assigned to oversee the construction of our cheveaux-de-frise.”

He explains his mission with a somber tone, obviously bearing the weight of an important task- occasionally complaining of the design his predecessor, Montressor. Hamilton interjects questions,
drawing information kindly and admiringly- we are speaking to the engineer behind the Delaware River’s defense network. The Marquis de Fleury talks with spirit, gesticulating with emphasis as Hamilton employs him to show us about the fort and explain his designs.

As we walk, I fall behind and allow them to speak familiarly. I try to focus on the information that the Marquis shares as he explains the fortifications, but I spend the tour drifting between thoughts and apprehensions of meeting the Commodore and listening to the way Hamilton’s voice smooths out in French.

I recognize diplomacy in every line of his posture, the way he seems to carry himself lightly on his toes. What would seem genuine affection in his smile and gripping enthusiastic hands as he walks with de Fleury, are so obviously a mask, I wonder how I had ever been impressed with this precarious act. It’s always frustrating to witness a man posturing himself for others’ expectations.

I wonder if this performance is the only reason I had ever persisted to try and know him.

I wonder what will become of my interest if ever lets me...

We make our way to stand atop the walls of the fortification and the Marquis de Fleury points out over the river, motioning to the points at which his submerged traps are hidden. “The engagement last week took two of our cheavux-de-frise. All our efforts must be directed to preventing any ships that would pass or attempt to destroy our defenses- and it is for this reason that Monsieur Hazelwood has taken his flotilla upstream to plan an attack against the British ships that have taken Billingsport-”

“The Commodore is not here?” Hamilton says, turning abruptly back to de Fleury and casting me a look over his shoulder.

I feel my jaw go slack and my shoulders drop, momentary panic that we have come all this way to be thwarted by poor timing.

The Marquis glances between us in quick realization that we are not here to speak with him. "Ah, he will return this evening- and I will ensure that he sees you before we depart for the attack.”

 Hamilton turns to me and speaks in english, “The General demanded we return tonight.”

By ‘we’, I know that he means only himself and I should suggest he ride alone and leave me to the Commodore so that he might return to Washington’s side, but, “Is there a place we may rest before Lord Hazelwood arrives?” I say, turning to de Fleury politely, “We will have to return to His Excellency immediately after speaking with him.”

“It is a long ride,” Hamilton adds helpfully.

THE COMMODORE’S HOUSE is placed at the far corner of the fort, behind the sailors’ barracks and the inner redoubt. As de Fleury guides us inside, Hazelwood’s aides remain seated, barely acknowledging their guests from the army, and I nearly step into the office to protest this, but Fleury presses us towards the stairs to usher us into a guest room.

Before he can leave us, Hamilton grabs his arm and requests he direct an American officer to have the servants draw us water to wash ourselves- with his limited english, Fleury agrees and turns his nose up in sympathy of the stench we’ve collected.

I would take insult if I hadn’t seen the naval officers seated around Hazelwood’s desk with clean hair
and laundered clothes, and their easy access to flowing water places them at an advantage, but they wouldn’t consider our inland placement as an excuse for the offensive odor. Rained upon all night, slept under riding blankets, and ridden wet horses, our smell would disgrace the army from ten paces at least.

It’s no excuse for the aides’ rudeness. “What a grand welcome that was,” I say sardonically once the frenchman leaves, already reaching to disentangle my arm from its sling and stretch stiff muscles.

Hamilton shrugs and begins unclasping his sword belt, “It is a different service,” he muses, “and none of those men are, or will ever be, under our command-”

“It’s nonetheless discourteous to neglect fellow officers.”

“I don’t disagree.”

We’ve undressed to our shirts and breeches and Hamilton’s untied his queue when two servants carry in a metal washbasin, steaming warm and two pitchers and cloths. They set the basin on the table between two chairs, and lay out the cloth beneath, opening the window for us to dump the water when we’ve finished washing. I thank them as they leave and close the door soundly, still holding my arm awkwardly stiff.

“While you halt, take every measure for refreshing your Men and rendering them as comfortable as you can,” Hamilton recites, reaching down to pull his shirt over his head before picking up a cloth and motioning for me to sit. “Shall we see to those bandages-”

I raise a brow and take the other chair, unbuttoning my shirt to shrug it off without assistance. I realize that he intends to help, but when he reaches to touch me, I push back his hands, “I can handle the matter myself,” I say, “It’s no more challenging than tying a queue.”

Hamilton doesn’t blink. “Which most men take assistance for.”

I realize I could thank him for the offer and be rid of the subject, but this infuriating concern has me feeling coddled and cornered. I recall my selfish hopes that Hamilton would continue to forgive my weak deflections, that he would fight my attempts to pull away. I could be glad for his reassurances, his tenacious belief that I won’t grow distant and cold in earnest, but all I feel is guilt...for having drawn him to believe that- and for continuing to test his resolve.

I’ve already hurt him more times than he should forgive.

“You don’t,” I say simply, but I cannot quite draw my voice to bite. “I’ve told you I don’t need your concern.”

Instead of twisting in insult as I had selfishly hoped, Hamilton’s expression draws and he relents. “Fair enough,” he says.

He takes the other seat to tend to himself, washing his face and taking a brush to the knots in his hair, turning away from me.

I sit frozen and watch. That’s it?

WE SHARE THE BED to rest, though ‘share’ implies a communal use of the space when it feels more like a division in the distance that Hamilton keeps between us. This is probably for the best as an officer of the Corps of Marines comes in after a few hours and wakes us roughly to escort us to
We collect ourselves and tie our hair neatly, checking our own clothes for loose pennants as we walk back to the main foyer of the house. I review my report in my head, mouthing the words to myself until the Commodore’s office door swings open and Hazelwood meets us, stout and stocky, eyes dark and narrowed and a turned-up nose. “A report from Washington or are you more boys come to march off with my men for Colonel Smith?”

Hamilton visibly tenses at my side, eyes narrowing, “...a report,” he says tersely.

I lock my hands behind my back and give a short bow of my head, “Sir, we carry intelligence that General Howe’s personal aide is dispatched to New York to collect forty-five hundred troops from General Clinton and a fleet from the harbor in Boston. His Excellency desires you to enhance your fortifications as necessary and dispatch for whatever acquisitions you need.”

For a long moment, I’m met with silence and the Commodore stares just beyond my shoulder, expression unreadable and unamused. I shift on my feet uneasily—debating whether I should speak again.

Hamilton relieves the silence, “Would you have a response for His Excellency? We shall return to him tonight—”

“Tell Washington this,” Hazelwood says brusquely, “I’ve only got a hundred rounds left in my stock and a bloody Lieutenant Colonel opposing my orders at every turn—” beside me, Hamilton’s shoulders push back and his chin raises near defiance. “I want no more officers from the army and I require a reasonable supply of shot if I’m to hold this river.”

Before Hamilton can speak, I say carefully, “And sir, how many rounds do you consider ‘reasonable’?”

WE COLLECT OUR HORSES from the stable house on the far inland redoubt, checking our riding packs are untouched and loading our saddles and bags onto their backs. There’s nothing to speak about as we move, though I can still sense the frustration in Hamilton’s posture, indignant with our treatment by the Commodore. He doesn’t complain to me.

Rationally, I know that Hazelwood did not mean to frisk our pride, but I cannot help feeling the same. It seems like a tactical disadvantage for a commander to be so rude to leaders of a service that would provide aid. I cannot imagine Lieutenant Colonel Smith enjoys his position with the navy.

We’ve ridden upriver several miles when I spy the flotilla in the distance, ships set aflame to frighten the British, and the low thud of cannon explosions off-shore. We stop our horses over a ledge to watch.

“Did you truly consider yourself for naval service?” Hamilton says, brows drawn.

I glance over, surprised by the question having nearly forgotten that I’d mentioned it, “Never with any conviction…” I say, giving a shrug and because the air between us feels tense, I add lightly, “I mostly wanted to fight pirates.”

He laughs, just a breath through his nose, and shakes his head.

We fall silent again.
My horse shifts uneasily.

THE WAMPOLE HOUSE is quiet when we return, stable our horses and bring our traveling bags inside. His Excellency’s valet is already awake and arranging our stations at the desk. I had not realized the hour, but it seems we rode through the night.

“Ah, good- you’ve reported, Colonel.”

Before Hamilton can remove his satchel or follow Billy up the stairs to report to the General as ordered, our attention is disrupted by a visitor. Seated behind Washington’s desk, Brigadier General Conway pushes himself to his feet and steps towards the aides table.

“And Lieutenant Colonel Laurens- allow me to congratulate you for your promotion,” he says coldly, giving a slimy smile that has my lips curling in response. “You must have been so eager for the recognition.”

I don’t thank him.

Hamilton throws him a weary look and removes his bag, walking to his seat to set it over the back of his chair, “Um...good morning, sir,” he says mildly. “We’ve honestly not reported yet, but I’ll return as soon as I’ve seen His Excellency and I’ll be glad to help you with whatev-”

“If you’re on your way upstairs now, I’ll accompany you,” Conway says. “I have a message for General Washington himself,” he patted his pocket proudly as if this should be grand news and not a mundane declaration in our office.

Every line of Hamilton’s posture screams repressed frustration. I wonder if he’s shared foul experiences with the Brigadier General as well- he doesn’t seem fond of the man. “Sir, His Excellency doesn’t take unannounced visitors to his room, but I’ll be sure to tell him you’re here or I may carry the message for you if it’s urgent.”

“It is urgent, so I should deliver it myself.”

“...Of course, if the message contains sensitive information- that you believe I would not be privy to- you may wait here,” Hamilton says, and I recognize smugness in his tone, doubt that any information would be secret to him, “but I will warn you, the General takes some time to rouse at this hour.”

“I don’t have time to waste in waiting-”

“Then you can give me the message to carry upstairs.”

“Or I could come with you.”

“Not possible- I’ve said, Washington doesn’t take guests into his room.”

“Then bring him down at once.”

“I’ve told you, it takes time-”

“And I’ve told you, Colonel.”

From the other side of the table, I see Hamilton’s eyes flick to Conway’s pocket and his tongue brush out to wet his lips in some consideration. He relents. “Right, yes sir- I’ll bring him at once, I’m sure mister Laurens will keep you good company while you wait- of course,” he looks down to continue
the task of arranging his papers over the desk, moving about busily- more than necessary, passing behind Conway more than once.

I’ve navigated enough cities to recognize wandering hands...

The Brigadier General is too distracted with the suggestion to notice Hamilton brushing the side of his coat, instead fixing me with a disgruntled look. I narrow my eyes and try to quell my own growing vanity for watching Conway disrespect our station; It must vex him to see me promoted- as will this prank, I’m sure…

Hamilton’s clever fingers slip a small envelope from Conway’s pocket and tuck it neatly beneath a pile of blank stationery. He knows that I see him- expects me to keep Conway distracted from the letter, but-

“Or he could come with you upstairs as he asked, Ham,” I suggest, tone polite. “You could make company outside Washington’s room- so long as you don’t disturb him, I’m sure he wouldn’t mind it- and I’m sure the Brigadier General would appreciate getting out of this office.”

The wolfish smile that Hamilton gives me as he retreats from the stolen note conveys his gratitude as he agrees and ushers Conway upstairs with him.

Once their voices disappear, I step around the table and untuck the letter from the stationary, turning it over to read the address. It’s a note from General Gates.

IT’S DIFFICULT to repress a smirk as the Brigadier General comes rushing back down the stairs a few moments later- just as the other aides are beginning to come take up their stations. Hamilton and Washington trail behind him, expressions impatient and Washington keenly aggravated.

“Sir, you have my word- it was in this pocket!” he says, coming into the office and disturbing the aides who have already begun sorting their correspondence.

Hamilton and the General stop in the doorway to watch him search the pile of letters, “You should keep better account of your parcels- especially when they have important information,” Hamilton says helpfully, face schooled perfectly neutral and arms folded imperatively over his chest.

I cough down a laugh, clearing my throat and pushing a hand to my lips to cover it.

Hamilton looks at me.

The joke’s been had already, so I drop my hand from my mouth, smile erased, “Ahum, sir,” I glance down and pick up the letter, hold it out to him. “This was on the desk when you left…”

GENERAL GATES has had another victory in New York and expects to force the British into a surrender on favorable terms very soon. Naturally, the boys expect this news will result in an early dismissal from our work so we might join the celebrating, but Washington won’t hear it. And I’m glad- there’s too much to be done.

We work through the day and I spend my time explaining Commodore Hazelwood’s demands to His Excellency, working to make arrangements to accommodate those needs, writing orders to move munitions and provide provisions.
To lessen my load, Hamilton takes the letters from my pile, addressed from the Marquis de Fleury. I didn’t ask for the assistance but I don’t deny it either. My body is sore from riding and it would be simple to just lay my head on the desk and sleep for a few hours- I’m sure the exhaustion shows in the quality of my writing and he is right to relieve me.

In fact, Hamilton is right in every way he treats me throughout the day, perfectly polite and good-humored. But, the strange tension that had pulled between us at Fort Mifflin has not left my notice and it has not lessened at all. I cannot define it- as it would seem nothing is wrong, but he doesn’t harass my legs for attention or lean towards me while we write, he doesn’t steal my ink when his runs out, his witty comments are directed to the office as a whole and he doesn’t sneak purposeful glances at me over his quill.

I’ve truly joined the ranks of my fellow aides, included in their banter and pranks, and Hamilton is...jarringly distant.
The Mifflin Maneuver

You weaken your love and you hold it above your head

THE CAMP RATIONS have grown sparse enough that, on most nights, General Washington’s staff makes a journey from headquarters, into the Towamencin Township proper to share supper, but as the happy news has arrived from General Gates in Saratoga, the boys would all rather attend their own celebration around the Wampole house hearth, drink themselves stupid, sleep heavily and regret whatever comes in the morning.

I remain at the table as they leave the office, bringing a fresh sheet of parchment to begin a letter to my father. I’ve neglected his concern for too long, leaving him only with a brief account of last week’s engagement and a censored description of my injuries, simply a note to assure him I’d preserved. He always did hate my silences- nearly as much as he hated my hasty notes, but there’s some comfort in the thought that he’ll be glad to hear from me, and with the office silent, the timing is ideal for me to write with consideration to his interests, to compose a description of my affairs that will please him.

I think that I need that.

Now- more than ever- I could benefit from his pragmatism. He remains the only friend who’s known me through the years and kept me all the same, and though I know he does this believing that he knows his real son, I now feel closer to the man he’d love to make me, honest and focused, aloof of distractions…

...besides this dejection- to feel so bereft of feeling.

As we had ridden from Fort Mifflin this morning, Hamilton’s coldness had brought a strange disturbance in my chest that I can now understand as disappointment. I had spent weeks, desiring his friendship so fiercely- almost spitefully, that some part of me still clings to the victory of his acceptance, but it’s that same piece that reveled in rejecting his treaties, demanded reparations and now scoffs at his retreat. It shouldn’t sting to have my own warnings heeded, but I feel the loss of his warmth like the fading slip of amusement after a joke’s been had and no longer provides any mirth, a half-content hum that stretches to silence and is gone...or the aftermath of a battle with no decisive winner.

I have no right to feel disappointed, so I don’t feel anything.

I dip my quill in my inkpot, shifting my fingers and pursing my lips. My father would assure me that these fears would not prevent me from pressing forward at my station. He would remind me that our nation beckoned me to return with great expectations and great need. At the least, I’m sure he would confirm that the whole affair is foolish and I shouldn’t spend hours questioning- have I loved deeply enough to merit being loved?

I’ve barely loaded my quill with ink when a pewter plate hits the table, heavy by my right arm, piled with boiled potatoes and meat. I jolt, eyes tracing up the length of arm that placed the meal to meet the gaze of His Excellency himself.

“May I?” he says, voice low, glancing down at the open seat across from me. He gives a slight, rare smile, especially warm for him and he carries a second plate for himself.
“O-of course,” I scramble to accommodate his company, tugging my arm uncomfortably in haste to move my papers out of his way.

As he sits gracefully, posture perfect, and takes up his silverware, I’m struck abruptly with a flustered bewilderment to have his attention. Since coming to work in this office, I had never shared a room with the General alone, much less dined with him outside parties where many officers ate at once. His Excellency always seems to have a crowd of advisors.

I fumble for something to say, afraid I may start gaping, “I was just writing to my father,” I set aside the quill to accept the fork he placed on the plate.

“Oh?”

“Yes, I...haven’t given him an account of the battle yet- he likes to know my opinions.”

The General is quiet for a long moment after this declaration, looks down at his plate and meticulously carves his potatoes into small bites. “He must be worried for you,” he says carefully, loading his fork.

“I...yes,” I say, lifting my injured arm as far as the pain will allow. “I’d like to dispel his worries and inform him of my happy appointment.” It’s only after this has left my mouth that Harrison’s words come to mind- my true purpose. It’s loathsome to me, but...if it will please the General, “He should know that your army fought well- despite our disadvantages…”

His Excellency nods, and the office descends into silence. My mind scrambles for something to say, but has become remarkably, embarrassingly blank in the esteemed General’s company. I focus my attention on the meal he brought and we chew in silence for several minutes.

Making company among great men had never unnerved me like this- I had seen the face of the King, made conversation with Benjamin Franklin, charmed all my father’s friends. If my patriarch were here, he would nudge me to share some anecdote that would bring him pride or amusement, he would guide the conversation beyond my awkward solemnity and assist me in displaying my best merits. In his absence, I had learned how to frame myself accordingly. But, I cannot be an ornament here and I know not how to compare myself to the men Washington keeps...

The General dabs his mouth with his napkin and sets it aside before speaking, “Will you convey a note from me to your father?” he says.

I nod at once. “Yes, sir, of course.”

He nearly smiles.

“But...sir?”

He raises a brow.

“I’d like to tell him of the appointment in my own words.”

Washington does smile then, tight-lipped, more an expression in his eyes, “Of course.”

We continue eating in more-or-less comfortable silence. Occasionally, some small pleasantry will occur to me and I’ll speak, the General will respond, and we fall silent again. I have never considered myself a slow diner, but General Washington finishes his meal almost rudely quick, faster than I could have imagined for the small polite bites he took. He sits in obvious contemplation before speaking plain and his thoughts have gathered my anticipation.
“I was...dismayed by your request yesterday,” he says.

“I…” stunned by the onset of dread and shame, I realize he must mean Hamilton’s guidance, my selfish ineptitude that pulled his best man from his office simply because I didn’t know the way and lacked the skill to find it.

The General doesn’t expect me to respond. He continues, “I am glad that you asked for help when you perceived it necessary, but...I am disappointed that you questioned your own capabilities and saw fit to defy your orders. If I give you a task, I expect you to carry it out. That’s your job.”

Throat impossibly tight, I choke, “Yes, sir.”

His voice softens, “You must trust me to make your assignments,” he says. “If I have faith in you, you must trust my judgment.”

I swallow around the tightness and nod in understanding. I can recognize a scolding when I receive one, but the General’s expression is neutral, lacking all the hardness that his words should imply and I’m struck with a strange confidence despite them. When he explains my actions in that way, I cannot believe I had ever questioned his judgement- the gall.

I’m staring down at my plate when a weathered hand touches my knuckles and draws me to lift my eyes, “You’re not in trouble, son,” he says, brows raised in amusement.

The knot doesn’t budge from my throat.

“In fact, I’m quite impressed with the skills you brought,” he continues. “I...was not aware that you knew methods of extracting information from prisoners. That’s a useful practice, if I had known...”

Before he can accredit me unduly, I say, “Sir, I wasn’t trained for it, I just...talked to him. I doubt I could repeat the performance if I tried it. I studied diplomacy and politics but never in any context of interrogation.”

The General’s lips pinch in contemplation and he folds his hands, “Well, perhaps this...education you so benefitted from might assist in our dilemmas within the capital.”

“Sir?”

“Of course, our most important priority remains the defense of the Delaware River but, as long as we deprive the city of provisions, those prisoners still held inside starve while rations are spent on British regulars. Major Tallmadge has collected numerous reports outlining the cruelties they endure. I dispatched a commissioner yesterday to begin negotiations that Congress has approved, but...they have not approved all that we need and they have been too sparing in the number of officers they’re willing to exchange.”

“I could...write to my father- and other congressmen- of these atrocities and the importance of approving these exchanges…” Its a suggestion, but I know it’s the one he expects.

He nods minutely, “You could,” and should.

And I will.

The General gives a satisfied nod as if he can see this intent on my face, but he doesn’t make an order. He could- and he should, but he shirks from the decision. “Or you could tell them to pray that horrid river freezes soon and detracts one of our worries, at least,” he says, tone falsely light.

“Perhaps then it would be pleasant to hear from Hazelwood, accounts of their ships bobbing in
confusion to avoid ice.”

I laugh politely, “Yes, sir.”

The General goes silent again, resuming his unearthly stillness. He watches my plate while I take another bite. “How much do you speak with your father about the happenings in Congress?”

Stabbing another cut of potato, “I...hear it when he’s displeased,” I admit, “beyond that, I hear only what he believes pertains to my interest.”

“I’d like you to show your interest,” he says abruptly, cold blue stare intense. “The majority of that body desires this army to make another attack for the capital.”

I nod, swallowing hastily. “I know, sir. I-” I hesitate a moment, but the General meets my eyes. Harrison had warned me that this would be my purpose, and Hamilton had prepared me at every opportunity, telling me his suspicions of General Gates. I’m wise enough to recognize my General’s predicament, and I say, “I truly believe it’s absurd.”

He raises both brows.

“To expect such a decision of you- at expense of your reputation. Were it my command, I’d make an attack, of course, I want nothing more than to reclaim our city at any cost, but...we don’t have the means- and you cannot afford the cost.”

It feels wrong to suggest inaction, but my frustrations have gathered for too long and Washington doesn’t stop me.

So, I press on, “Asking you to lead an attack is asking you to embarrass yourself. We barely have enough ammunitions to stock our forts on the Delaware, much less to lead an assault, the men’s endurance suffers without warm clothes, then there’s Foreman and Potter’s militia contracts expiring- men are leaving in droves and Congress cannot even present a viable plan to resupply our numbers.”

The only system proposed was the enumeration plan, dividing each county into militia districts and calling on an allotment of white men to serve for two months. What it failed to recognize is men that serve for two months make unfit soldiers- even if they support the cause...but, more than anything, “We need Continental troops,” I say.

The General is still as ever. His mouth barely moves when he says, “Yes. I agree.”

And I barrel onwards with permission, “And, it must be Continentals- before we make any attack- or it would send an unfavorable message. My father likes to prefer a militia, but at least he knows the idea is fanciful- General Gates has been so successful in New York solely because his army is composed almost entirely of trained Continentals, but there are men in Congress who ignore this fact in support of their argument that we no longer need a standing army- and I’m sure there are other, even more treacherous characters who would use our campaign as an experiment to prove the value of a militia...who knows what it may have meant to their beliefs if we had succeeded with so many transitory troops.” Coming into a realization as I speak, I add, “It’s almost as if, whatever actions we take, victory or loss, our outcomes will give precedence to the arguments of foolish politicians.”

Abruptly, General Washington laughs.

I hadn’t been joking...

But, he says, “You are your father’s son- though perhaps more readily informed.”

I can nearly hear it in his voice, implied beyond his fondness- how useful that will be. I set down my
fork, pressing down the swell of pride that would have me smiling like a foolish child. “So, what do we do sir?” I ask, “We cannot risk another loss in this campaign while General Gates has been so fortunate in the north. It reflects unfavorably on you...”

The General considers me, lips thin, “We explain our situation honestly,” he says simply. “The outcome at Germantown wasn’t a reflection of my leadership or my army. It is possible to do everything right and still lose...that’s not a reflection of our own weakness. That’s the folly of life.”

I can sense that this wisdom is gravely imparted, but something in me rejects it, refuses to begin understanding, “Sir, if you want to keep the support of Congress, we should protest our weaknesses so that they may correct them and see you successful. The outcome at Germantown was a reflection of our army. Its deficiencies hinder us- and Congress needs to-”

“Congress needs to believe that I will win this war. That’s all I require,” the General says softly. “If I have their faith then I will have their support- nothing loses faith faster than attempting to justify one’s failures by accusing others of failing them.” My mouth clicks shut.

“Do not worry for my reputation, son. I know I’m well-kept in the hands of those who know me.”

The General’s expression is unmoving, but I can feel awe overtaking my own, to be in the presence of my nation’s greatest man is one thing- to experience his wisdom first-hand is another. It seems I’ve done nothing but question him and yet still, here he sits, patient. He goes silent again and lowers his eyes, reaching across the table and picking up my finished plate before I can protest it; he stacks the dish with his own and sets them aside. Washington is such a quiet man that I still cannot fight my own flattery to be receiving his attention, and I wonder if he’s speaking to me for lack of better company.

Until, “But, in your confidence, I’ll say...it would be nice if all men shared your concern for our...deficiencies,” he says. “I’ll be glad to rely on your counsel. And, among these things, I wanted to assure you that your good name is safe.”

“I…” don’t understand his meaning, but I am flattered and I can see that he is collecting himself to retire from the office, so I say, “thank you, sir?”

The question in my tone seems to surprise His Excellency and he takes a moment to adjust, settles back into his seat and collects a response before he explains, “Sometimes I forget the isolation that this office keeps you in. See, there is...a congressman from Philadelphia by the name of Benjamin Rush who has taken to...openly criticising the engagement at Germantown. His complaints...seem to blame the fight at the Chew house, alluding that it was unnecessary and a wasted effort that damned the whole battle.”

A sharp dread strikes me and I feel my posture slouch in shock. The name is familiar, not one that I’d easily forget. Benjamin Rush represented Philadelphia on our Declaration of Independance, I had read the names over and over to commit them to memory...and one thinks me a military idiot. Before I can place my panic for what it is, Washington says, “Of course, Mister Rush knows nothing of the engagement and he is obviously taking the word of others who understand little of what happened that day. Allowing a stronghold at Cliveden to remain in our rear would have been tactical suicide...but, it is unfortunate that Rush is influential enough to sway others’ opinions.”

The clawing fear grips my chest tighter- as if my lungs are pressed in a fist.
“For your good name, I will keep your influence in my decisions detached from the event, of course,” he says and I’m unsure whether to feel flattered or horrified, “as well as Major White’s and Lieutenant Colonel Hamilton’s.”

I don’t know how to respond before I begin speaking, but the words come nonetheless, “It was my suggestion though.”

“And it was unanimously agreed upon.”

“By your subordinates, not you.” I can speak for myself, and because he cannot- I’ll speak for John White, but, “I don’t think Hamilton will shirk responsibility and I know that I won’t- he had wanted to fight that day and this was my assignment. We don’t want our decisions to reflect badly on you.”

“Your decisions were sound,” Washington says.

“Sir, my decisions were rash!”

“But they were decisive.”

I recoil. I want to shout in sudden frustration, and it occurs to me. Before I traveled to meet His Excellency in Philadelphia, I held a conversation with my father, spoke on matters we had discussed only in letters- mostly personal matters regarding my marriage without his consent, but he spoke of his feelings towards our Commander in Chief. He feared that ‘a good heart may be too diffident, too apprehensive’. In a lesser man, I would fear apprehension as a dodge of accountability, but…

Don’t worry for my reputation, son.

Your friends expect to see Jack Laurens the Man of Honor.

You are going to be the Voltaire of your Province.

For my father’s sake if not for my own, I have to relent, to accept my General’s defence and hide in the protection of his robust reputation. Glancing up to Washington’s eyes, he must see that I know it. He gives a small nod and I press my lips together in discomfort. In a way, it would reflect just as poorly for Washington to have taken bad counsel than to have made a bad decision.

“Well, I appreciate your discretion, sir,” I say carefully, “But, I doubt that Hamilton would thank you.”

General Washington nods as if he’d already considered this. “He may not thank me now, but someday he will be glad for my keeping him from the field.”

The thought of Alexander Hamilton accepting the General’s protection gladly- and thanking him for it- is nearly laughable. It’s a wonder that Washington has kept his aide on staff for so many months without learning his most basic desires. “Respectfully, sir…I’m not sure you know him as well as you’d like to think…”

“Mister Laurens, I’m not sure anyone truly knows him,” Washington says firmly, smiling even while his voice goes deep and dour, disarming. “But, that is precisely why he’s useful to me…”

I RETIRE FROM THE OFFICE particularly troubled- by General Washington’s unsettling words, by the purpose of the letter I had just written, by my own eagerness to write it. Tucked in my coat pocket, the piece of parchment feels like a lead weight. Would my father perceive its motive?
Would he see my enthusiastic praises for the General and realize the reason for my appointment…?

It’s humiliating enough to know that the other aides know it. I shudder to imagine my father’s blighted hopes- to receive word of his son’s proud office and, in the same stroke, the farce of merit that had placed him there.

“Laurens!”

I startle, bumping the back of my head on the low door frame and stepping back with a wince. The voices of the boys, still awake and drinking, drifts muffled through the house, and I recover, squinting into the darkened hallway until candlelight reveals my ambusher, “Meade? Dear God…”

He laughs at my skittishness, ignoring my concern with a flushed grin, “Finally you emerge!” he says, grabbing my wrist and pulling me into the hall, around the corner towards the illuminated den. “We sav’d you the rum, but I’m afraid Fitz found the claret and tha’s gone already.”

It takes no time to realize that I will, inevitably, be pulled to join their small party, so I give my indulgent surprise. “Already…”

“Well, if you hadn’t burrowed yourself in your papers all night, there may’ve been wine in’t for you too.” Meade’s quick words tie together drunkenly and I resist his pull half-heartedly, concentrating my efforts to avoid tripping over his haphazard strides. The tent I have been sharing with Tallmadge is a short walk away from headquarters and I would truly prefer to make the trip before my exhaustion discourages it, but there’s a sharp determination in the strength of his grip and I don’t quite have the heart to protest.

He leads me into the Wampole’s sitting room where all the aides are lounged on chairs around the hearth in varying states of disarray, coats discarded and boots untied. The underlying tone of stiff professionality that usually holds their posture is shed away like another layer of clothing, and the comfortable laughter feels nostalgic of a tavern on Market Street, but altogether more intimate. I step through the door behind Meade and the room falls abruptly quiet.

My eyes move instinctively to find dark red hair, a lithe, elegant figure. I’m surprised to see him here- celebrating a victory for General Gates, but Hamilton is turned to face Tilghman, half-sprawled on a lady’s wide sofa with his vest unbuttoned and cravat untied. When the room comes to my attention, he turns and meets my eyes and I’m caught, unbalanced.

He breaks the gaze without a smile, turns back to his conversation.

The tension in me coils. But, the moment must pass without notice. Meade completes his task, pulling me to a sofa between Walker and Fitzgerald and releasing me there to sit obediently while he gathers a glass from the cabinet table. I don’t lean back. I feel overdressed and uneasy with my brothers on staff slouched around me, Hamilton ignoring me, Fitzgerald leaning his weight forward against my side as if he’d ‘found’ all the claret down his throat alone.

I find my voice before Meade can pour me a drink, “I shouldn’t…”

He glances at me from the cabinet.

And, so as not to seem rude, I explain, “We all have work tomorrow morning and I’ve to walk back to my tent, so-”

I move to stand up, but Fitzgerald’s legs drop into my lap, baring me down.

I huff, “So, I should retire to bed while I still have the strength to make the walk.”
This earns a laugh from behind me.

Meade just smiles, “None of us plan t’make that walk, Laurens…” he says, admonishing.

My brow draws.

But, before I can ask the question, a low snore rumbles from my right and I turn to find Walker’s head tilted back, tucked into the armrest of the sofa, fast asleep. My dawning realization- that they intend to sleep here- brings more laughter from Fitzgerald and catches Tilghman and Harrison’s attention. They don’t seem to find it as amusing as our Irish brothers, and Hamilton keeps his back turned.

Meade waits for my answer and I consider- it may be warmer to sleep in the Wampole house, gathered with the other aides by the hearth. The chill outside brings aches to my injuries, and it will be nice to have quick assistance in dressing and tying my queue. Shrewsberry takes some time to arrive as I tend to wake earlier than his time to wake me, and staying in the house would relieve me the walk back to headquarters in the morning. Nonetheless, “I’m not thirsty…”

“Ah, don’t be such a bloody Yankee!” Tilghman snaps.

And, I recoil at his abruptly harsh tone. “I’m...from South Carolina.”

Fitzgerald’s hand at my shoulder squeezes near my neck and he laughs, “He’s teasing your puritan sobriety, lad. Have a drink.”

That doesn’t ease my weariness. But, the glass of rum that finds its way into my hands is a good start.

AS I DRINK and sink into the thrum of conversation, for the first time in weeks, I’m glad to have a distraction besides work. Sharing poems and songs, humorous stories and adages, laughing and talking over one another, we don’t speak of our experiences in battle, and while I’m nearly the youngest on staff, chosen for this office to make friends of my father, I don’t feel that the other boys think less of my opinions. With some coaxing, I talk about our campaigns, about similar battles in history, the holes in our training, the holes of our chain of command; I compare my studies in Europe, the training I’d received abroad, the merits of learning to fence for sport before battle. Meade and Fitzgerald emanate acceptance, as they always have, but even Harrison indulges loose smiles when I offer taunts against the King.

Tilghman is still abruptly hostile, but he eases into the conversation when Hamilton joins it and brings a piece of newspaper into the center of the room, taking a seat on the floor with it. He presses the paper flat for all the boys to see, “Commissioner Boudinot arrived in the city today and sends his regards,” he says, “Philadelphia Paper, enclosed in a letter from the interior.”

Hamilton drops ungracefully to the floor first, and he braces himself on one arm, leaning over the news and pouring over its headlines. I follow at his side, ignoring the way his shoulders stiffen, and his focus is disrupted by my presence. As the other aides join us around the paper, he dives into a reflexive attack on the author’s writing, perceiving the message of the article instantly and turning his humor against the intellect of person who had written it.

His words drift to my periphery as I read, a published account of the numbers of rebel prisoners that the British are holding. The language of the article provides a sickening loyalist spin on the circumstance, explaining the burden that those prisoners place on the occupying royal general to feed
“It’s only a matter’a time before they’re all on parole,” Tilghman says, “just like the minutemen that got captured back in ‘seventy-five.”

A low rumble of agreement goes through the room and I look up, “What do you mean?”

Five sets of eyes fall on me in unison as if they had forgotten that I’ve never been further north. I regret speaking.

To my surprise, Hamilton responds patiently, “As long as the British doubt that our soldiers are a threat, keeping them prisoner is more a burden than a prize,” he says, and explains, “After the battle at Lexington, General Putnam went to perform an exchange of prisoners on his own authority.” He brushes a stray lock of hair away from his cheek, still averting my eyes. “Reportedly, the affair was performed with all formality to the pleasure of both sides.”

“Boy, you weren’t even a Regular yet- believe me, there was no pleasure in it,” Harrison says shaking his head. He takes a drink and sets his glass on the floor, “I joined His Excellency’s staff just in time for the letters to begin arriving on the affair.”

“Was Washington upset with the exchange?” Hamilton says, brow drawing, and I’m not sure- but it may be the first time I’ve seen him admit ignorance to another officer.

Harrison gives a sigh before explaining, “One of our militia officers, Colonel Allen, was taken aboard the Gaspee and confined hands and feet in irons, crammed below deck with the common criminals. The general of his unit had protested it and demanded his release for parole. Royal officers refused to recognize his military authority. Colonel Allen had a family, people that loved him to write their protests, and the matter made it to our Commander in Chief’s office within three months.”

“General Washington heard complaints for one little militia colonel?” Meade says, expression obviously stunned. “He had time for that?”

“His situation reflected a common injustice,” Harrison explains, laughing wryly. “He was not the first or last of our officers to be mistreated, regular or militia- and not mentioning the treatment of soldiers. His Excellency took the opportunity to act for this one man on behalf of the whole of our suffering.”

The boys are silent in respect of Mister Harrison’s story, but as he says this, a few looks of understanding pass over the older men’s faces, Tilghman, Meade- Walker snores a little quieter.

“I transcribed a polite message for General Howe, explaining that this treatment had placed us in a position of necessity to retaliate the same upon their highest-ranking officer that we held, a Brigadier General Frescott,” Harrison says, “We believed this would be the best, to place ourselves on equal grounds. When the matter was taken to King George, he proclaimed his colonies to be in rebellion and ordered the army to condign punishment to anyone found in arms against the established government- as if we didn’t already have one of our own.”

“Luckily, General Howe has a better idea of how an army behaves,” Tilghman says, interjecting, and his praise of our enemy surprises me. He says, “Wasn’t the order to exchange ‘officer for officer of equal rank, soldier for soldier, citizen for citizen’?”

“Indeed,” Harrison says with a nod.

From my right, Fitzgerald slurs, “They’d still got five thousand when we had three, but some’s better
than none."

The aides go silent and seem in agreement.

I’m shaking my head between them, “No…” I adjust on my knees to relieve the strain of sitting on my feet, “It’s not better! That proclamation should’ve come from the King himself- and if Howe understood our army well enough to respect it, he’d make good on his order and exchange in equal numbers!”

Tilghman’s eyes roll and Harrison's brows are approaching his hairline. Fitzgerald snickers.

And, Hamilton says, “We never had equal numbers to trade…”, smiling as if it’s obvious. “Additionally, Washington kept having to exchange prisoners on terms to regain lost members of prominence- like General Lee.”

I’m appalled that Hamilton, of all people, would agree with this complicity. “I’ve read the accounts,” I say, “we took more than three-thousand in New York last year-”

“And were compelled to give up more than were due, yes,” Hamilton says.

I feel his eyes on me from the left and I turn to meet his stare, “Then you should’ve followed through on Washington’s threat!”

“Treat their prisoners as they treat ours?” Hamilton’s brows raise and he grins at my foolishness as if he believes I’m joking. “And lose any chance of being regarded as a valid army? Don’t forget- we're rebels, Laurens.” My first thought is to roil with indignance, but as soon as the words have left my mouth, I realize their stupidity and appreciate his faith that I wouldn’t mean them.

The other aides sense Hamilton’s amusement and laugh along and I have a strong urge to get up and bolt from the room. My face feels hot from drink and humiliation, “It’s not the proper way of doing an exchange,” I grumble, flustered. “Bartering deals and weaseling out of agreements…”

“And it’s exactly what we should expect of Philadelphia,” Harrison says coolly. “Along with His Excellency’s ripe temper for having to endure it.”

I scoff but would sooner shove my fist into my mouth than continue embarrassing myself.

Meade’s grinning, deeply amused with my disdain, “Poor boy, who strapped you up to a spontoon and drilled out God’s good lenience?”

“I…” my mouth goes slack and I blink out my confusion. “Alright, what does that mean?”

Fitzgerald’s arm drapes over my shoulder and musses my hair. “He means t’say you’re a perfectionist who took it a little too personal each time his wrist got slapped at boarding school-”

“I didn’t go to…” I shirk off his arm. “I never got my wrist slapped.”

This does nothing to dim the Irishman’s grin, “Ah- see, boys, case closed. He is perfect!”

At my left, Hamilton pushes to his feet casually, glass in hand, “I’ve been telling you all along.”

And I reel, glaring, feeling vaguely like I’m being had for their amusement, “I’m not a perfectionist,” I say. But, is that truly what I mean? I’m too drunk to tell.

“Says the one wee hair standing escaped from your queue. Oh, Laurens, if the rest of us were graced with your perfect dignity, the world around you would be so much less cruel wouldn’t it?”
I shove Fitzgerald at my right. "Oh shut it!"

“It's not an insult,” Meade says, his amused smile growing warmer, “If Fitz had avoided the switch, he’d be bragging about it.”

“Ey!”

“We’re saying you are a fine man, Laurens, a pleasure on staff,” Meade says. “Beyond any of our expectations. Isn't that right, Hammy?”

At the cabinet, Hamilton is focusing all of his considerable concentration on pouring himself another glass of brandy without spilling the bottle in drunken clumsiness. “You already know my judgement of his character,” he says without looking up.

Meade all but cackles at some humor in this response, “That we do! And a good judgment as always.” He leans towards me, “No one keeps more careful friends than Hammy.”

“Of course,” Hamilton says simply, picking up his glass and drawing his posture aright. His shirt is loose at the collar, revealing a stretch of skin above his chest, and stretching open wider when he places a haughty hand on his hip. “Those I keep dearest should be held in the highest regard. My friendship belongs with no less than the finest gentlemen.” He means to sound jokingly arrogant and holds his glass in a mockery of a toast, but something in his words feels too honest when he meets my eyes and pulls his gaze away too fast, breaking the veneer of haughtiness.

The room feels too spacious and quiet.

Perhaps sensing the awkward tension- or perhaps too drunk to realize no toast was being made, Fitzgerald lifts his glass as well.

After a moment, every man is raising his drink to Hamilton who shifts back on his feet, unbalanced. He catches the cabinet with his hand and steadies himself and he forces his eyes to mine. I realize I haven’t lifted my glass and do so. Something clicks.

“But...we’re drinking tonight, not to discuss our own thoughts of each other, boys. If you want a toast...tonight, we drink to success!” he roars, raising his glass so aggressively the brandy within sloshes dangerously, his stance spread like a dare against nature to make him fall. “To self-determination! To virtue, sovereignty of our own merit!” I startle at the force of his voice, some inspiration jolting in my chest. “To no wasted opportunity, no story untold, no fear, no regret! Let us taste all the glories liberty can offer, all the love and pain- whether we accept these in pride or shame, let us never face them with indifference! Let no man look back upon these days and consider a single chance he missed, a single wrong he didn’t strive to right. And, let him know, when the smoke clears and the stifling air flows clean, that he gave all he possibly could- and it was enough.”

Five glasses raise higher, but Hamilton presses on. The steady flood of discourse had kept my engagement flowing far from my worries, but when Hamilton forces the tide, I could drown in the sentiments he stirs.

I’m swept back in time when he speaks. Standing in the center of the room and posturing himself like royalty, he makes familiar declarations, blustering talk about empires and human rights, sharing immortal visions that would embarrass a man of lesser confidence. And I feel something deeply unsettling in the performance.

Because I’ve seen it before.

While he was trying to discard me as a lover.
Like a perverse reversal, he’s taken the magnanimous rhetoric meant for public speeches and corrupted it. He’s learned all the most effectively stirring words, and altered the way I receive them so that the patriotic swell in my breast that catches my breath and makes my heart clench with vigor now also feels intimately like flirtation...a very public seduction.

The fact that it’s not directed at me- or anyone in particular- only deepens my shame. As if I should have prevented this unsettling feeling.

As if I’m not the only one that’s suffering.

“To success of our cause in any form it takes- for whoever might seize it,” he says with a flourish. “But, moreover, to the men who strive tirelessly to achieve success in its purest virtue- the ones who truly deserve our recognition and yet work- not for the admiration of others, but for the liberation of others...to victory!”

A hard cheer goes through the room, though this is hardly the first speech Hamilton has made tonight and it’s not the longest delivered, less than half the length of the ramble he indulged us with about fine treatment his cock had seen while he acquisitioned in Philadelphia. He throws back his brandy and sways dangerously from his balance, but a moment later, Fitzgerald’s at his side, praising General Gates’s campaign and General Arnold’s performance at Freeman’s Farm.

I lose track of their conversation until they begin singing ‘Yankee Privateer’, and through Hamilton’s dreadful singing voice and the jibing lyrics of the song, I feel vaguely like I’m being mocked.

HAMILTON COLLAPSES in a drunken heap by the hearth with Fitzgerald draped over him, face pressed into the crook of his elbow. He had spent a good while on the floor, awake but unable to get back up, but it seems he’s finally drifted off. With his mouth lolled open gently and his cheeks flushed attractively, he should be as lovely in sleep as ever. It’s not the case. They make a pitiful picture, but something in his contorted posture has relieved Fitzgerald of his snoring, so no one dares to move them.

Meade brought a deck of cards to amuse himself and he and Tilghman are playing in the corner near the firelight. I can hear the rustle of the cards while I keep my eyes forcefully closed, searching for the exhaustion that had plagued me all day. I fear I may have outrun my own need for sleep.

“Laurens?”

My eyes lift too easily and I roll carefully back to face Harrison who has crouched behind my place on the floor. I move to sit up, struggling briefly onto one arm. “Sir?”

His lips press thin, considering his thoughts before saying, “Sorry if I’ve woken you- I wanted to apologize for having offended you the other day…”

My brows lurch in surprise.

“I did not mean to imply that your family connections were your only function to the General…” he says, “and I should have amended that implication sooner. I was concerned for your health, but I fear I hurt you more than I protected you.” His hand clasps my good shoulder, “You should feel honored by your appointment.”

My skin crawls under his reassurance but I resist the urge to shrug off his hand and say, “No...you were right.” Hearing the stories shared tonight, feeling the ostracization of a conversation in which I couldn’t take part, I can see how my best qualifications fall short of those of my brothers. They all
shared experiences in the war that I’ll never understand, shared time gaining prominence while I was held aloof and safe- time that I cannot get back. General Washington had no need to tell me as much aloud. “I was appointed to keep my father’s favor.”

Harrison’s face is edged with lines of his age that deepen with his frown, “But, that was not the only reason you were selected,” he says. “Do you believe you’re the only well-bred son of a congressman in the army?”

It hadn’t occurred to me.

“You came with more than just your father’s name, you know that,” he speaks low and clandestine, and if I didn’t know him better, I would say proud. “Mastery in four languages, an understanding of natural science, more extensive reading of warfare than any American officer of your rank. You never hesitated to make yourself an active part of our staff, shared an equal burden of our epistolary work, but beyond that, you’ve indulged us each personally to learn our interests and share them enthusiastically. Since the first day you volunteered, you’ve integrated yourself into our every function, and don’t think we haven’t noticed your absence in our conversations. You’ve said more tonight than I think I’ve heard you speak in a week.”

“I…I’m sorry if I’ve been distant.” Overwhelmed, I don’t know what to say; trying to recall these moments of great kindness and worthiness, but I’m blocked by disbelief- that anything I’d done these past two months had been notable. It seems that the boys have all been lavishing praises upon me...as if they believe I need them to bolster myself. I know why, “…I was troubled by the fate of my friend,” I say.

It’s not fully a lie. It’s certainly easier than accepting the compliments.

Nodding in understanding, Harrison gives a rare smile and squeezes my shoulder before removing his hand. “I know,” he says. “I know. What happened that day was not right. A lot of men died needlessly…” From the sympathy in his expression, I assume he has been told the gruesome nature of John’s death, “But, I want you to never feel obliged to return to work in such a state,” he glances at my slung right arm, “And I want you to feel entitled to come to any of us with your troubles. You’ve made a friend of everyone on staff,” his eyes move past me to where Hamilton and Fitzgerald are tangled in their drunken heap, “That’s not a simple task.”

He pauses for a response, but I have nothing to say.

His lips press thin and he studies my face as if he’d at least like to see some look of pride. He says, “I should thank you for resolving whatever tiff came between you and Hamilton. He was never a reserved man, but...he had certainly been holding back before you came, and something in you made him warmer to all of us. It was difficult to see you both so tied with regret.”

I believe Harrison is more drunk than his eloquence implies. And, I realize how I’ve defined myself among the aides- by making a friendship with a man who had always seemed unreachable. But, if Hamilton’s behavior today has been any indication, I’m sure I’ve insulted him more than resolved our divide.

As with all my ‘achievements’, I’m not sure I’ve done anything notable over my peers- it’s just as likely that Tilghman had freed Alexander’s reservations. They’ve been closer recently than they had been when I arrived. Presumably, they never spoke when I arrived. I recall Gilbert’s awe that Hamilton would attend a party, drink with his fellow aides, how surprised he had been to hear how unsociable Hamilton could be outside his work... It must be you- he likes you.

He doesn’t know me.
I shake my head, “I did nothing, sir,” I admit, glancing back to my estranged friend, “…he took care of himself.”

AS AFTER ANY VICTORY, our days pass in an effort to adjust our plans in accordance with the developments in the north. With General Gates’s claims of confidence against Burgoyne and Congress’s demand that we make one last stab for the capital, my suggestion to call for more Continentals from the northern army has become a common sentiment among the aides and the General’s guards.

Meade takes up my riding duties, and he doesn’t say it, but I suspect he does so in concern for my health. My injuries are healing infuriatingly slow, still weep and ooze two weeks after the bleeding’s stopped, but the surgeons insist that I’m progressing at a natural pace- that I simply expect too much too quickly.

It does not help that I cannot afford to rest. The engineering efforts along the Delaware River have been taken up by French officers and General Washington’s need for a translator has peaked. Most of the boys speak enough of the language to hold a conversation, but the nature of these letters is technical and descriptive, including uncommon vocabulary that even I struggle to recognize at times.

And, Hamilton keeps busier than ever.

I foresaw an improvement in my comfort when our headquarters moved to Dawsfield, a stately home with four beds for the aides to share. A real mattress would be a welcome comfort. But, as Gibbs, Tilghman, and Meade ride ahead to ready the house for our arrival, they take the first of two rooms, Mister Walker claims their second bed, and I’m left with Harrison, Fitzgerald, and Hamilton…

“You two may share of course,” Fitzgerald says, tossing his travel sack beside the thin older aide’s on the first bed, “since it’s been your habit.”

I open my mouth, but I bite back my protest as Hamilton strides into the room behind me, feet creaking on the floorboards.

“I have no qualms with that,” he says, giving me a hard look, eyes sharp under his brow, challenging.

“Of course,” I say and drop my bags on the bed resolutely. “Gladly.”

ON THE THIRD DAY of this arrangement, Hamilton has still yet to sleep in our shared bed.

Each day, while we worked, he’s carried a frantic energy, writing as fast as his quill allowed, keeping several tasks spread out before him at once and moving between pages of notes. Something in his posture, though it had lost the stiff formality it held when we first met, does not lend easily to casual intimacy, and I’m not the only aide who’s been leaving him alone with his studies.

Most nights we leave him sitting at the General’s table, continuing relentlessly at this pace.

One night, I saw him slip through the back door of the house with a lantern and disappear down the path into camp.
“Damn, I should have bunked with Ham,” Fitzgerald muses, pulling on his nightshirt and shaking his orange hair loose of its braid. I sit across from him on my empty bed, carefully working my boots off. The leather became saturated on the march to Brandywine last month and now they’re beginning to fall apart at the seams. Fitzgerald notices my one-handed struggle and grabs my foot to assist. “If I’d known he had a lady in the town, I’d have a bed all to myself right now.”

He throws me a hopeful look and I roll my eyes. “No.”

He pushes out his lip in a childish imitation of a pout, but the humor of it is lost on me. Beyond my strange and haunting dreams, I’ve slept more comfortably in the past three days than I had all month, and I’m eager for my injuries to heal. For this reason, having a bed to myself is not a privilege I’d readily relinquish. And, if Hamilton has found a lady to meet his needs for intimacy, I have every reason to support him—especially if I stand to benefit from his absence.

It’s just as likely that Hamilton’s been sleeping at his desk or on a sofa in the north parlor.

Either way, he’s withdrawn himself from the family once more. Bright and sociable during the day as he can discuss his duties, but absent in all other conversations outside work...absent entirely while we take rest. I can feel our competition resumed each time I take up my own pen. A stubborn halt in his retreat. If my friendship had liberated his affections in some way as Harrison implied, he has chained himself up again, and I cannot help but feel responsible for this as well. But, it’s no great revelation.

I entrap everyone in the end.

I RESUME RIDING whenever I may find an excuse for it. I miss the rush of wind on my cheeks and the steady thrum of a horse pounding the earth under my legs. Carrying letters back to headquarters has never seemed such a liberating task, but without my arm in a sling, I’m eager for the ride.

My pleased mood takes a turn when I receive the post and recognize the looping scrawl of the Marquis de Lafayette. It seems so long since I’ve seen his eager smile, I could almost discard him as a character of my imagination, but the shape of his writing brings my awareness back to his absence and it explains one piece of the empty pit in my chest. I recognize the feeling.

I miss him.

The letter is addressed to Hamilton.

I swallow the knot that forms in my throat and stable my horse as I reach Dawsfield, dismounting and setting a clipped pace up the front walk towards headquarters.

Before I can reach the door, a short figure is crouched near the stone steps at the front porch as I come round the house. Stepping closer, auburn hair glints gold underneath the trifold cover, reflecting the sun, “Hamilton,” I say, squinting down at him where he’s leaned over the dirt. “What...are you doing?”

He doesn’t look back, acknowledging my presence with a slight shift in his seat to show a soaked mound of dirt he’s prodding a stick into. “They’ve already begun rebuilding,” he says.

“What?” I take a step closer and lean to see what he’s hunched over.

It’s...an ant’s nest.
Dead ants are lying, drowned, in a halo of corpses framing the soggy dip in the soil like a heavy sprinkling of cracked pepper. He brushes those aside with his stick to make room for the surviving ants to continue their work, carrying lumps of clay back into the new pile, unperturbed by the swaths of their dead surrounding them on either side.

He watches their march, entranced. “It took a few minutes for the water to drain into the ground-then they emerged,” he says, “spent a few seconds carrying out their dead…before they just…” a far-away expression holds his face, and he motions vaguely with his free hand, eyes staring into the dark center of the flooded nest, “just...recommenced.”

His eyes are bloodshot, bruised under the lids when I lean closer and really look at him. He hasn’t been sleeping. That much is obvious. But, wasting time, prodding a stick into a flooded ants nest for amusement, this behavior...is anything but normal- even by his standards.

Tucking his favor from Lafayette under my arm and taking off my hat, I drop to sit on my ankles beside him, ignoring the direction of his attention and focusing on his face- where I’m most concerned, “Are you alright, sir?”

“Fitzgerald stepped into it when I came out of the office this morning,” he explains, eyes unmoving. “I threw a pail of water on him before they could start biting, but...I flooded the nest.”

I glance down at his offense, just briefly. The small mound of dirt must have already been destroyed by Fitzgerald’s stomping foot, but if he feels so responsible, “Poor luck,” I muse. “For both parties.”

He nods distractedly.

“But, as you said, they’re rebuilding.”

He nods again and goes quiet for a minute and I follow his gaze, trying to see whatever’s so fascinated him. When he speaks, it’s a distantly familiar tone, as if he’s possessed, caught in some web of thought that’s still invisible to me. “I used to watch these creatures at work and imagine men in their place,” he says softly, touching his twig to the ground long enough to collect several rogue ants crawling up the length of it. “Picture myself on a rooftop or the tallest mast of a ship, looking down at the tireless swarm below, moving relentlessly forward, rebuilding again and again, creating these castles of dirt a hundred times their height. That sort of reconstructive energy could forge empires overnight. If we could harness just one lifetime of that endurance...what could we accomplish?”

“Hamilton-”

“They rebuild from nothing.”

I blink at him, the sudden barbed timber in his voice, as if I’m being foolish.

“I’m sorry- you didn’t ask, I…” He stops, perhaps realizing he had apologized, unable to complete it. When he’s silent for a long moment, I almost feel I can hear the ants crawling over one another in reckless pursuit of creation.

I wet my lips, considering all the questions on my tongue why are you out here? What’s wrong with you? But, I’m afraid of how he might answer, so I take the parcel out from under my arm, “This came for you with the courier,” I say. “It’s from the Marquis de Lafayette.”

This, at last, earns a hum of recognition and lifts his eyes from that cursed ants’ nest. He points to a pile of papers, collected by the front step which I assume are his. “With the others,” he orders.
I rise to set the letter on his stack when he speaks from behind.

“There’s a paper about General Stephen’s court martial, take that inside to Lieutenant Colonel Harrison as well.”

I look down at the papers and see what he is referring to tucked under some sheets of numbers, lines and lines of balanced equations, tallies, and notes. I’ve never known his work to include so much accounting, but there’s more pressing matters to question, “Stephen’s…court martial?”

“Conway accused him of drunken conduct at Germantown,” Hamilton explains shortly.

I recalled a notice on our desk just a day after my appointment, but I hadn’t realized…I had hoped it wasn’t a continental general. To hear the accusation comes from Conway… “Perhaps you should take the letter to him,” I say, hesitating to touch the note- for want to read it and tear it to shreds.

“I’m not to go into the General’s office just now,” Hamilton says simply.

“...What?”

“I was directed to ‘go for a walk’,” he says flippantly, tossing a gesture towards the house where I can see silhouettes moving about inside the windows of the office, General Washington’s outline a tall figure among them, speaking to a shorter man whose frame appears to be Gibbs.

I understand at once. “You had an argument with the General.”

He gives me a look, brows raised like a dare.


He shakes his head, unsurprised and unsettled. It feels improper to tower above him on my feet, but I cannot drop back down now. He sighs and breaks my gaze, “Harrison is seeing to matters about the court martial right now. He’ll need that paper or he shall come out looking for it,” he says, shoving the stick into the center of the nest with harsh conviction and climbing to his feet. “I was ordered to be walking.”

CURIOUSLY, he comes to bed that night. I don’t ask what he intends- or why he’s been avoiding it. Harrison’s already asleep and Fitzgerald long-settled; we strip down and pull on nightshirts, and though we’ve seen one another totally bare, wrestled in that fashion, I take a corner for changing and slip tight to one side of the bed near the wall. I leave him plenty of space as he crawls in by my left and grows instantly heavy with sleep.

Come morning, he’s risen early again, leaving a warm place on the mattress next to me. It feels vaguely like an accusation- like cowardice, though I’m not sure who’s being charged.

But he returns the next night- and the night after.

SEVENTEEN YEARS OLD, I climb fast with more length to my limbs and three paths set out clearly. Mother’s gone from my reach and she doesn’t beckon as before, but I know I’m climbing to meet her, climbing to flee the manicured lawn spread out below, cleaved up with cannon shots and littered with collected straw, dry and waiting to be set ablaze by the brick home on the hill, a stronghold at my rear.
I stop myself, recognizing my climb as retreat.

It’s loathsome.

So, I turn, standing on my own branch, balancing easily. I should be able to face the house, but a shot rings out, my gut drops and I teeter off my branch towards the flames. That deep voice laughs, harsh and dual-intonated below me.

I’m falling.

And I jolt-

Legs twitching and heart pounding against my ribs, I take a steadying breath, eyes adjusted and staring up at the corners in the ceiling.

I’m in Dawsfield, Camp Morris, not Cliveden.

Huffing a breath, and pressing a hand to my brow to wipe away a sheen of sweat, the motion rouses Hamilton beside me who grumbles something unintelligible and shifts where he’s wrapped his leg over mine in his sleep. Many things have changed between us- many things have changed about him, and yet, for all his waking distance and posturing, he is ever a tactile man in the short hours of the morning before he’s woken to realize who he’s clung to unconsciously.

This isn’t the first time I’ve woken from a nightmare in his clutches. It’s happened twice in our current sleeping arrangement, and I try not to mind it as his holds are always innocent and brotherly, unmintended and instinctive. It’s only natural to reach out for a warm body when it’s placed so close and the windows are so drafty. And, as soon as he wakes, he must detach himself with enough care not to rouse me again because he is always gone when I wake fully. If I gave any indication of my restless discovery, he might resolve himself to sleeping on the sofa again out of mortification.

He doesn’t wake from my falling thrash, but the motion of returning my hand to it’s position of rest shifts me just enough to call my attention to another way my bedmate has been...roused.

And, the mortification is all mine.

He’s hard beneath his nightshirt, the length of his cock a defined nudge against my thigh, unnoticed in his sleep. I turn to check his face for any twitch of recognition, but he's been sleeping soundly these past few days and morpheus is holding him fast- thank God.

Heartened that I can do so without being caught, I try to slip from his hold, but the motion only turns his grumble to a low approving hum and I go cold with shame. Thankfully, both Harrison and Fitzgerald snore loud enough to assuage any fears of that humiliation. Hamilton’s hips never press so close, but the leg that’s tied around mine pulled his arousal nearer to the closest source of warmth, and I feel entrapped.

There’s nothing to do for it but wait- and resist the urge to press him and force that intriguing, pleased noise from his throat again- if only to confirm that I had heard it. If he ever knew it was me he’d pushed against-

It’s nice to know I’m not yet cruel enough to find pleasure in another man’s shame.

So, he sleeps on in silence and I allow it in stiff acceptance, caught between mortifying noises he’ll make if I move and a mortifying comfort I take in feeling the circumstances of his sleeping mind. He must be having particularly pleasant dreams. And, perhaps I wouldn’t enjoy causing his embarrassment, but my thoughts are helplessly curious when I can feel his length lurch against me or
hear a small purr in his throat, unprovoked. There had been a time that I’d indulge that curiosity with investigation, but now I’m horrified that the urge still lingers.

I only wish we were in a position that I could tease him in the morning with good nature.

His problem softens with time and his leg loosens its hold, but I don’t find sleep again and it’s the best I can do to feign it as he stirs before wake-up call, hoping he doesn’t suspect he’s been caught. It’s not an apology I’d relish.

He comes awake all at once and hisses a quiet, frustrated breath. His arousal had eased, but not fully disappeared and I flush with the knowledge that he must be aware of it now, clenching my eyes tighter closed. There’s something forbearing in his carefulness as he disentangles himself, as if he’s practiced the motion before- and I know he has. He would’ve had to in order to avoid waking me the other times I had fallen back to sleep in his hold.

But, it’s his lack of surprise with his own body's arousal that unsettles me as he slips from the bed and pulls on his breeches, putting a firm hand between his legs in a well-rehearsed reprimand before buttoning the flaps over his stomach.

He pulls on the soft-soled shoes he wears for morning exercises and pads quietly from the room.

I stare up at the wall until Billy comes in to wake us.

WHEN CORRESPONDENCE ARRIVES from the naval forts along the Delaware, they fall directly into my care and I spend my morning translating a letter from the Marquis de Fleury with the help of a French volunteer in General Washington’s office.

The Baron d’Arendt is perhaps the most renaissance officer I have met, perfectly fluent in english and capable of holding profound discussions on topics ranging from music to theater to art or science. He translates the words that I struggle with and explains them in simple terms. There have been some small successes in our naval efforts, but supplies are running low and prospects of holding the fort are becoming increasingly dim. Commodore Hazelwood’s officers have been able to collect intelligence from Admiral Howe’s fleet that he plans to bring a two-pronged attack with a German detachment marching from land and storming Fort Mercer while the Royal Navy attacks Fort Mifflin.

Realizing that these grave matters could be deterred with the help of a fleet from his own country, the Baron leaves my side with a grimace. He offers his assistance to Hamilton, the only other aide confined at his desk with...whatever task has been so consuming his attention these past few days.

I’ve just begun my response to de Fleury’s letter when d’Arendt jolts from Hamilton’s side, “This cannot be your job!” he declares, holding himself at arm’s length, “You are an aide-de-camp...to His esteemed Excellency General Washington, and you shirk your duties for...” his voice drifts, studying the notes that Hamilton’s written, “Are you fashioning yourself to be a Quartermaster?”

Hamilton’s posture bristles and he jerks his chin up to meet the Frenchman’s startled indignance, “Someone must do it,” he says. I know the nuance of his voice well enough to recognize veiled frustration.

“Is there no Quartermaster General?” d’Arendt says, tone genuinely worried.

But, before Hamilton can speak, the office door creaks open and Tilghman clatters inside carrying the first of the day’s courier sacks. The ritual of dumping the heap of letters on our office desk draws our attention from Hamilton’s covert project, and we set about sorting the addresses of the notes and
their departments, divvying our tasks.

Hamilton finds a parcel with my name, and rather than placing it on my stack, he holds it out to my hands, “From your father,” he says.

I glance at him and down to the letter, taking it in my hands with every effort not to begin trembling in apprehension. The first of father’s responses to my real purpose in this office—possibly a notice of my disgrace in his eyes, that he might see through the aires of my merit. I tear my finger through his wax seal, a pompous, prestigious thing with the design of our family crest. It’s familiar, but it feels like a distant relic, like the symbol was never mine to claim.

A quick perusal of my father’s words banished my fear of being found out. The majority of his words are familiar disdain against inefficiency, a reminder of how far superior he believes he would serve in any role he’s not been assigned—particularly, and shockingly, General Washington’s role—and how he would provide desperately-needed regulation and discipline. I recognize that he’s angry and speaking on that emotion. But, my eyes catch on one particular phrase...a subtle implication—but that was always my father’s favorite way of conveying his disappointment. So I might doubt that he ever impressed it and question if it’s just another way I’ve dismissed his affection.

Without thinking of it, I find myself reading aloud to the Lieutenant Colonels in my company, “He knows the ‘cruelty of tongues speaking the feelings of designing hearts’...but he believes Washington ‘accepts the opinion of some who have no superior claim’!”

“What did you tell him?” Tilghman says, brow drawn.

“Nothing but praises! I spoke of the battle—the spirit of the men under Washington’s command, how bravely he rode in the fight. I said nothing about his advisors or— or the counsel he takes.”

Hamilton’s expression creases in thought, folding his arms over his chest while Tilghman continues working at the mound of correspondence. “Why would he mention ‘designing hearts’ if you never implied any concerns of treason?” he says.

“I pleaded him to protect our General’s reputation if he heard seditious talk against him—”

“But you don’t believe that’s what he’s speaking of,” Hamilton says. It’s not a question. He presses a thumb to his lips, picking at the skin in thought. “It’s possible he’s heard rumblings from radical factions. There are complaints circulating through certains spheres against Washington’s dependance on General Greene. But, this would be nothing new worth noting—”

And, if my father had heard such things, he would have told me more directly. “No...”

“What other ‘opinion’ would he warn against?”

A moment’s consideration has me drawing a sharp breath, realization seizing my lungs in a grip of horror. My eyes lock on Hamilton’s deep blue. “Cliveden,” I say. “The General warned me that—there was a man—um...” the name alludes me in my dread, “Benjamin Rush-a Philadelphia doctor—one of the signers, he’s—he’s telling his friends in Congress that my choices damned the battle—”

Hamilton’s expression moves to mirror the horror I feel before he can train his face calm, but I saw it. I have to ignore that his concern is on my behalf. He obviously doesn’t want it.

I correct myself, “Well— he doesn’t speak of me by name, but...well, my father knows that I was involved there.” I glare down at his letter, “He’s warning me to withhold my thoughts.” One of his
favorite lectures.

My shame must be evident because Hamilton’s expression shifts in sympathy- and I must ignore that as well.

“It could be worse,” Tilghman says from the table, still organizing letters, “far as disappointed fathers go.”

I reel on him, “Really? How could it?” I snap, “He thinks me a military idiot- all my years of schooling a waste as if I’ve learnt nothing-”

Tilghman stops my protest with a sharp look and he glances at Hamilton. His lip curls on a wry smile and he grabs his letter satchel, draping it over his shoulder purposefully, careful not to disturb the press of his blue uniform. He picks up his hat from the table and looks back to me. “Well, he could be a Tory.”

My eyes snap to Tench in shock- his father...

*Perhaps they honestly want that affection.*

He turns and marches from the office.

GENERAL WASHINGTON brings a wooden ball to the office on some mornings when he seeks our collective opinions, tossing it about the room to whomever’s voice he wishes to hear so that we don’t all speak over one another and work ourselves into shouting matches. Once he’s found his answer, he’ll toss the ball in one hand as he dictates our notes. According to Harrison and Gibbs, some of his best plans have been born in this fashion.

When he comes into his office before dawn on the twenty-sixth, I’ve barely got the reflexes to lurch from my seat and catch the ball as he throws it to me. “I’d have your counsel,” he says and leaves the room before I can say ‘yes, sir’.

I stand, hands raised, still clutching the ball.

Meade reaches past me and begins collecting my papers with a whispered, emphatic, “Go.”

THE GENERAL’S OFFICE changes more frequently than our headquarters do. At some houses, he may have all his papers moved two or three times before deciding which room he likes best. At Dawesfield, he’s selected a warm den near the house’s kitchen.

He places his hat on a cabinet and walks to his desk, paying me no mind as I step in, the door creaking behind me. I’ve yet to see this room, but there’s no time to observe it. “I noticed that a letter arrived from your father, did he speak of the prisoner exchanges?” he says straightforward. “Has Congress come to a decision?”

“No, sir, but he expresses his deepest concern and has begun lobbying the matter,” I say, and because I’m sure he expects it, “I shall bring any news to you at the soonest.”

He nods, fingers tapping against the sword that he carries by his hip. It’s a familiar signal of agitation. “On the matter of Congress...I have...considered our discussions.” He walks to his desk and lifts a particular letter, glaring at it. “We are soon to be shamefully in want of provisions,” he
says darkly, “and if we shall be capable of carrying forth another attack it will have to be now. What are your feelings on this matter?”

*Make the attack before we lose our naval forts- the bloody lobsters are in want as much as we are.*

“Sir, you…” I recall the sour expressions of His Excellency’s Generals at Germantown upon hearing that he would act without their conference- I recall my father’s letter, “you should call the counsel of your Generals.”

Washington nods patiently, “Yes, I held a Council of War after our last engagement and they were determined that it should be our last.” *He fears they won’t want an attack.* “But...I shall consider another discussion.” He folds the letter in his hands, creasing it sharply with his nail. “The surgeons tell me that your ride to Fort Mifflin slowed your healing...are you feeling improved?”

“I’m fine to ride, sir,” I assure him, suppressing the surprise that he would inquire about my health of all things- with a court martial against one of his generals approaching, an angry salvo of letters stacked on his desk upon the subject of prisoners, our rations falling short of our needs, our militiamen’s enlistments expiring, continentals deserting, Congress expecting another attack...

“Well, there’s no need for that,” he says. “I would like you to take this day to rest.”

Shock must be evident on my face because his eyes briefly light with amusement. “I...am alright, sir, truly,” I implore him. “There’s too much to be done to-”

Washington raises a hand to cut off my retort, a sharp glint in his eyes, “Son, you are going to take this day to rest.” Something in his tone is off, his eyes drop to my uniform briefly, and he pressing, “and you will go with Lieutenant Colonel Fitzgerald and Major Tallmadge into town to the Angelica Estate where you’ll express my concerns for Quartermaster General Mifflin for the unfortunate decline in his health.”

He tosses the letter haphazardly aside and I realize I’ve not been given the day off- I’ve been assigned a personal task. To check on our absent Quartermaster General...

“THOMAS MIFFLIN was Washington’s first aide,” Fitzgerald says as we walk down the front step of headquarters.

It feels strange to be out of uniform at Camp Morris, but the Lieutenant Colonel insisted as we are, in an official sense, ‘taking the day off-duty’, that we should dress the part. As I brought only formal dress besides my uniform, and my breeches in both cases are growing worn, I’m left in Tilghman’s trousers which fall loose at my hips and bunch up under my belt.

“He idolized the General at the start of it,” Fitz says. “And, he was all too pleased to be put next to the ‘man who’d be a god’. Harrison’s said, when they first met as the army headed out for Boston, Mifflin got down on his knees to assist His Excellency in mounting his horse- he didn’t need it, ‘course- but the gesture didn’t go unnoticed. If anything, I’d say it just *miffed* Washington.”

He looks at me and raises his brows in jest. I roll my eyes in poor humor and turn away.

He continues, “But, apparently working together officially was more than either of them could endure. They fought constantly. The General wanted an aide who would share his thoughts when desired, could give intelligent counsel to help him organize his own ideas, but Mifflin shared them without reserve, desired or not.”
Fitzgerald is describing a familiar character- but there’s no need to mention that.

“And, when his ideas were overlooked in favor of taking counsel with General Greene, Mifflin got word round to his friends that the Commander never made his own decisions without the opinions of lesser men.”

I appall at that. To think Hamilton could be out-matched in gall...“I would argue that’s a testament of His Excellency's modesty,” I say.

“Well, some would call it weakness.” Fitzgerald stops as we reach the edge of Sullivan’s camp near Tallmadge’s tent. He puts his hands on his hips, “In any case, Washington had him promoted to Quartermaster General- if only to get him out the office. He didn’t like the position much, sought a field command- and got it for several months, but our short supply demanded a clever man keeping the books and that need saw him back in the Quartermaster department.”

“And he’s fallen ill?” I say, comprehending the General’s words, Hamilton’s work with our supply department- what I don’t understand…

Major Tallmadge emerges from his tent and strides towards us, appearing like a stranger in civilian’s clothes.

“Well, that’s the story,” Fitzgerald answers.

I stare after him as he starts towards the stables.

GENERAL WASHINGTON HAD CLAIMED there would be no need for riding, and yet we spend over an hour on horseback, galloping through wooded trails in the direction Fitzgerald leads. As we approach the Major General’s farmland estate, Fitz guides his horse abruptly into the woods, and I had given every effort to avoid my suspicions of this endeavor, but it’s becoming undeniable.

“We’re...spying, aren’t we?” I say, tying my horse to a tree behind a thatch of briars.

“Is that what the General told you?” Fitzgerald says with a smirk.

I huff, turning away and glaring through the trees towards the estate where General Mifflin’s home sits nestled between kitchen gardens. When Harrison impressed to me the importance of being capable of thinking for the General, I hadn’t thought he would mean I should be capable of thinking on behalf of him- not thinking around his every order to interpret what he intends.

But, it makes sense that he could not directly order his aides to spy on his own officers. If we should be caught and questioned...

Don’t worry for my reputation, son.

An honest man could never accuse the General of wrongdoing.

CROUCHING BENEATH A WINDOW of a Major General’s personal estate, I understand how my sister must have felt each time I coaxed her to steal away with me into town without father’s permission, following the orders of a man in authority, but acting against an authority above him.

It’s thrilling- and yet wrong.
Fitzgerald seems to have no similar compunction, scrawling tirelessly against a leather pad in a coded series of numbers. How he can hear the conversation ongoing inside is a mystery. Major General Mifflin is speaking with a man Fitz identified as Congressman James Lovell, but I cannot hear the details of their conversation. One thing is clear to me- Mifflin doesn’t appear ill.

Beside me, Tallmadge watches the front door of the Angelica Estate and his posture tenses. I turn towards him as he whispers, “Just on time…”

Following his gaze, I startle in surprise. Brigadier General Conway is walking, arm in arm with a man I don’t recognize, but he’s out of uniform, dressed elegantly as the gentleman in tow. I assume his presence was expected, given the Major’s reaction, and I’m left to wonder how long Washington’s spymaster’s been watching Conway- and for what purpose. Leaning against Tallmadge’s side, I whisper, “Who is that man with him?”

“Doctor Benjamin Rush,” he mutters, his eyes keen on their movements.

The pit of dread in my chest returns once more.

BY THE TIME WE RETURN to headquarters, the sun is dipping below the horizon and our breath forms clouds of steam around our faces. Camp torches are lighting in the valley below, but Tallmadge will have a short walk to make in the dark when he returns to his tent.

“General Washington mentioned to me that you had written your father about the prisoners in Philadelphia?” he says as we walk up the stone path to the General’s quarters.

“Yes,” I say, and because I know he will ask it, “but, he hasn’t had any progress on the matter yet.” The Major’s posture visibly sinks and I scramble to offer comfort, “Though he’s working in our favor, always- and he’s gathered a fair amount of support for the military. Commissioner Boudinot will hear of it as soon as he can make a trade with Cunningham.”

Tallmadge nods and quickens his pace.

It feels cruel to pursue a matter that causes him such obvious distress, but my curiosity prevails, “This means a lot to you, doesn’t it?” I say. “The way you attacked that Ranger- all the intelligence you’ve collected about the prisoners’ treatment-”

Before I can complete my question, “Captain Cunningham has...a history,” he says.

Something dark passes over Tallmadge’s face and I’d like to question it further, but Fitzgerald presses me to walk with a hand between my shoulders. He leans close to my ear so that the Major won’t hear him, and says, “Cunningham oversaw Nathan Hale’s hanging.”

I understand at once and say no more of it.

WITH HAMILTON IN MY BED, most mornings had passed with civility, but the air of hostility that initially held us tied to one another by competition exists now without such a simple cause. Any attempt he made to alleviate the tension with trifling taunts and winks had failed, tainted with too much honesty not to cut a deeper wound. He cannot avoid this confrontation with innuendo and I cannot avoid it with silence. But, conversing like friendly strangers is all the more painful.

Hamilton has not extended any concern for my injuries since we returned from our trip to Fort
Mifflin, but when he falls into the mattress each night, limp with exhaustion, the bruises under his eyes deepening each day, I cannot dispel the twist of concern for him in my own chest.

The morning after my unofficial spying mission, he wakes up and winces as he ties his queue, hands fumbling uncharacteristically, motions pained with overuse.

I cannot stop myself from grabbing his arm, “Let me tend to your hand,” I say with all the warmth I can muster. “Please, I think you’ve strained it.” Without a response, I press my thumbs gently into the large muscle at the base of his palm- the place my own hands are wont to hurt with overuse. Through all my frustration with him, there’s honesty to say, “…I’m worried for you.”

I expect his glare, a sharp response to an abrupt extension of intimacy, but it’s still a cold shock of beauty. There’s something to be said for eliciting an intense emotional reaction from a man who’s hidden his emotions in defense.

It could be said that it’s selfish.

Hamilton must see this because his sneer closes off at once and he pulls his hand away smoothly, “Don’t be. It’s no matter for concern. In this profession, if one’s wrist doesn’t hurt- he’s not writing enough.”

I can tell he’s trying humor, but it fails again. It’s a dismissal and a retreat and I know I should permit it, but I lurch to follow him, “But, if it does hurt, you shouldn’t have to suffer it.”

He turns to look at me impatiently as if expecting some righteous speech about the merits of trusting members of his military family to take care of him, and though I had one prepared, it’d be lost on him. His posture closes off, arms folded over his chest, calculating me like one of the formulas on his pages.

I know that I cannot retract what I’ve said- the retraction that I’ve made, and I don’t believe it would be a mercy to do so. But, I can recognize how I’ve betrayed him with abandonment. The weight on his shoulders has grown ever-heavier, and it can only be worse to have lost a form of friendly counsel- no matter how small. While I doubt that my concern does anything but exacerbate that weight, I want him to know that I don’t enjoy his pain- or being helpless to alleviate it.

“Alexander, I’m sorry,” I start, and his posture goes tense. “I was cold to you. I doubted that I...I-”

“You doubted yourself. Don’t apologize to me for it,” he says shortly, and even given blandly, his words strike blows, his eyes daring me to take up arms.

I shouldn’t accept the challenge. Seeing him in retreat, my pursuit is just cruel, but “I offered you friendship then took that away from you. It was a mistake from the start, but I didn’t know what else to do. I hurt you, and I-”

“And you believe I’m still hurting?”

It may be instinctive for him to speak words like weapons, but his meaning still cuts, “I know you are.”

This was the wrong thing to say. An attack.

I know it before he strikes. There was a reason we had so long avoided this confrontation- a certain vulnerability in the pain this separation had caused and the need for expressing it. I’m not sure he’s ready for this fight, but I’m ready to accept the lion’s claws. The title is apt, and yet there’s something stronger in the force that drives this man. It’s not beastial, it’s primordial, a force of nature pushing
him forward like the roar of the ocean.

His lip curls in a snarl, “I could take you.” And, my mind renders a memory of clever hands plucking a letter from Conway’s pocket. Take. The sea doesn’t question its right to consume. He sees that I’ve understood the threat— that he’s clever enough, he could help a man ruin himself— his eyes glint. “You’ve felt it,” he draws himself to full-height and steps closer, crowding me. “I could take your heart…draw all your sentiments to just how properly alone you can truly feel, knowing you relinquished your best chance of finding someone to match your image of brotherhood. Because you’ve wanted that for so long— someone to understand and accept all the pieces that you’re so… ashamed of— and I could take those, and you know it.”

When he puffs out his chest it’s easier to stand unmoved in the flood. I can recognize his threats of leaving me isolated, and while he may be honest about his capabilities— while it may truly devastate me to lose his company entirely, I’ve felt the warmth in his arms, wrapped around my chest with a boyish need unfulfilled. I had considered what it must mean to meet his expectations— to be held in the highest regard. He already cares too much to withdraw. He won’t see me to ruin.

“Whether you wanted me to or not, I know you,” he says firmly. “So, no, I’m not hurting. You don’t have that power.”

I nod and grip his shoulders tightly, “That’s good.”

And, whatever response he had hoped to achieve with his threats, he gapes at my reply, obviously not expecting relief.

It’s satisfying to surprise him again.

THE GENERAL HAS A WAY OF SCOWLING so deeply his eyes nearly disappear beneath his brow. He walks into his office for the first time that day, just after supper, dropping his hat onto his desk and standing slouched by the table. Hamilton had paced at his heels into the room, but he’s frozen now in the doorway, holding in anticipation.

We had all stood to the General’s attention, and we all still stand.

It’s unlike Washington to disregard us— to neglect returning a salute or pausing to recognize our attention with his own, but he lets us stand in this posture for a long moment before he heaves a sigh and rubs his temples. He turns and straightens his posture. “The field officers are attending a celebration in Dawesfield township, and you are all dismissed to attend” he announces, giving a small smile. “General Gates has obtained Burgoyne’s surrender.”

A sharp cheer goes through the room like a bolt of lightening, shifting the mood of our work so abruptly I cannot help but smile with our triumph.

Our brothers in the north— the army in New York had done it…one step closer to inviting the French, one step closer to victory.

Instinctively, I turn to the door to share Hamilton’s pride, but his expression is wearily neutral. When he finds my gaze, his eyes dart away, lips pressed on a thin smile. It’s undeniably good news…and yet…

I TAKE A MENTAL NOTE to never allow Meade to pour my drinks again. Each time I have
indulged his enthusiasm, he’s either downed my drinks before handing them to me, poured too much, or spilled spirits on us both. Tonight, he seems determined to achieve all three. I had wanted to relieve the unnatural reticence that’s gripped me since Germantown, but I still cannot quite find the humor in me to laugh as he uses a kerchief to dab at the rum stain on my chest.

“This reminds me,” he says, voice slurring with drink. “Hamilton’d said something amusing the other day about you- about uhm...you wanting to be a private.”

My brow draws. I hadn’t mentioned desiring a demotion in rank...

But, Meade corrects himself, “No...rum- he said pirate.”

At that, I scoff, but see his meaning, hazard my guess, “A sailor- he talked about a joke we’d shared about the naval service.”

“No, he said it with a ‘p’.” Meade insists, enunciating the sound of the letter.

“A privateer?”

“That!”

This earns a laugh for the absurdity, “He’s teasing, sir, he knows I couldn’t make a life off stealing...”

“Stealing from thieves and the King...it’s all legal.”

“It’s theft just the same.”

Groaning, Meade throws his arm over my shoulder, “Your expectations of justice leave mortal men trembling- have mercy on me!” he wallows dramatically until I shove him off.

But, he doesn’t release me without a fight, mussing my hair and flicking at my nose with uncanny coordination as I swat his hands back. Teasing flicks turn into a short-lived scuffle that leaves me breathless from the pursuit and Meade cackling in amusement.

“Hammy was right about you,” he grins.

I raise both brows at him curiously. This subject again. Propriety had held me from questioning the other aides’ mention of Hamilton’s opinions of me- but propriety be damned right now, we’ve won in the north and I’m drunk. It’s not truly gossip if it’s talk regarding me, “What did he say?”

“What didn’t he say?” Meade picks up his glass and takes a drink and a short panic nearly takes me to think of the things that Hamilton could share about me. But, the fond acceptance in Meade’s tone assuages my more rakish concerns. “You’re his favorite subject of conversation,” he says, “it’s like an affectionate pup, freed from its cage, he brings stories of you t’all our meals, some adventure you’d shared, something amusing you’d done, a stroke of wisdom departed, a discovery he’d made about your family or your happiness. It would be endearing if not so annoying,” he says, but the smile on his mouth implies the opposite.

I don’t know how to respond against the perverse twist of guilt in my throat- to have given Hamilton such gratifying attention and pulled it away in patronizing disregard. I had known we enjoyed each other's company, and the intensity of that affection had intimidated me with the responsibility it held, but to think...of how much he liked me. And, I spurred him. Even with good reason to doubt myself, I should have realized the cruelty of action against the cruelty of inaction- or at least braced myself to ignore its effects. Knowing how truly my cowardice had hurt my friend...breaks my heart.
I had been able to avoid seeking him out all night, but my silence has Meade’s eyes staring behind me to where I know Hamilton is seated on the fringes of a conversation between Tilghman and Gibbs, drinking alone.

“Y’know, when I first came to the General, Hammy’d only been around for a week,” Meade says and I turn to face him with this new information. “He was all charm and grins, but had a certain stiffness about him that never quite loosened, like he thought someone would angle to have him pushed off staff if he didn’t make himself vital. I don’t know that he ever put much stock in the rest of us. But, for a while there, it almost felt like he at least trusted us...now,” he makes a vague hand motion, “the boy’s burying himself alive with this new project.”

I assume that Meade’s referring to the work Hamilton’s been performing for the Quartermaster department, but I hadn’t been able to pull any information from Hamilton himself regarding what work he was actually performing. I throw the older aide a questioning look.

“I don’t want him jumping in too deep,” Meade says. “Just hearing Harrison’s stories about the early days on staff, the way the General talked about the supply side- the profiteering and mismanagement...I know Hammy thinks he can solve this, but- it can’t be forced with words and numbers, and there’s politics in our funding beyond his reach. He’s vying to make himself another man who failed.”

Staring at the colonel, I realize he believes I know more of Hamilton’s intentions than he does, and some strange pride in that belief prevents me from asking *is Alexander trying to replace General Mifflin as Quartermaster General?* It’s what Meade’s seems to be implying.

I grip his shoulder, “I’ll talk to him,” I say, pushing up from my chair.

I doubt that I could enjoy myself now anyway, knowing Hamilton’s so dejectedly detached himself with these extra duties, taken on recklessly.

I shouldn’t assume my counsel will be helpful to him- or wanted at all, but I cannot say nothing- and if I’m to say anything, I need more to drink.

I weave my way through the tavern with practiced grace, collecting two glasses of rum from the counter as I approach the Lieutenant Colonel from the flank, sliding a glass over the table to him. “It’s a celebration, you’re suppose to be enjoying yourself,” I say, scolding lightly.

The corner of his lip twitches in recognition. “General Washington shouldn’t allow us to celebrate this victory yet…” he says, so blunt it’s like he couldn't quite prevent the words.

“Did...we not win the north?”

Letting out a wry laugh, Hamilton’s fingers brush absently along the rim of the glass I’d brought but he doesn’t take it to drink, “We assume the report’s true,” he says. “If Lieutenant Colonel Wilkinson’s to be trusted, but whatever official note he brought from General Gates went directly to Congress, so how can we be sure?”

My brow creases at that information and the carping tone Hamilton takes with it. I turn away, glaring in thought. “You mean to say that General Gates is…”

“Reporting directly to Congress,” he says.

I don’t want to immediately assume that this news should mean General Gates knows about the plotting politicians who would see him replace Washington in command, but Hamilton’s expression reveals that he’s already submitted to that cynical belief, and beside me, he roils with tension, fingers
picking anxiously at the frayed finish on the tabletop. Until something finally snaps-

“...And, if that body knew anything about running a war, it wouldn’t be such a concern, but men in that chamber think a rotation of elected officers each year would ‘ensure meritorious promotion’ rather than put a rank of unpracticed politicians in command of an army; they think militia fighters can hold the war alone when half their officers fail to even clothe them uniformly- trust me, I know this; they think providing serviceable funds to our effort will make our officers ‘greedy acquisitioning fiends’ and y’know, in some cases it has, but if our best citizens are paying for this effort out of their own pockets, you can assume they’re well-practiced in the art of using their funds economically.”

He doesn’t pause to breathe, speaks quick and sharp and honest, fire and passion underlying his words so they pour from him- less like a flood and more of an inferno, and God I’ve missed it.

He tells me about the radical Whig factions in Congress, about New Englander’s puritanical moralizing against the army’s leadership, about campaigns against the need for even having an army-during a time of war, Washington’s efforts to follow trails of dissension in our own ranks and trace them back to politicians, about the illegal trades in the Quartermaster department that have slipped under Washington’s nose thanks to His Excellency’s poorly-placed trust.

Finally, he tells me about his own work, the tireless efforts he’s placed into finding scouts to trace the movements of their resources, managing reports from those scouts, organizing the information they provide for its authenticity and usefulness, analyzing that information, and trying- if it’s even possible- to create a report of the army’s finances which lays out its current use of funding and all the reasons its budget is insufficient.

I see the determination swirling in his eyes, primal and furious, like he cannot help but shape his world to survive, like that clutch for control is woven into his very existence, so integral to who he naturally is that it cannot possibly be wrong. If I ever doubted him, I regret it.

As his inferno dims and his words slow to a stop, his expression grows weary and he finally- finally reaches for the glass, throwing back the liquor in one heavy gulp without tasting it. He doesn’t look at me.

“Do you...believe you could manage our Quartermaster department?” I say.

The look in his eyes is simple and sure, “I could.”

“Then you should.”

He stares at me. And, something shifts between us at the confidence in my voice- his eyes soften in gratitude, but he shakes his head, “Believe me, Washington won’t allow it.” He touches the glass I’d brought and studies his own hands, smiling wistfully, “It was a mistake the last time he assigned one of his men to that department. There’s too much risk.”

I can see he’s troubled, and though he seems to have no love for matters of supply, there’s no denying that he’s qualified to match the challenge- no matter what worries Meade or Washington might have for him. And he knows it. Being held from providing his service...I know that he loathes it.

Reaching out on instinct, I grasp his shoulder reassuringly. “Well...I believe Washington girds his best officers too closely to exploit their best potential.”

Perhaps recognizing his own words, his smile grows warm and flush. He can’t seem to help it for a moment, but that affection grows somber with regret and he turns away. “You’re too good for this
office,” he says.

And, I open my mouth to protest that, but he doesn’t allow it.

“See, this is the real job of an aide, a pack of well-bred boys to prance around and show off like the
General’s prized hounds. We’re all a political tool to command loyalties from different factions, and
if any of us think otherwise we’re denying our political friends...if you can call such men friends.”

“That’s a cynical outlook,” I say, scolding half-heartedly. Something in my breast reaches out in
agreement with his disdain, but I cannot give in to accepting it. I had thought his optimism fake
before I could recognize his heart, but I understand better now. He’s not unrealistic- far too cynical
for that. His hopes are high and expectations low. I fear I may be inclined unrealistically to the
opposite.

He doesn’t protest my berating, just gives that vague wistful laugh and shakes his head. I’m
prepared to drop the subject without another fiery tirade against our occupation when he loses all
traces of a smile and drops his head heavily into a crooked elbow. I had noticed signs of his cheeks
growing sanguine, but I hadn’t thought him so drunk to collapse at the table.

“I hate this, John,” he grumbles.

I don’t fail to notice my christian name on his tongue or the attention it seizes in muffled words. I put
my hand along the flat of his back in reassurance, “I know, but the General needs our service in his
official capacity, any other matters he requires are-”

Hamilton groans loudly, “No! This…us. I hate this...detachment.” He pulls his head up from the
table and glares at me, sharp. “I feel a keen loss of...potential- somehow, as if I may have ruined a
great opportunity and I’m unprepared to fix it.”

Against the meaning of his words, his tone feels like an accusation.

“It’s my own impropriety…” he insists, and I’m not sure whether he’s trying to convince me or
himself. “If I can't even keep a damn dog how should I keep you?”

“What are you-”

“-I’m worse than a child- more feeble and flighty and mean. I’ve been horrid to you- intentionally.”

This self-doubt doesn’t suit him. “You did nothing wrong, you-”

“No, I…” he stops himself mid-thought, dropping his eyes from mine and shifting his seat so that
my touch doesn’t reach him. “I never had a reason to doubt you. I should’ve seen that sooner- I
should’ve trusted you from the start.”

What I said in our room this morning- having made a mistake in offering my friendship as a means of
avoidance, I meant it. But, it seems I’ve hurt him again with my words. He shouldn’t blame himself,
“You were right not to.”

His eyes snap back to me incredulously, but a moment’s consideration steals away his frustration and
he seems to sink.

“...I’m going to bed,” he says. “Try not to wake me when you follow.”
LIEUTENANT COLONEL HARRISON IS GONE from his bed the next morning. Heavy with drink, Hamilton was fast asleep by the time I retired with Harrison and Fitzgerald, and he kept to his side of our bed throughout the night. But, as Billy comes in to wake us, he pushes aright with a jolt, leaning over me to see Harrison’s usual place. “Where is he?”

Fitzgerald pulls on his stockings with a small grunt, “Ah, he’s off to York.”


Fitzgerald looks up in surprise, “He’s...he was appointed to General Gates’s Board of War…”

“Gates’s what?!?”

Before Fitz can respond, Meade pushes through our opened door beside Billy, wearing a worn countenance, sullen. The room goes silent in anticipation of whatever could’ve pressed such an expression. “We’ve lost Fort Mifflin,” he announces, and where he’s leaned above me, Hamilton’s shoulders drop.

The irony of the fort’s namesake strikes me darkly.

Meade looks at me and across to the other bed, “The General wants you two in his office.”

LIEUTENANT COLONEL FITZGERALD shifts on his feet as we wait outside Washington’s office for him to open the door. I hold more rigid, thoughts swirling to catch up with the state of our changing defenses. General Gates, creating his own Board of War, acting without conference with the Commander in Chief and reporting directly to Congress, General Mifflin abandoning his post where his talents were desperately needed, gathering congressmen to his estate for private meetings, leaving a tangled web of supply misconduct...the loss of our primary naval defense station...and our Capitol still in the enemy's hands...

The General greets us with unnerving warmth. “Come in, tell me- how was your day off-duty, boys?”

Shocked still, I allow Fitzgerald to respond, “Quite good, sir. General Mifflin was...hospitable to our interests. And, he brought several interesting guests.”

Washington tosses his aide a keen look and nods, “Yes, Mister Tallmadge told me the Major General took familiar company. I’ve already collected his thoughts.” He glances at me, “But, you’ve also met Brigadier General Conway, Mister Laurens, what’s your estimation of him?”

This is a test of my diplomacy, but with all the news arriving, all the speed of events occurring outside my control, I cannot help but be bluntly honest, “Sir, he’s a rude officer,” and I immediately realize my folly and scramble to correct myself, “that’s not to say unskilled, he’s...well, he was excellent at Brandywine and he’s a fine drillsman, but…”

Washington doesn’t hide a smirk, lips pressed tight in amusement.

Fitzgerald’s shoulders shake with repressed laughter.

I’m done with it- all this verbal ducking and dodging. “Sir, he’s an ass.”

Laughing outright, Washington steps deeper into his office and takes a seat at his desk, motioning for Fitzgerald and I to come sit in his audience. We do so with care, but the mood of the room feels too
loose with his good humor, liable to crumble apart. “Well, mister Laurens, General Stephen’s already
given me a similar opinion. Have no shame in honesty,” the General says.

I send a glance to Fitzgerald, but he just presses a thin smile.

“I’ll have you continue to follow Conway's ties to General Mifflin,” Washington says to him, picking
up his quill and beginning to take notes, “Hamilton has provided us with a long trail of transactions
to follow and investigate and I’ll expect extensive reports of each. Of course, keep your contact with
Mister Harrison while he travels to York and sits on the Board- you’ll understand if that requires you
to travel extensively?”

“Yes sir, of course,” Fitz says at my left. A moment passes in silence beyond the scratching of the
General’s quill against the parchment carrying his orders, and Fitzgerald sits forward anxiously.
“Sir…” he says.

Washington hums.

“You do know what it means? That Harrison was called so abruptly...that the notice about the
Board just came yesterday- without your having approved the need for one?” In his tone, Fitzgerald
is begging clarification, but I can sense some accusation under his words that I don’t understand until
he pushes to his feet, “They’re acting without your approval, creating councils to control you,
reassigning *your* officers without conferring with you.”

“-Your orders.”

The General’s hand holds out a short note and he doesn’t rise from his desk, but Fitzgerald bites his
tongue and bows slightly. He accepts the paper.


Fitz gives another curt bow.

“You’re dismissed.”

Fitzgerald turns to leave and I begin pushing up from my chair until the General puts up his hand and
stops the motion. I sit uncomfortably while he takes several more notes and organizes some letters.
He ignores my presence for a long while, working in my silent company, and I avoid staring,
turning my attention out the window.

“My best tacticians warned me against a flank at Brandywine,” the General says, breaking the
silence.

I turn back my attention.

He’s watching me levelly, eyes a cold storm of blue, “And, so did you.” He gives a small nod to
himself and puts down his quill, folding his hands over his desk. “I’ve arranged to hold another
Council of War with my Generals tomorrow evening in Whitpan Township.”

Something clenches tight to hear my General heeding my advice- even if only to seek out other
advice.

“When I accepted this office,” he says, “I promised the delegates from New England that I would
take wise counsel before making decisions. I rely on the advice of men who can be bold and
decisive when I can’t- you’ve seen that.” He pulls his chair out and rises to his feet, “But, I’ve been
criticised for pondering *too* long upon my decisions. A wise man may ignore criticism, but it
requires a wiser one to heed it. So, I need you to be my second mind.”

“Sir?”

The General smiles and walks to a cabinet by the wall, picking up a piece of rolled parchment, carrying it to his desk and spreading it flat. I recognize a map of our current camp and the surrounding counties. “Help me consider my courses,” he says. “So we might be prepared to be bold.”

I SPEND THE REMAINDER of the day in the General’s office, discussing strategy with the Commander in Chief. Our discussion began slow, him laying out preconceived thoughts he had already contrived and me responding with similar accounts I could recall from my readings- how those plans had played out in practice. As we speak though, he coaxes me to confidence with encouragement, and our talk grows more boisterous, more active like the discourse I’d shared in French with Lafayette while we criticized Howe’s movements at Brandywine.

When the Commander grows too weary to continue our planning, we have decided upon and enumerated nine fully-developed courses of action for him to bring to his Generals in council. He seems pleased with our progress and collects his notes into a divided book for transport in the morning.

As he gathers his cloak and hat from his chair, travelling to the door to retire, he stops before leaving and turns, considering me in quick realization. “I was told tomorrow is the date you were born,” he says.

I startle and nod confirmation, unsure how he might have been informed of that.

He gives a nod. “Well then, have a delightful day- in advance.”

WHEN I COME UPSTAIRS into the bedroom, Hamilton is already in bed, covers pulled up- but curiously, he’s awake and reading a book from the study, leaning on his side to catch the light of his candle. I’ve never seen him read without a sheet of parchment and a pen to take notes. There’s something disarmingly domestic in the sight, to see him...relaxing.

When he hears the door creak and I catch his attention, he marks his page and sets the book aside. “Finished with Washington?” he says, moving over under the covers casually to leave my space open.

I glance at the vacant bed left in Fitzgerald and Harrison’s absence, but I don’t question the offer to share. He must know this is a test. “Yes,” I reply, “Sorry if you kept awake on my behalf. He’s called a war council tomorrow, there was much to discuss.”

“I know,” he says simply.

The room descends into silence as I begin undressing for bed, removing my boots and stripping my coat and stockings. I avoid moving to the corner for privacy and dress down to my nightshirt, ignoring his eyes with hard conviction. When I push back the thick coverlet and lay down, he scoots to make room and sits up at my side, staring at me.

“Washington is going to use you.” he says. “To keep tabs on Congress, to spy on his officers…”
I push up onto my elbows and meet his stare. “I know.”

“You...know?”

The incredulous tone of voice shouldn’t cut as much as it does, but “Of course- I’m not a fool, Ham.”

“I know that...just...you’re alright with this?”

This is a conversation I had hoped to avoid ever having with anyone, but as he seems resigned to it, I push up properly to face him, curling my legs beneath my lap, “No,” I admit, and the emotion that comes out with a single syllable is more honest than I had expected I could be- if the conversation ever became unavoidable. “I’m not. But, I’ll do it. If it’s what the General needs, I’ll do it.”

Something in the choice of those words causes Hamilton’s expression to sour with some emotion I’d like to avoid, but there’s no going back now.

He pushes back the covers and matches my seated posture, “If you accept the task,” he says slowly, choosing his words with obvious care in a way I’ve not seen him do while sober, “this will be your occupation in this office...this may become the purpose you’re remembered for in the eyes of posterity. If you should be caught in this function, if you...upset the wrong individuals by exposing the wrong information to the wrong person—”

“Alex,” I grab his knee sharply before he can continue this concern.

His worried gaze sharpens and he pulls his leg from my reach, “You shouldn’t trust him,” he says flatly. “General Washington is the best man for this command- I know that to be true because he will do whatever it takes to win this war. And, for that very reason, you cannot trust him with your personal honor. He will crush you if he needs to.”

I appall at him- to take his mistrust so far as to reach the General himself- “My personal honor is to obey his command...as is yours!”

“John, you’re a virtuous man, I would never doubt that- but...you must be practical, you’ve only known Washi-“

“And you must release me to make my own choices of who I should or should not trust!”

I’ve never spoken so sharply in both tone and words and the crushing combination makes Alexander recoil, brows drawn. He closes his mouth and looks down, muscles working in his jaw. He studies the wall beyond my shoulder in consideration before seeing me again, and something has shifted in his expression, a force of conviction directed at me that catches my breath in anticipation as he scoots nearer and grips my shoulders at the crease of my neck. “Your personal connections are about to become infinitely more important to the General,” he says. “But, John- you are more important than any influence you may bring.” His eyes blaze so intense I feel as though he’s trying to impart a piece of his own soul into mine through the force of his will. “Remember that.”

His hand moves gently up my neck to hold against my cheek in much too fond of a caress. At this distance, I could fall forward and kiss him and that desire rushes back at full-sail as if to remind me that I’ve never outrun it with distance, and nearness only makes it grow softer.

“Consider me well-warned,” I say, but my voice has gone gentle and I don’t mean to argue it any further. Still, to speak against our General is treasonous- we had shared ribbing critiques of his plans in the past, but this is different. Alexander speaks not just against his decisions, but he’s urging distrust against the man himself. “Why are you saying all this?”
His hand draws away from my throat and he shifts back to his side of the bed. “Because I’m your friend.”

THE HEADQUARTERS SEEMS EMPTY when I report in the morning, having slept more soundly through the night than I had in weeks. Meade’s already brought the day’s first post delivery into the office and he and Tilghman are seated at our desk, sorting the letters into three piles for us to begin on our work.

I step in and join the effort, making a quick realization- it’s strange to have only three places set, “Where’s Ham?” I say, “Did he ride out for another post already?”

Tilghman looks up and gives me a strange look, “He left with the General this morning to take the minutes.”

“...Oh.” My heart drops in realization that I’ll be spending the day without him- not by my own choice this time.

The Council of War. Whitpan Township is a day’s ride away.

Meade tosses a letter onto my stack and looks up with a hint of sympathy touching his eyes, “I’ll buy you a drink tonight.”
WHEN I WAS SEVEN YEARS OLD, the Cherokee revolted against our inhabitation of their land. They took up a warpath, killing fifty colonists in the piedmont. In our defense, British soldiers drove them into the mountains of North Carolina, but the threat lingered- raids on markets, attacks on travelers coming to Charlestown.

That spring, several companies of Scotch Highlanders and militia from my state gathered in earnest to destroy the 'Indian threat'. The redcoat soldiers had done all they were willing to do to protect us, and "the native resistance must be quelled"- my father told me this.

I thrilled to see him in uniform, marching among men in bright red kilts and tilted caps of the Royal Scots- redheaded and fierce as the scotsmen are. I remember holding mother's hand as he left, my chest vibrating with the monstrous bellowing of the bagpipes that marked their step.

Father didn't return for weeks- no word reached us of his safety, and when he came home, his feet never recovered from the swampy march…

MARKING THE ANNIVERSARY of a birth was never a priority in my family. Mother would prepare a meal of our choosing to honor the date, but we were never a family to exchange gifts or host grand parties in celebration. So, when a letter arrives from my father, mentioning the occasion, it’s more than I expected.

It sits on the desk the morning of the thirtieth, a couple days late, but appreciated nonetheless. A short mention is all I need, among the regular enumeration of his complaints and opinions.

Colonel Meade, Tilghman, and Fitzgerald have assisted me in devising a discreet system of information extraction with specific keywords embedded into the body of the letter, providing more sensitive accounts of what’s being said in Congress between the lines. Fitzgerald brought a request to him from General Washington on his journey to York where he accompanies Harrison in watching General Gates’s Board of War, and father has- by appearance of our key words within this letter- agreed to inform us of the rumblings against His Excellency. My weariness lingers, but he did receive this request without implying any disappointment in my station in his letter, so I assume he has not realized the correlation.

I sit with Meade and take notes of the distrust among the New Englanders, the Adams’, Joseph Lovell and Benjamin Rush, men whose philosophizing shrouds them from rationality. However, only a few months into his term in Congress, my father has already entrenched himself in a battle against a scandal among our Ministers in France, attempting to move Deane from his commission, and the majority of his complaints focus on these issues of his own concern. He doesn’t seem to have much time to complain on behalf of our prisoners, our supplies, and-

“Fitz was to specifically request information regarding the causes of dissention against Washington...not...all this,” Meade complains, marking through passages of my father’s letter.

I raise a brow at him, “And I’m sure Fitz delivered that request.”
“Then why must we sift through your old man’s woes and...there’s a whole paragraph dedicated to his gout!”

Restraining myself from rolling my eyes, I snatch the letter from his abusing pen, “My father is only a man…”

“Who bemoans all his worries to his son?”

If Meade were not a friend, I would take those words to blows without a second thought. As it is, I send him a sharp glare, “You insult the value of my father’s confidence in me, and you insult my father himself if you imply that he.”

Before I complete my protest, the office door opens behind me, and Meade jumps to attention. I follow, turning on my heel towards the door where the General has returned from his trip to Whitpan. The insult loses relevance as General Greene follows Washington into the office and Captain Knox comes in tow. The Council of War must have adjourned decisively- meaning the commanders bring plans for our next moves.

His Excellency motions for Meade and I to take our seats, and as we do so, he brings a letter to me, saying, “You boys will be pleased to translate that. I couldn’t understand most of it, but...it came from Fort Mifflin this morning…”

Meade’s eyes widen, “Sir, we had received a report that the Fort was lost-”

“And now we receive this,” Washington says, smiling and tapping the letter from the Marquis de Fleury with one finger. “The report you received came prematurely. We still hold the fort. There was an attack; your messenger fled with the news before the night was won.”

General Greene comes into the room, shedding his coat as he walks and hanging it by the door beside Washington’s personal office. “Of course, this means the fort’s been depleted of men to defend it and will desperately require our reinforcement, so I’ll be taking my division into New Jersey. Any of the plans you designed for a proper assault had to be tabled...in light of that.” He gives me a small approving nod, perhaps crediting me for my discussions with General Washington, but I’m not sure, so I only nod back in response.

I look down to the letter placed before me, eyes skimming over a few words describing the state of the fort’s defenses. Fleury uses language that I don’t always recognize, and in need of another French speaker, I realize an absence in the returning party, “Sir, where’s Hamilton? I thought he was travelling with you.”

General Washington glances at me as he removes his gloves and coat, his eyes a sharp glint of blue. “Yes, I’ve ordered him to ride for Albany and demand the reinforcements we’ve been requesting from Gates. He’ll collect our Continentals.”

I startle- and irony strikes me darkly once more.

Continental troops...

THE GENERAL’S OFFICE DOOR CLOSES with a firm click and I turn immediately on my fellow aide, who sits unable to suppress his satisfaction with this news. “About time he makes the ride.”

“Did you know he would send Hamilton?” I say, voice drawing tight in my throat. ...Had Alex
known he was leaving last night?

“We all knew he’d send someone,” Meade says with a shrug, picking up his quill once more. “Gibbs started packing up to accompany the ride days ago. Seems reasonable to send Hammy when he was already out at Whitpan.”

He doesn’t seem displeased, and it draws my lips to curl back over my teeth, “It’s not safe in New York—”

“Safer than it is here,” he says, glancing up over his quill with brows raised.

But, his words don’t make sense. Many townships in New York are still held by British regiments that haven’t yet been repulsed, raiders infest neutral paths from both sides and target officers preferentially, and- with the growing distrust between General Washington’s army and the northern army under Gates, I cannot quell my unease for sending His Excellency’s favorite aide to meet their apprehension of the treatment he’ll face from the northern officers.

“...Well, safer at least for Hammy,” Meade says.

And, I appall at him, narrowing my eyes in disbelief. How is it safer? The decision confounds me- Meade is a better rider than any of us, he could make the trip fastest, and while Hamilton knows the terrain because he served in New York, so had Tilghman and Meade and Harrison.

My shock reels into anger with realization...Meade fears Hamilton’s additional work, the accounting he had been performing for the Quartermaster department. All the aides have been complaining about General Mifflin’s desertion of his post, speculating theories about the crooked influence in the department. While we had celebrated my birthday with wine in the Wampole house parlor, Meade’s loosened tongue had denounced Hamilton’s efforts and the additional work his accounting investigations had been bringing to our office.

I loathe his lack of faith in Hamilton’s ability, or worse- that he would assume Hamilton is susceptible to the treasonous dissent spreading through the ranks of arrogant officers. And to value his loyalties over the safety of his person... “We need Hamilton here- now more than ever,” I say, and from the shift in Meade’s expression I can see that he realizes the source of my disdain.

“Hammy’s safe in New York, Laurens,” he insists, diverting the argument. “Gibbs packed to ride out with whoever made the trip, and there’s no one more capable to ride with.”

I remain unconvinced and loathe the diversion.

“Have you ever seen Gibbs in a fight?” Meade says.

I admittedly haven’t, but I have no argument against Washington’s security chief’s capability. Gibbs had protected Hamilton when he was ordered to acquisition supplies in Philadelphia- surely a difficult task. But, “When he’s there, you expect he’ll be able to convince Gates to degrade his force? General Gates?”

“Actually, I can think of no one more qualified to argue with Generals than Hammy...”

I don’t laugh, “We need him here.”

“And he needed to leave.” Meade says it with such finality I know there’s no changing his opinion on Hamilton’s work. “Just for a while- give the General some time to sort all this out. I know you see how he’s interested in our supply issues, but let him face the monsters that he can defeat.”
I narrow my eyes, reach for my quill, and draw my papers to my station pointedly. We’re finished arguing. I’m not interested in hearing him flatter my friend’s ability to navigate strategic politics. It doesn’t excuse the offense. If he won’t just admit that he believes my friend corruptible, I cannot argue it without instigation, so I glare at my paper as I begin translating Fleury’s letter. My voice bites and I affirm my position, “He will make a fine Quartermaster when he returns.”

I FINISH MY TRANSLATION as Meade packs his papers and retires to bed. I’ve never disagreed with him upon any matter, and the tension between us is new and strange- and yet empowering. I am not wrong to defend Hamilton’s work. It feels good to stand on my own feet.

The office descends into a silence where I can concentrate. The General left his divided book sitting on the aides’ desk containing the enumerated plans from his Council of War. I’ve completed my work and slipped those plans from his case, skimming them voraciously when the General’s office door creaks and the familiar, uneven sound of Greene’s footfalls approaches my desk.

I jolt to my feet, turning to a position of attention.

He smiles and waves away the formality, eyes dropping to the desk behind me where the plans are scattered from my haste to drop them, “We added our thoughts to your plans, hope you don’t mind,” he says, nodding towards them.

I laugh modestly, “Of course not, sir.”

Greene’s demeanor seems to warm with satisfaction at his own humor, showing his youth in his amusement, “General Washington’s told me your opinions were useful in drawing them up. I’m glad he benefits from your counsel.”

“In absence of more qualified men.” I nod to him.

General Greene’s smile softens and fades and he steps to the table where Washington’s map is laid out. He looks over the surveyed drawing and touches the paper, “I’ll be leaving tomorrow with my division to New Jersey to help Hazelwood and determine the strength of Cornwallis’s force. There should be some fine opportunities for scavenging and skirmishes- if I suggest it, Washington will release you to join me…”

It’s an offer, and one that flatters me deeply, but I hesitate.

“If course, I would never remove you from a post where you’re happy to help Washington…” General Greene’s expression is hopeful in a way that presses me to smile.

But, flattery aside, I cannot overlook my purpose in this office- whether I’m happy with it or not. Washington had kept me here to work Congress at a critical time. If he had not needed me, he could have used my diplomatic education, and sent me to General Gates rather than Hamilton- and now with Hamilton gone, there will be excess paperwork needing tended.

I give a small bow, “I appreciate your consideration, sir, but I…must decline- and ask that you not mention the proposal to him. I believe General Washington will be needing me, and while your station in the field is…tempting, I’ll not have him believe my thoughts are elsewhere.”

If General Greene is disappointed with this answer, he doesn’t show it, returning my bow politely. “I’ll inform General Lafayette to fill the post without you, but-”

“Lafa…”
My eyes drift to General Greene’s hands where he’s turned to rummage in a satchel by his hip, producing a letter with familiar handwriting and holding it out to me. “I believe he wrote of some personal matters as well, so you should have his letter nonetheless.”

My mouth gapes open, and I collect myself in haste, “I...wasn’t aware that the Marquis had returned.”

“Yes, about a week ago,” Greene says, retying the buckles of his bag, “He insisted on reporting to General Washington upon his return- I would have thought you’d see him then?”

“...No.”

Greene hums in mild surprise, “Well, does...this change your mind about the post? He had a preference for you.”

I glance at General Washington’s office door, considering- my friend had been returned for a week without my notice, he had visited headquarters and not seen me- chosen not to see me. The pit that has grown in my chest by his absence aches with the thought. I glare down at the letter and frown. A preferential field command, gifted as an apology- for something that does not merit it- is not fair to the men who deserve the glory. “It doesn’t, sir.”

Greene nods in deference, gives a small bow, and leaves me with my letter.

ON NOVEMBER SECOND, as decided at Whitpan, the army marches to a plot of land known as Whitemarsh, thirteen miles northwest of Philadelphia. We order the construction of redoubts and fortifications on three hills, Militia Hill, Fort Hill, and Camp Hill. And, as the soldiers put up their tents and move carts of belongings, we aides practice our routine, unpacking the General’s papers.

Settling into my own tent, as winter descends, I miss my bed at Dawesfield, the drafty windows, and a pillow that smelled of Hamilton’s hair in his absence. Mister Tilghman takes the cot beside mine, and we don’t speak much, but he’s invariably considerate as a bunkmate. He leaves me our desk for my own personal writings- and with my correspondence with my father growing rapidly, the gesture is appreciated.

Besides missing a few comforts, I relish the move to camp. It’s more natural for an army than shifting from town to town and home to home. Howe’s army had plumed itself with pride after Brandywine, but with such a showing as we made at Germantown, even without a victory, the enemy has grown apprehensive. Our new position places us directly in General Howe’s throat, and we prepare ourselves so that, should he make to bite at us, he’ll receive a choaky mouthful.

A DAY AFTER MAKING CAMP at Whitemarsh, General Washington is pacing his field-tent in agitation.

General Stephen’s trial had begun, and the boys have all been careful to avoid speaking ill of any superior officers, making any hint of disagreeing with decisions, or needling at the soldiers’ bad behaviors- though we all have noticed the alarming rise of boozing in tippling houses whenever we make runs through camp...

With Harrison in York to sit on Gates’ Board of War, Fitz out chasing the web of supply mismanagement, Hamilton on the road to New York, and Walker currently ill with a fever, the General has employed a squad of respectfully educated boys to assist us in managing his
correspondence.

One unfortunate Captain leans to explain a grammatical error in the General’s letter, and—“Out!” he
snaps. “I don’t need a whole crew of jarkmen praddling to me about insignificant commas! Out- get
out!”

The volunteers stream from the tent, hastening each other until the General is left alone with his
aides, one hand braced against our desk, the other rubbing his temple. The tension that emanates
from his posture has Meade casting a concerned look across the table at Tilghman and me, one
which we turn and share with each other. After a few moments, Tilghman pushes aside the papers
about Stephen’s trial which he had assumed in Harrison’s absence, and he steps to the General’s
side.

“Sir- if you need to go rest, we can-”

“I’m not leaving this tent! I don’t need rest- I don’t need pity!”

Tilghman recoils against the sheer presence of Washington’s anger, obviously questioning the merit
of the General working in such a state, but he doesn’t dare mention it. “Then allow us to help with
whatever is concerning you-”

“What concerns me is this!” the General snatches a note off his personal stack, tossing it haphazardly
at Tilghman so it flutters to his feet. The aide stoops to collect it instinctively, but Washington glares
at the motion. “Heav’n has been determined to save your country, or a weak general and bad
counsellors would have ruined it! Weak general! Bad counsellors!”

Tilghman’s eyes rove the page in his hands, presumably finding these words on the note as his
expression conveys a crease of concern. He sets the page at the table within Meade’s reach, “Sir,
where’d this come by?”

Meade shows me the paper- just a short scrawl in an unfamiliar hand, the beginnings of a raving
response letter, already torn to be discarded.

“General Conway,” Washington snarls, “sent those words to Gates- and news of it came back to me
by General Stirling, confirmed by Gates’s aide, Colonel Wilkinson when he reported Burgoyne’s
surrender.”

I don’t fail to notice Washington’s verbal demotion of Wilkinson’s rank. Wilkinson’s promotion to
Brigadier General was an undeserved gift from Congress and has not been well-received by the army
recently- by Brigadiers and Colonels alike. I had hated the name since Hamilton spoke of him as
Gates’s messenger. The General must be aware of that- and his current company.

I glance back at the beginnings of the note, “Do you intend to reply to it, sir?” I say.

Washington has returned to pacing, plucking at his bottom lip in thought, but he stops, looks at me.
“Do you believe I should?”

“I…” don’t believe it’s my place to say how I’d treat Conway.

“Yes, he should answer for it-” Tilghman says, relieving me of the need, “Sir, Fitz was tracing
rumors of a note like this spreading around York- there’s good reason to believe this report is true,
and if it is true, you cannot stand for it.”

Washington doesn’t move, doesn’t turn to recognize his aide.
“Sir, Congress is ripe with rumors, and with Harrison’s report, you know you cannot ignore it. They’re stocking Gates’s Board of War with men who harbor some dangerous opinions- General Mifflin who left his quartermaster post without telling you, Richard Henry Lee who proposed our Declaration and holds more influence over Congress than any of us, Adjutant General Pickering who’s already shared some unfavorable opinions of you, and Baron de Kalb- who, while I’m not entirely sure understands what’s happening- has certainly been bought with Congress’s brierous promotion to major general.”

Tilghman’s words, and his usual drawl were replaced with an insistent, all-encompassing arguing style that nearly mirrors what I’ve heard from Hamilton, and I wonder how much they had spoken on these matters- how much I still don’t know. I recall Fitzgerald’s insistence with the General before he left, how he’d urged Washington to respond to these abuses. Tilghman counts off the names of the Board members on his fingers, and looks to me and Meade for support.

I give a nod to his words, aching for inclusion to benefit my commander as everyone expects. I stand, “Sir, with New York secured, Gates will have nothing better to do but vye Congress for another command- your command. Do you plan to ignore that?”

Across the table, Meade is motioning to me to sit down.

“And from everything I’ve seen- all that I’ve heard from my brothers on this matter, he has a stronghold of influence in Congress. Without a way to exploit your own support, and establish a stronger hold, you’re-”

The General halts my words with a look. “If you believe I’m ignoring it, you must still be defying your orders.” The softness of his voice doesn’t match how his words cut. “Or, do you not understand what I need?”

I drop my eyes and swallow, sit down and reach for my quill. “I’ll write to my father.”

FROST HARDENS THE GROUND the next morning as I make the walk to headquarters. Tilghman had left me in our tent as I completed my letter to my father, adding an account of the cannonading heard off the Delaware, between the sixty-four gun Somerset, the Roebuck, and some other vessel. We had received the report from General Varnum describing how the Somerset had run aground and the American battery fired upon it.

The camp is at arms, an extra patrol dispatched from each company to make constant rounds around our border. A heavy musquetry had been heard yesterday between the Delaware and Whitemarsh, and we take no chances. A team of privates are making rounds near the guardhouse as I drop off my letter with the courier, and I report to them the noise- then take the opportunity to speak with them about their post and berate the state of their uniforms.

As I come into the General’s headquarters, the volunteer boys are gathered, leaning over the table and talking about the noises I had reported. I take up my own station, listening discreetly as they laugh.

Apparently Potter’s militia had been exchanging some fires with a British detachment at Province Island. They had been jeering at the redcoats, inviting them over to have some beef and flour- to which the British called back to partake of their salt. The raillery continued until shots replaced words.

I stifle my laugh in my fist so as not to encourage the talk. The boys should settle down before the
As I set about the day’s first translation, Tilghman clamors into the office, dropping another bag of dispatches onto the desk for the boys to start with. He steps to me, putting a hand on the table, “Have you seen Meade?”

“He’s not reported yet. Why?”

Tilghman leans back from the table, instead pulling out the bench to sit across from me, shifting his eyes away. “Just curiosity. He’s...keeping our record of the mercury- dropped ten degrees since last week. Down to the twenties now.”

The mundane subject doesn’t suit Tilghman’s perplexing tone, a forced casualness. But, I let it slide, pushing a portion of my stack to him to sort through while I translate. We talk for several minutes about my letter to my father, my trip to the guardhouse and the patrols around camp. I tell him about Potter’s militia’s glorious battle for the beef.

When Meade comes into the tent, Tilghman hastens to him, grabbing his arm and speaking to him quietly. I watch the exchange in growing discomfort, feeling vaguely disincluded until Meade looks over at me and says something to Tilghman who responds with a sharp whisper.

Their debate ends with Meade walking brusquely to my side and putting a hand on my shoulder, “Come,” he says. “We’re going to speak with General Trumbull.”

“I WAS THINKING, because you do well with General Washington when he’s being unreasonable, talking him through it and all that, maybe you’d do best to speak with Trumbull about dropping all this,” Tilghman says, looking over at Meade who simply raises a brow and gives a shrug in response. “He was on His Excellency’s staff about a year ago, so he might appreciate hearing from us- aides de camp.”

Their conversation has me feeling neglected and confused, “...Dropping all what?” I say.

“It’s not something you need worry about-”

Meade interrupts Tilghman’s dismissal, “General Trumbull is planning to resign his post as the general of purchases for the quartermaster department.”

AS WE WALK, Tilghman explains with some hesitation, that he had been working closely with Hamilton to keep the supply department from falling into shambles. He obviously withholds information, but each time he does so, Meade fills in for me, tossing me careful, guilty glances which I pointedly ignore. If he means to include me now as an apology for his insults against Hamilton and my father, he shouldn’t involve me in this matter at all.

Congress had split the commissary department in half, creating a Commissary General of Purchases and a Commissary General of Issues, separating the task of buying supplies and distributing them with the belief that this would prevent any one man from aggrandizing power. All it did was lead to supplies being distributed unevenly, corruptly, and too slowly- so that perishables like vegetables, flour, and meat, were failing to arrive on time and going spoilt.

Commissary General Trumbull had been attempting to combat this by purchasing more foodstuffs, the highest quantity he could. But, without a Quartermaster General ensuring that carts were
traveling on time, his money wasted away with the foodstuffs left rotting in their ports.

As we approach the young general, he’s sitting sprawled against the wall of a barn, a notebook propped open on his knee and sketching. His personal belongings are gathered in a satchel under his knees as if he’s entirely prepared to depart the army this very moment. It makes this conversation all the more daunting.

Meade exchanges a glance with Tilghman, pulls him aside to whisper something by his ear before Trumbull looks up and sees us.

I turn from them and step fast to the young general, dropping to a knee beside him. “You’re an artist,” I say.

He glances at me, one brow raised, and turns his attention wordlessly back to his paper where a sketch of the camp tents is coming into shape.

“I was trained to draw when I was a child, but I never practiced much with landscapes- that’s quite good.”

He gives a small nod of recognition, “Yes, thank you. I prefer to draw faces.”

“Well, I’d love to see your work.”

Setting down his pencil, he looks over my uniform and meets my eyes. “You’re...John Laurens?” he says like both a question and an accusation. I nod the affirmative, and he hums as if he had expected such. “Yes, I had heard General Washington picked up a new aide. Well, don’t tell him you’re trained to sketch or he may employ you to critique his own drawings- and it’s more of a burden than you’d think.”

I give a small grin and shift my seat to lean back against the barn beside him. “Tilghman says you were on his staff last year, so I suppose I should congratulate you for the quick promotion.”

The general’s brows raise, “A bit late,” he says.

“Yes, well I didn’t have the privilege of knowing you last year,” I say, aware that my tone borders on flirtatious. Though I have no attraction to the older man, a touch of flattery has never hurt in swaying a man’s mind when he’s set upon leaving. “And I would’ve been glad to congratulate you at once, sir.”

He shakes his head, amusement fading. “It’s not the honor you believe it to be.”

“To be a Commissary General?” I say, “Sir you are the first of your station...the very first general of purchases of the American army, it’s certainly an honor!”

This renews his incredulous half-amused look and General Trumbull closes his notepad. “You truly are new to the army.”

“I am,” I must admit.

“Well, I suppose His Excellency admired your fresh enthusiasm, but if he has a plea for me to stay, he should send Colonel Hamilton to talk.” His lips press thin, and I realize he doesn’t mean any preference for my friend, but that he must have been working closely with Hamilton to compile the notes that he had been working on in support of the department.

I frown and look away, “Hamilton has been sent to New York,” I admit. “He’ll be eager to speak
with you when he returns, I’m sure—"

A sharp huff comes from my side and Trumbull pushes up to his feet, “Of course Hamilton’s gone. Yes, that’s best now isn’t it, send away anyone who’d help.” He presses his hands hard into his hips, muttering curses under his breath against General Mifflin. “Lost one aide to ambition and he sees traitors at every turn, that man!”

I wish that Washington had sent me to Gates in Hamilton’s stead, so perhaps he could be here having this talk...he might know what to say.

As Trumbull stands, Meade and Tilghman approach and join us, giving hasty explanations that General Washington requires him to serve his station, arguing with him not to make a hasty choice, and Trumbull points to them, orders them to sit and listen.

They obey, dropping to sit on logs gathered from the barn’s wood pile, and General Trumbull explains a predicament that seems to surprise even Tilghman.

Congress had applied a law, requiring deputy commissaries to provide specific descriptions of what’s being sent where, every item purchased, the size, quantity, and quality of it- on a five-thousand-dollar bond, out of pocket. Congress’s distrust of the army’s supply had grown so frantic that the lost goods, spoiling in port were charged from the honest buyers’ pockets. Trumbull’s deputies were quitting their posts. With good reason.

“How can a promotion be honorable if it costs me my honor itself?” he snaps, “I receive notes from my officers- my friends, pleading with me to spare them the charges of shipments of flour, grain, meat, corn- because they cannot continue to feed their families while paying off the losses of goods that they had no power to deliver!”

I draw a shaky breath.

“And, it’s to me who must refuse them their requests because Congress has required it- because it’s the will of the people that the army support itself. Someone must be held responsible for lost goods...and though the spoilage occurs under his neglect, the General of Issues will surely not handle it- ill as he is!”

On his log, Meade is glaring down at the soil. He kicks a clump of grass and pushes to his feet bravely. “Help them pay off the bonds,” he says. “Tell them to send requests to Washington, and we’ll—”

“I have!” Trumbull snaps. “I’ve paid more than my share of debts and I would continue to do so, Lord knows I can afford it.” He steps close enough to Meade that the aide backs towards his stump. “I could even plead with His Excellency to heed their requests. I’d feel no shame in begging on behalf of my men. What I cannot afford, is being held so entirely powerless at my own damn post, to fail so completely and lose every effort of fixing this again and again. I won’t suffer it.”

We fall silent, consumed in the gentle din of the soldiers at work around us. I can see that there will be no convincing this man to remain at his station. He’s determined to defend his honor against a hopeless battle, and I cannot begrudge him.

I cannot imagine the pain of failing so many subordinates, costing them their wealth and pride for orders outside my control. Standing from the barn, I reach to touch his shoulder and give a nod in understanding. But, I have to believe in my father and his peers- that they will understand what needs to be done. I have to have faith- “If Hamilton were here,” I say, “or...or if his work were completed and Congress saw the condition of your department, would you reconsider or- or come
Trumbull laughs through his nose, shaking his head wistfully. “If Congress saw what we need, you wouldn’t need me- we’d obviously have God on our side.”

I nod, “Then I’ll do all I can.”

THAT NIGHT, as I tug off my boots and untuck my shirt from my breeches, Tilghman sets his parchment aside at our desk, paper crackling in his fingers, clutching too tight. He turns in his chair and watches me as I stretch out my arms and a cool breeze surges across my chest from beneath the open hem of my shirt. “What did you mean...with Trumbull?” he says, “About Hamilton’s work.”

I drop my arms to my lap and consider him, black eyes and grey streaks of hair touching his temples. I’m lost as to his meaning.

“How much did Alex tell you?” he says.

It’s strange to hear Hamilton’s name on another man’s tongue so casual, but I brush off my surprise and brace my hands on the edge of my cot. I can’t forget that Tilghman had known all about Hamilton’s work long before anyone had told me about it- he had had Hamilton’s trust, and he had not trusted me. “Enough.”

His lips press thin in consideration, loosening his fingers on the letter he’d crumpled, and he turns back to the desk, grabs his stationery box from the far corner of the table, “I really doubt that,” he says with enough guff that I think to protest it, but, “What do you intend to do?”

I raise a brow at his tone, an accusation and a warning wrapped up into one, and it’s true that I hadn’t formed my plan yet, but to simply stand back in the face of our army struggling. “I’ll compile the department’s complaints, get...get the information that Ham was compiling and help Trumbull get the truth to Congress,” I say.

Tilghman picks his stationery box up from the table and moves it to his lap, turning in his chair to face me, “You should be focusing your efforts on this business with Conway,” he says. “Y’know him better than anyone else in this office...”

“I won’t neglect that duty,” I say firmly.

“And your duty as translator?” he says, “Without Alex around, we’ll be short on fluent french speakers, and we’re working with a lot of engineers on the Delaware.”

“The Baron d’Arendt volunteers in the office, I’m sure he would help-”

“But, you really wanna do this?” Tilghman stops my tongue with a sharp look.

I knit my brow, “Of course.” He studies me in blank silence, and I admit, “Hamilton worked hard to collect information, if Trumbull quits- if...if the quartermaster department falls apart while he’s gone, all that goes to waste-”

“Trumbull gave me his resignation after supper.”

“Wha-”

Opening his letterbox, Tilghman pulls out a letter and holds it up where I can see a signature- signed
with a prominent ‘T’. “He quit,” Tilghman says, and he stuffs the letter back down into his box with unnecessary force. “There isn’t anything any of us could’ve said to stop it.”

I clench my teeth, fingers tightening against the frame of my cot. Is...that why he hadn’t wanted to bring me? Is that why Meade had?

“But, you are right that you can get the truth to Congress.”

I look up again.

Tilghman is rifling in his box, digging through notes until he comes to a thick packet of parchment, tied together with a red cord. “So, Trumbull resigned- his position will be filled with someone new, and it’ll come down to his successor to tie things together, so we’ve gotta make sure whoever’s next gets all the most recent information. Alex did most’a the footwork,” he lifts the packet with a quirked brow and I recognize the handwriting- the sharp dashes through Hamilton’s ‘t’s, “but, I’m sure His Excellency will allow me to have a nice long talk with Trumbull...about what he needs to turnover his office in light of Mifflin’s absence...”

Studying Tench’s expression, he’s gravely serious but also...somehow smug. He doesn’t seem so perturbed with Trumbull’s resignation as I do…

Washington had not wanted his aides meddling in General Mifflin’s department, attempted to reign in our study of the absent General’s affairs to a more personal study of his character. And, Meade had implied to me that Washington was nervous of Hamilton’s involvement in Mifflin’s duties- how those duties had lost him the loyalty of his first aide- but...for whatever reason, despite those concerns, Washington had allowed Tilghman to meddle in those affairs so far as to compile that thick stack of notes...at least, he seemed to have allowed it, but-

“Does he have a copy of those notes?” I say, “His Excellency, I mean.”

“Washington already knows everything here,” Tilghman says, waving the packet, and I believe him, but-

“Does he know that you have a copy of those notes?”

That catches the older aide in surprise and a slow smile stretches over his mouth. There’s something conspiratorial in his look, but he seems satisfied that I would question him on behalf of the General. “Have you got any brothers, Laurens?” he says.

It’s my turn to startle, “Yes, I’ve t...I’ve got a little brother, Henry.”

“Hmm- I had five,” he says, and I’m struck with dread to hear him speak in past tense, “Tories- the lot of them...and I could’ve stopped it. If I’d just talked to them, just showed them the truth before…” his voice drifts, “well, regardless- I have five new brothers now: Harrison, Meade, Fitz, Hamilton...and you.” I raise my brows and he holds Alex’s notes out to my hands, “And, I want to make sure we’re all on the same page.”

I blink, reaching out to accept the packet, unable to stave my own confusion and suspicion. I’ve never seen Tilghman question a word Washington has said. Of all the boys on staff, he has always been the most loyal to our commander, the most susceptible to the General’s paternal affection-drawing countless eye-rolls from Ham. But, Washington didn’t know he was keeping this file...Washington hadn’t approved him to share this information with me.

“What do you really plan to ask Trumbull?” I say.
He grins, “Nothing you won’t know about.”

“And nothing Washington doesn’t approve.”

“Of course.”

A strange confliction strikes me— forbidden fruit, this knowledge isn’t mine to have. It’s not my General’s desire that I know, but “You...didn’t actually care if he resigned this morning, did you?”

“Not particularly. It was bound to happen.”

I nod, coming to understand how the boys worked so efficiently, how they always seemed to understand exactly what Washington needed. “So then...when I made that offer to Trumbull...you already knew what I'd say…”

He motions to the packet with a slight, encouraging nod, “Start reading.”

ON NOVEMBER FIFTH, a small detachment of militia arrives at Whitemarsh from General Putnam, and it brings me to grin with pride as the news arrives in Washington’s office. Hamilton surely had orchestrated the detachment’s march, and while they’re not the requested Continental soldiers, the added strength to our force is a blessing.

The reinforcements I had ordered had also arrived- at Red-Bank, Hazelwood has stocked two garrisons. And, plumed on this knowledge, I take satisfaction from the effect my words had made on the state of our naval defences, but our needs on that front have become personal. All matters on the Delaware have been falling into my hands, and as they do I find myself reporting those affairs to my father in my letter of the day, describing the damage at Fort Mifflin which had been allowing British ships to pass unharmed out of reach of their cannons. There are galleys that could be launched to make attacks on the ships, but the sailors quibble with the soldiers, refusing their assistance in sailing, and there’s not enough sailors to launch the galleys alone.

Such vicious spirit should not be known in a republic. It infuriates me to think there’s nothing I can do to stop it.

A wooden ball hits the table over my letter and startles me from my writing. General Washington is standing at my left, one hand on his hip and a certain warmth in his eyes, “You’re trained to draw?” he says.

My brow lifts in confusion until I glance over the table and Tilghman snickers over the days courier stack, unloading letters. I narrow my eyes. Shouldn’t he be speaking with Trumbull? “Yes, sir- but only a few lessons in my youth.”

Washington gives a mild nod and pats my shoulder, “Well, there was a rumble of cannonading nearby this morning and I was planning to draw a survey- the terrain should be high enough to see the river and assess your reinforcements. If you can manage a sketch, I’d have you along.”

My reinforcements…

WHATEVER PRIDE I had taken in His Excellency’s accreditation of the Delaware defenses to me fades quickly as I ride behind him and Meade, horses driving us southeast, towards the northern tip of Philadelphia, towards Germantown…
Towards a familiar cleaved-up lawn.

As if the sky senses my dread, the clouds bunch up and rain begins plopping in thick drops over the grass, striking sharp on the leather of my hat. Cliveden sits atop a hill that dips sharply on its far side, trees interspersed along the pathway that leads from the hilltop and the few structures atop it and down into town. The ground, where it had once held lush grass and manicured shrubs, still holds the scars and wounds of the battle that had played out here exactly a month ago. There are dents in the brick walls of the mansion, broken glass where windows once were.

I let Meade ride ahead with the General, keeping myself behind them so they might not see how my eyes catch on the house, how my teeth clench when we come into view of the principal door.

A man shouldn’t visit his nightmares.

But, I feel I deserve this reminder of my failing as we ride to the crest of the hill and the General dismounts to walk to the edge of the dip. I should consider my reputation in light of men like Rush and Conway, speaking ill against my General’s office- and his officers. I am proud to do all I can to assist the naval efforts, translating de Fleury and Hazelwood’s needs, but I must be wary of the divide between pride and hubris.

Washington was right that the Delaware is visible from this level. I can see the base of Fort Mifflin, strongly fortified and manned, and with the aid of a telescope, I can count the flags of each regiment myself and estimate the numbers that had arrived.

Squinting from this distance, the men look like ants…

EACH AIDE serves a vital purpose to the General. Unbeknownst to me, we had been gathering information whilst performing our regular duties all along. Mister Harrison’s work surrounding General Stephen’s trial had brought him to studying Conway’s accusations against Washington’s officers- and now his assignment to the Board of War placed him closer to studying how those accusations tied to General Gates’ command. Fitzgerald had been assigned to follow General Mifflin when the former aide fell ‘ill’ at his station, and that brought him to reporting Congress’s decisions about the supply department as a whole. After the battle at Trenton, Meade had taken a particular interest in Gates himself of his own volition, keeping detailed notes of the northern commander’s battles and collecting any reports he could gather on his trips to carry notes to Congress, sharing his findings with Hamilton. Washington had called him into his office, allowed him to continue collecting information on his rides, so long as he stopped including Hamilton. He didn’t stop.

Hamilton fixated on his suspicions and shared them with Tilghman who helped him to compile the findings of all the aides together.

And me, I had been placed beneath Conway’s command for a purpose.

I loathe being held to an epistolary task. But, it’s comforting to know my cause, to have borders in which to confine my efforts, dictated by a leader that I trust. If I can succeed to make my father a friend of the General and keep watch over the loyalties of his officers, I can redeem my failures in the field and help Washington as I should. I can avoid over-extending my responsibilities beyond what I'm capable of. And, with my brothers on staff sharing their findings with me, I feel I’m back in the heart of things.

I make the first ride to the post, retrieving a bag of letters for the office...including a letter in Hamilton’s handwriting. Clutching the parchment, I can’t quite repress my smile, wanting more than
anything to tear the wax seal and pour over Hamilton’s words immediately. I know better than to open the General’s letters if they’re not assigned to my station.

Conway’s response to Washington’s letter is sitting at my desk when I return to the office, Meade and Tilghman sitting across from me and eyeing it with trepidation. I understand the warning and accept the General’s rage that’s to come, sliding the letter down the table to Washington’s stack.

It sits there like a lead weight.

And, when Washington comes into the office, a coil of tension wraps itself through the room, binding my attention to my brothers, all of us casting weary looks as we stand to his attention.

He reads it.

But, the General doesn’t explode as he’s oft done before. His shaking fist clenching at the table remains the only indication of his fury and he turns directly from the office without addressing us at all, jaw set so tight I swear I could hear his teeth creeking. Somehow, even his footsteps sound furious. He drops the letter at my desk as he goes.

I don’t hesitate to pick it up and pour over it voraciously.

I regret whatever professional trust I ever held in Conway.

Everything he implies- all that he alludes to believe of the General and his own station makes my body roil with a poignant, keenly physical disgust, as if I might actually vomit from words alone. With careless strokes of a pen, he brazenly admitted to having shared such insulting opinions of Washington with General Mifflin and several of Washington’s personal friends, attempted to absolve himself by declaring his slander ‘candid correspondence’ that should be encouraged in the name of free speech, implied that the inquisition of his words was despotic and tyrannical, presumed that he held the right to ‘allow’ Washington to request the original letter from Gates, and completed his presumption with a thinly-veiled threat that he would give an account of his grievances in France upon his return...an act that would not only jeopardize our chance of an alliance- but perhaps place the stipulation of the General’s removal.

Pushing the letter away, I understand Washington’s response. I don’t know what to say- how anything could encompass my feelings.

Meade bursts into furious, angry laughter a moment later, the letter gripped in one hand, “God, what a cock!”

HAMILTON’S WORDS provide a necessary balm to my frustration with Conway, bearing some happy news about his arrival in New York. I had wanted to focus my attention on writing angry suggestions for the ways in which I believe His Excellency should address Conway’s insults, but Meade’s picked up Alex’s letter and insists on reading it aloud in a cheap impression of Hamilton’s voice. He’s impossible to ignore.

The address of Hamilton’s note allays my fears for his safety on the road, showing that he’s arrived at his first destination. And, it seems he’s met with a Colonel Morgan who was eager to depart from the north and join us with his corps.

The happy news stops there.

“We’re taking wagers- how long it’ll take Hammy to twist Gates’s arm and have him cough up those
troops,” Meade says, packing his riding bag as he speaks.

I haven’t finished my pile of the day’s dispatches, but I did complete a note to my father to request an update about the prisoner exchanges last night. I toss that haphazardly onto his stack, taking small pleasure in his frustrated huff as it knocks several notes from the precarious pile. Meade has been irritatingly pleasant since we had spoken about Hamilton’s departure, and I’ve still yet to instigate any anger from him- no matter how I’ve tried. “Who’s bet the longest?”

“Walker as of now- says eighteen days.”

“I’ll say twenty.”

He throws a hand to his chest in mock-hurt. “Laurens! An insult- against your own friend?”

“Contrary, Meade, it’s a good bet. Ham’s letter makes the matter seem in such a state that he’ll be held there longer than we thought. The northern commanders are strengthening themselves in Albany instead of marching to our aide.” I toss Hamilton’s letter across the table for them to read. “Besides...if I wager too soon- I’d hate to feel that sting of missing him while also losing a bet to you lot.”

Tilghman snorts and drops his pen to stretch his fingers and pick up the letter. “Sting of missing him?” he laughs, throwing me a taunting look under his brow. “Little lion’s got you in his maw, eh, Laurens?”

As if in exact opposition to Meade’s excessive pleasantry, Tilghman’s ribbing has been relentless, and I’m afraid it may be a manifestation of how he expresses affection. I throw him a glare. Perhaps if he hadn’t been so insufferable recently, I’d worry more about the accuracy of his assessment, that he may’ve seen just how deeply my sentiments extend, but I know he’s just being a prick.

He smiles wider and looks down, grabbing his quill again and underlining on the letter, “If I can count on you to search out all your dear friend’s letters, you should be vigilant of these names,” he slides the paper back over the table and I lean to see where he’s marked two men that Hamilton mentioned having spoken with, a Mr. Hughes, and Colonel Hughes. I vaguely recall the name Hughes in the notes Tilghamn had shared- vaguely. “Alex wouldn’t’a mentioned them less he wanted us to see them,” Tilghman says, pointing to the page and lowering his voice.

I lean in to hear him. Guests and volunteers have been wandering in and out of the office all day, and the Baron d’Arendt was still taking a particular interest in our work. It requires some secrecy.

“Colonel Hugh Hughes is the assistant Quartermaster General- and not too fond of his boss. And, Lieutenant Peter Hughes...well actually, I don’t know ‘bout his rank anymore, but he was Gates’s former aide de camp- quit back in January. If anyone up there knows anything about Mifflin and Gates- it’s them. Alex’ll have ‘em round his finger by now.”

“You’re serious?” Impressed with my friend’s guile, I can easily imagine how Hamilton would charm these men for their loyalty. I look back up before I can train my face neutral and my admiration must show.

Tilghman smirks, “You didn’t think he’d be wasting his time up there, did you?”

I smile. Of course not.

ON NOVEMBER SIXTEENTH, Fort Mifflin’s last holding slips. News of it rocks through camp,
followed insistantly by clinging murmurs of hope for the other forts upstream, hope that the river will freeze and trap ships. No one dares voice the thought aloud, but as the trail of soldiers’ families that follows our camp settle into the fields behind Whitemarsh, there’s also a sense of relief. Many families of patriots are still trapped inside Philadelphia, and ships coming in will bring food for loyalists and patriots alike. Even loyal soldiers can’t help but feel for the plight they’ve endured without.

In a camp this near to the city, wives and children cry at the gateposts every night. From my tent, I can see Washington drawing his curtains in the windows and latching shudders to avoid the sound. But, the gate guards can’t avoid it, under strict orders to turn everyone away for fear of spies.

It’s hard to ignore the state of the men themselves. Rations are dangerously scarce, and I’m weak with want to help them. I’ve started making the walk to headquarters with Tilghman. And, through his ruddy taunting and moodiness, I know he feels the same. But, often he expresses it with anger. I watch him kick a man’s face to stop him from eating his own boot.

“I’d give ten dollars of my own pocket for a substitute for hide shoes,” he says, glowering as we walk away. “They smell animal and get it in their heads that it’s food.”

I have nothing to say in response. The men are hungry.

And, I’m so useless. In this and everything else. The defense of the Delaware river was my primary task in the office as Washington’s translator. I am glad to know that my true purpose extends beyond that capacity, but it was still a matter that I had taken as a personal responsibility despite all rational warnings against overestimating my importance. I should’ve done more.

We make a walk to the northernmost post to pick up the day’s first courier stack, and I hold the bag while Tilghman rifles through the notes. It’s become a habit of his to check the parcels before we bring them to His Excellency, in case anything comes that might send him into a rage- or that he might attempt to withhold from us.

We’re silent in the foggy chill of morning, just the sound of paper crackling and the knuckles of his hand hitting the sides of the bag as he digs- then he stops and stands straight, holding out two letters to me.

I take them, feeling a quick surge of warmth cutting through my melancholy.

*Hamilton.*

The last letter we’d received from him had been dated the sixth and detailed the conclusion of his mission in New York. And, I must assume this will be an update of his travels to return to us.

General Gates had insisted on keeping two brigades of Continental troops in New York, assuming that Clinton would be coming to Burgoyne’s aide, saying he wanted to preserve the ‘finest arsenal in America’- a term which Hamilton had scoffed at in his letter, complaining of the difficulty of the roads making it impossible to move troops, and believing he could attack Ticonderoga.

Hamilton had been unable to acquire the eight-thousand Continentals we had needed, but instead managed to send five-thousand along with thirty-two hundred militia. All in all, two-hundred more troops than Washington had requested, though Militia were not ideal. Despite this, Ham’s last letter had been a pleasure to read, rife with his particular brand of sniping wit. He hadn’t written again about either of the Hughes gentlemen, so we anticipate seeing him again in person to inquire what information he could elicit.
Tilghman takes the messenger bag and slings it over his shoulder. I skim over the first of Hamilton's letters as we make the walk to headquarters, realizing sharply that my friend's task has had even more complications than we anticipated.

I'm glad we took our chance to rifle through the General's letters before we arrived because His Excellency is already at his desk, pen scribbling at a note with a sort of angry precision. We give him the customary 'Good morning, sir', and I bring Hamilton's letters to his attention. He reaches for the more recent update and leaves me the letter of the tenth, so I sit down to read it more thoroughly.

All of General Putnam's militia units were delayed for some or another reason, soldiers rebelling without pay, turning on their commanders, the foolish plans of those commanders, and-

"Violent fever and rheumatic pains," His Excellency says, voice dark.

I look up. Across the table, Meade and Tilghman do the same. The volunteers in the office stop in their tasks.

Washington pushes up from his desk and walks to me and I'm too confused and perplexed to respond to his approach. He reaches to my hands and takes the letter I was beginning to summarize—lets the letter of the twelfth flutter to my station, footsteps loud as he returns to his desk, the rest of the room in total stillness.

For a long moment, I don't touch the letter, but as the silence of the room stretches on, I can feel Meade and Tilghman's eyes on the note and I know they'll snatch it to read if I don't.

'I have been detained here these two days by a fever and violent rheumatic pains throughout my body.'

One sentence and I seem to lose my ability to decipher English, my vision drifting off the page and out of focus. After a moment in this posture, Meade must realize that I'm not reading anymore; he plucks the letter from my fingers and reads it aloud, and I have just enough focus in my capacity to understand that Alexander will be remaining in New York having done all he could to encourage the movement of troops.

But, he's violently ill...so much so to have mentioned it—so much so that it's stopped him from returning to us—

"Sir!" I say, pushing up from my desk before actually gathering something to say.

The General looks at me sharply from his desk where he was reading the earlier letter.

I stare, caught.

"Mister Laurens…"

I glare at the table, the most interesting thing in the room. I can't seem to grasp my own focus, distant from myself. It's finely-carved, smooth oak with a nice finish. The sort of table for lavish parties and we've covered it in our papers.

"Laurens!"

And, I come crashing back- Hamilton, "Let me ride to him, Sir."

"Excuse me?"
“Hamilton’s dangerously ill and we need the troops he’s tried to send and he can’t complete such a task from his bed- he shouldn’t even be writing in such a state but if I ride to him I can complete his orders and ensure that he’ll be fit to trav-”

“Sit down!”

The General’s voice booms deep, like a knock to the chest, ceasing my frantic explanations. I move a step back. “Sir, he’s got a fever-”

“And you’ve got work to do, sit down!”

I cannot make myself do it, holding rigid where I stand, but I don’t know what else to say, how to voice my protests though they roll in my breast- the General’s dearest aide, a man he treated like a son, my brother in office, my dearest friend, might well be on his deathbed and we all sit and do nothing. I’ve felt the ghost of Hamilton’s presence at camp these past near-three weeks- in the empty space of my cot, my shifting perspectives of the cruelty of duty, the papers I peruse with his handwriting...at times I’ve smiled at jokes simply with the thought that he’d laugh were he here. To sit idly while he suffers-

A hand grabs my sleeve and yanks me clumsily to the bench, knees locking on my descent. Meade pushes my hand up over the table to my quill. I won’t take it. He grabs my fist and shoves the stick into my fingers, “Be rational or you’ll lose your right to hear Hammy’s letters,” he whispers, breath harsh between his words. “We’ve gotta trust you to perform your duties without distraction...besides, there’s not danger in every mention of fever, Hammy’s always been sick with something or another...don’t be worried.”

Looking at Meade, I can see that he truly isn’t. And, Meade was right to have faith in Hamilton’s capabilities on this mission- he’s done more than any of us could’ve managed and even achieved his own means in the process. I know Meade cares enough for my friend that I should trust him if he isn’t concerned...

I hope he’s right not to be.

“I COULD’VE HUGGED THE BOY, your Excellency.”

As I step out of the General’s tent with a bag to ride post, His Excellency is meeting with an unfamiliar Colonel wearing a long hunting cloak over his uniform. Broad-shouldered and stout, his hair is crisp white though his face doesn’t show old age. It’s unusual to see field officers speak to His Excellency, much less with any familiarity...

My time has been so consumed with compiling information and enduring the officers’ complaints of sailors and the Commodore, that I hadn’t left my desk last night.

Focusing on my tasks remains the safest direction for my thoughts, holding precariously against a flood of guilt and worry that threatens to surge over me each time I slow my pace. So, I’ve taken it upon myself to tend all matters in the General’s office having to do with the Delaware defense. With Fort Mifflin lost, our possession of Red Bank and Fort Mercer call us to dispatch general officers to investigate the points and everything they’ve collected thus far is alluding to an attack from The Empress of Russia which had managed to slip past our cheveaux-de-frise three nights ago. I’ve compiled reports for General Greene so that he can plan our defense, and if I request it, I’m sure he would suggest me for a command in the engagement.
I should be going, but-

“To hear you needed reinforcements was enough,” the Colonel was saying, “but Hamilton sold his point with respect and charm anyway.”

Washington laughed, “He didn’t expect anyone to be so amenable to leaving.”

“Honestly, sir, we’ve been chafing for the fight. There’s barely any of it to be had under Granny Gates- unless you prefer politics to war.”

I recognize the words, spoken low and with an obvious smile in the tone. This must be the officer Hamilton had mentioned in his letter- Colonel Morgan, who had broken camp in New York as soon as he’d heard word that Washington needed troops. I press myself tight against the doorframe, entirely aware that what I was doing was eavesdropping...on my General. But, their conversation was harmless enough and stepping outside would require walking directly past them both, possibly revealing the way that I had paused. I have no explanation to excuse the way Hamilton’s name had caught my attention.

“I’ve heard about Granny’s response about the letter...your boy’s seeing plenty of politics, sir. I’m truly sorry I couldn’t save him from that.” The amusement left Morgan’s voice.

“There’s nothing you could do to prevent the accusation.”

I should turn back into the tent…

**Accusation?**

“Mm, I don’t think he’d heard about Conway’s letter when he arrived,” Morgan says. “And with all this animosity arising...and the pettiness I’ve seen from old Granny, I should’ve guessed he’d try to implicate one of your boys when I heard the letter got copied...I should’ve warned him. I just hope it doesn’t ruin him to Congress.”

There’s a long silence from Washington in which I turn my back against the flap of the tent, pressing a hand to my mouth to stifle any noise that might escape from my quickening breath. No- it wasn’t true. I would’ve recognized the handwriting of the letter if Hamilton had been the one to copy it...but he- Gates was implying…

“The matter will be dropped before it touches Hamilton’s reputation,” Washington says simply. A finality in his tone as if he could order the circumstances by authority alone.

I want to believe he can.

HAMILTON’S RECENT LETTER was uncharacteristically short. It left me longing for information- his health, his plans, his thoughts- anything. It’s a meager explanation of what he had done: tried to set out once more to return to us and was laid up in bed once more in Peek’s Kill at a house of a man named Kennedy. He had crossed a ferry and collapsed in the road before reaching the brigade he’d intended to fall in with.

I can see the act play out in my head. Hamilton steps from the flat onto the dock and his legs buckle. Gibbs grabs his arms and assists him to his horse. They ride a short ways with the marching column. Hamilton’s face grows pale. More and more pale as they ride- until eyes roll back and he slumps into his horse’s neck...
I would ride out to find the Kennedy house at once if I thought Washington would allow it. He wouldn’t _sit down_. And, held from that, I would join General Greene on the front lines of our defense- ride to open arms in Lafayette’s new division. Washington would welcome that. My work with Conway is drawing to a close now that the Brigadier General’s unwisely exposed his treachery in refusing to apologize, and Washington had been all too pleased to receive a report from Greene of Lafayette’s bravery in reconnoitering the British positions in Gloucester, quick to grant the Marquis command of Stephen’s men after the Major General’s court-martial deemed him unfit. I do envy the boy’s position.

But I cannot leave.

Headquarters gives me the only access I have to these letters.

I’m held useless in every matter. It chafes at my patience. And, the work is endless, ever demanding my attention. Which would seem a blessed alternative to worry and guilt, and to dwelling on my own petty woes; I should be glad for distraction. Yet, despite the activity, the relentless gale of work, I feel suspended in wait and rooted with some dragging weight that makes the completion the General’s tasks- no matter their importance- feel unlike accomplishment. There’s some vital thought I’m neglecting, some restlessness left unoccupied that leaves me fatigued, and I cannot place the burden- or where that feeling has taken root.

ON NOVEMBER TWENTY-FOURTH, General Washington holds another War Council to discuss the possibility of making an attack. Fifteen of his generals and closest advisors arrive and make a vote upon the motion- eleven members vote against. But, though he appears to be wearily neutral, I can see His Excellency suppressing his disappointment, knowing the cost of inaction...of waiting.

He tables the matter, deciding to wait until General Greene can return from his station in New Jersey and discuss the issue.

The gentlemen gathered begin packing their papers and drawing cloaks in anticipation of adjournment when a sharp accented voice speaks up from the front corner of the room, “I have a concern.”

Glancing over, the Baron d’Arendt has stood up from his chair, and I notice his place in the room for the first time. He’s not a Major General, has no large command and has mostly acted as a volunteer on staff, so it strikes me as odd that he’s attending until-

“This army has no officer of the position Inspector General. It is shocking.”

All the men in the room stare at him. Washington nods.

“In France,” he continues, “When there is a crime in our army- theft, unlawful tippling, desertion...profiteering...those matters are investigated and corrected by law. I have checked it- you do have laws, you have held court-martials. But, who leads the process of investigating such crimes? Who upholds the duty of bringing corruption to justice?”

Silence.

He glances across the room, eyes falling on the table where I’m sitting between Meade and Tilghman, a place set for Fitz who was unable to join us- still on the road following leads...I have the feeling d’Arnet has been watching us too closely to have missed this deficiency. He’s been
watching too closely to have missed our additional work.

He knows who’s been investigating our corruption.

I AM LEARNING QUICKLY that appointments to a station in the military are a matter more likely to alarm offense and suspicion than anything else short of perhaps questioning a man’s family honor...perhaps.

Since Wilkinson’s promotion to Brigadier General, talk of rank among the aides and volunteer officers has been delicate and explosive, and though everyone tends to agree in their anger, no one thinks to stop and consider actually doing anything about it. I’ve made mention of the matter in letters to my father, but Wilkinson’s promotion came from a movement of the New England delegates in Congress, and no one in that body who tends to agree with our anger stops to consider...actually doing anything.

When Meade brings up the subject of Inspector General at our table as we’re beginning our morning duties the next day, the tent explodes into a brawl of opinions and suggestions of characters from the volunteer boys. While I might’ve once enjoyed the challenge of argument and engaged the conversation...the subject revolts me now.

I gather my papers and move them to find a more quiet place to work outside the tent near a warming fire. Carrying a stack of notes from Tilghman’s quartermaster sources and my scouts along the Delaware for General Greene, I arrange my ink and pens. The stillness of morning is constantly broken in camp, men moving about to arrange their stations and prepare reports for their superiors, dress for exercises, or- mostly- fool around before called to wake up.

“You are John Laurens?”

I startle, turning about so quickly I nearly topple off the log I’ve sat on. Behind me, crouching, is a French officer, tall and muscled and smiling. The crook of his nose is familiar, one of the occasional volunteers that moves in and out of the office- but mostly out. I’ve never heard him speak, seen his face in passing. I blink, “...Yes?”

His grin broadens and he moves, stepping over my seat with wide sweeps of his leg and dropping by my side without ceremony. “I am Johann von Robais,” he says brightly- then seems to remember himself, “Baron de Kalb.” Rather than bow and give a formal introduction, he stretches out long legs towards my fire and speaks before I can properly greet him with respect, “I am a friend of your Lafayette.”

I raise a brow. *My* Lafayette...I give a nod, ”Enchanté, Johann von Robais Baron de Kalb.”

His hand gives a dismissive wave, “Baron will suffice for any friend of Lafayette’s.” And, his eyes drop to my pile of letters and numbers, smiling widening- if that was possible. He raises his eyes to me with a knowing look, then glances away, “I have just talked with His Excellency,” he says. “See, your Congress has granted me a promotion to Major General.”

I give a nod of congratulations.

But he continues, “They didn’t consult General Washington before doing so and I believe it was a bribe.”

And, I’m startled by his bluntness. I’ve never even spoken to this man before now...and he’s already sharing suspicions. Instinctively, I press my foot against my stack of papers, notes and
secrets that Tilghman has girded closely, pressing them deeper behind my legs. I recall the fears he had sustained against telling Lafayette his supposition of Gates. I’m inclined to trust the Baron—just as I’m inclined to trust Lafayette, but...these aren’t my secrets to share.

“You may have heard that I was assigned to sit on the Board of War,” he says. “Of course, I will not. I can’t see what supplies the army truly needs if I’m sitting in York, and Lafayette likes me to write our friends for supplies from our country. I have told Washington I prefer to stay with the boy.”

I stare, watching the obvious marks of affection play along the Baron’s face when he speaks of Gilbert, pride and protectiveness, like a father brags of a son. I trust him entirely, but, “Why are you telling me?”

“Because I have already told your brothers,” he says, eyes falling back to the stack of papers behind my boot. “I will be nearby should you need my help. With... anything. I’m not unfamiliar with the...pressures of your work, and the necessity of receiving some good news every once in awhile.”

He holds out a letter to my hands, marked with familiar looping handwriting, and I hope it’s from Lafayette. It’s not— it’s an official note from Conway. It’s already been opened and read. And, staring at it, there’s some vital thought I’m neglecting, some emotion I’ve suppressed into cold numbness.

It’s a resignation. I receive General Conway’s resignation letter, hold it in my own hands. And I feel absolutely no satisfaction.

“THE BARON DE KALB was a Quartermaster General in France,” Tilghman says that evening as we’re returning from supper. It was a late meal, and Washington had taken Meade aside to compose a letter to Albany including orders for Hamilton’s care and the march of the troops he cannot accompany. Tilghman and I completed our own tasks, and after we secure the General’s field tent, we’ll be free for the night. "Conway must’ve heard about his promotion to Major General and took enough offense to quit..." Tilghman says, "of course, there’re probably other reasons for his resignation, but this one aligns quite nicely. Baron de Kalb was a low rank in France, so Conway must suppose it’s an insult to his own qualifications."

I had been weaving our conversation around the volunteers that move in and out of the office throughout our meal, specifically the French ones. Tilghman had been all too pleased to complain of d’Arendt’s recent attentions, and I had a few stories of Fleury’s letters. I know my fellow aides are clever, but Tilghman’s been allowing my elicitation as if he doesn’t notice it. I’m sure he does.

“But,” he says, “the Baron couldn’t’ve held much rank for his post. I’ve done some digging— during the French and Indian war, he spied on us for King Louis.”

“Us?”

“Colonists— to see if we still liked British rule.”

“Wow,” I say. I feel vaguely like I’m playing along, becoming too obvious, and Tilghman looks at me hard. “So then the French were interested in us even back then,” I say helpfully.

He pushes his hands into his pockets and turns forward. “We’re not trusting him, Laurens.”

I restrain myself from drawing breath too harshly and spluttering when his words catch me like a fist. I give a nonchalant shrug instead— as if his immediate denial of a suggestion I hadn’t even brought up hadn’t unbalanced me so much, “So then we don’t trust him, but as you said— he’s a quartermaster
and a spy. Both of those skills would be useful to us—"

“He’s also Lafayette’s friend, a general- and dangerous to us.” Tilghman stopped briefly to listen to me, but he steps forward again as if physically dismissing me. “Besides- now that Gates’s friends have an interest in him, he’s off limits to us.”

I grab Tilghman’s shoulder to stop him. “Why is that that means?” I demand, abandoning my restraint. If this is my station now- I won’t be dismissed. “We trust Harrison to hold a seat on the Board- I know he’s an aide and that alters the circumstance, but Gates’s friends have an interest in him and you’re using that position to draw information. Why not offer the same opportunity to Baron de Kalb? He turned down his seat for Washington’s sake- he’d be loyal, he’d report everything to Lafayette. On the Board of War, he could be an asset—”

“He’s a foreigner, Laurens!” Tilghman snaps. “I shouldn’t have to explain this to you, he could ruin us—”

“So could I!” I speak before I consider my words. And in a beat I understand the threat and regret it, but I won't retract it. I came home to America to fight. I was brought to a sheltered station, appointed and moved at my General’s convenience to meet people and form opinions that would be favorable to his needs. I might submit to this manipulation. But I do so because I know what I believe. Given the chance to know the full scope of the situation, I would’ve believed the same. If I chose not to- I could ruin General Washington in a few words. It’s the truth, “You trusted me.” I lower my voice, loosening my grip on Tilghman’s lapels. “Trust him.”

Tilghman narrows his eyes.

“It’s Lafayette…” my voice comes sounding more like a plea than I mean it, and the tone makes something shift in Tilghman’s expression.

He looks away from me and grabs my wrist until I release his coat. “Not everyone’s had the privilege of seeing the performance you saw,” he says softly. “Some things seem inherently true because you’ve been in the right place to see them. Your friend’s put all his hopes in us, all of his heart and his trust- and he’s come a long way through every obstacle, abandoned everything he has and loves in France to be here at his own expense. He is entirely motivated by his belief that-...that we’re golden. Do...you really want to show him the rust?”

A MUFFLED NOISE is coming from within the General’s field tent as we approach, a low whining sound, somewhere between a growl and a cry that alerts me of some wounded animal inside. I hold out my lantern and open the flap with care, prepared to strike if needed-

But, the tent goes silent. A single man is hunched over the desk, face in his hands and shaking. I glance back to Tilghman for instruction, but he just shrugs and steps forward to confront the man- an officer, and when he touches the back of his shoulder, Major Tallmadge sits up and throws off the hand. His eyes lock on me and I can see tear tracks trailing down his cheeks.

Somehow, seeing his emotion strikes me to envy him for his crying...this expression.

But, he closes off, purses his lips and rubs the tears off against the back of his hand. “I presume you’re here to clear the General’s tent for the night.”

“That’s right…” Tilghman says slowly.

Tallmadge nods and moves to stand.
“Is everything alright?” I say before he can rise.

He stares at me a moment and turns away, moves again to stand, but I step forward and push him down by the shoulder, squeezing it. He had spoken to me once when I was in such a state...

Tilghman shifts on his feet behind me, and I glance back at him, lifting my chin towards the flap of the tent. “You can go ahead to bed,” I say, more of an order than I should make it. “I’ll lock this down.”

Tilghman gives me a long look before nodding, stepping back and letting the flaps of the General’s tent drop closed behind him.

Tallmadge stares at me as I turn back to the desk and pull out the bench to sit across from him. “You want to know…” he motions vaguely to the table, “why I’m here, right?”

“I’d like to,” I admit. “But, I won’t make you leave like this…so I’ll wait until you’re ready to go.”

He nods and says nothing.

And we sit- quiet for several long moments, until he slouches to put his elbows onto his knees and I cross my legs. He scratches at his hair restlessly, a nervousness I understand though it feels impossible to describe. He’s only a few months my senior, but some impression he’d bestowed had never allowed me to see just how young he is- we are. “I wonder what even keeps me here, Laurens,” he says finally, hoarsely.

“Here?”

“This camp- the army.”

I have nothing to say, but Tallmadge doesn’t seem to expect an answer.

He pushes his hands through his hair, thoroughly ruining his braid. “I...I was demoted, John.” He blows out a harsh breath and looks at me, “I couldn’t collect information fast enough. A woman from inside the city carried out a note and reached His Excellency before I could- looking for her son, she...she slipped right under the British generals’ noses out of her house where they were quartered and I...can’t even get information from Boudinot fast enough to please His Excellency…”

“A...woman?”

Tallmadge shrugs, “Lydia Darragh.”

He says the name with enough blasee that I don’t question it further. Gathering intelligence is primarily Tallmadge’s occupation and he must know enough about the work to have seen everything. I can understand the source of his embarrassment- to have his sources outpaced by an old woman. “So, Washington demoted you from intelligence chief?”

A nod, “I couldn’t retrieve any more information than I already am from my sources without endangering lives…” his lips press thin a moment, and he admits, “and I...pestered him to demand an immediate exchange.”

I knit my brows until my understanding of his causes catches up to our discussion- all the times I had seen him moving through the General’s office, chasing Commissioner Boudinot, trailing Washington’s heals. He was persistent in one matter, “Of prisoners?”

He nods.
The tent falls silent for a long moment and I don’t know what to say to fill the space. I’m not deaf to the cries of the people coming from the city every night. There aren’t the means to survive—no bread, no meat. I know...the prisoners are dying. Tallmadge’s hand raises, discreetly wiping his eyes. I reach over the table and cover it when it returns to it’s resting place. He looks at me. "My...brother fought at Long Island," he says. "I was there with him when...his company got captured just over the hill from where I was fighting and...I saw them put his hands in irons...when they took the city, we cut off their supply lines to starve them out...” his voice drifts off again and he seems unable to continue.

“Did he…?” survive.

Tallmadge just shakes his head and diverts, “Captain Cunningham was the one who held my friend when he...when I heard he was commissioner of prisoners in Philadelphia, I volunteered for reconnaissance, any intelligence position I could snag after Brandywine, I...I thought maybe if I could convince Washington to press Congress for an exchange, maybe this time I could save someone...but I just...I can’t…”

“Your intelligence about the march to Chester helped Hamilton confirm our attack before Germantown...if not for you, we-”

“No, Laurens!” Tallmadge shakes his head and puts up a dismissive hand. “Don’t. I don’t have resources. It’s not...it’s not a lack of motivation or skill, I just...don’t know the people I need to. I can’t do the things the General demands while achieving my own means. But, I’m grateful for your faith...seeing how you handled our prisoner, how you detach yourself from the work. Boudinot always asks for you- asks about your father. And, I know you boys are performing your own intelligence in addition to the General’s papers, and you all have your own noble goals, and I wish you the best...I just...don’t have the same patrimony. I’m not fit for this.”

“But- patrimony’s not a mark of your character!” I say, indignant.

He laughs through his nose and smiles wryly. “Yes it is.”

I’M ANGRY. Far from detached, the emotion must have laid dormant for weeks now- rage with myself, with my job, with the army, with my commander. I can’t protect anyone I love, can’t defend their good name or preserve their lives or their honor- from myself or my friends or themselves. I returned to America to give my life to a cause and been confined instead to politics, the only thing I’ve ever been properly used for- and worse, I’m admired for it. My fate never changed. I was just foolish enough to believe I’d chosen it.

If I had I would’ve failed. I’ve failed every task I’ve chosen- the militia that had reinforced Red Bank panicked when Mud Island was lost. They fled, blew up their magazine, and ran from the fort we’d prepared for seven weeks. And, I had- once again, wasted time and resources on a stronghold that we couldn’t keep. Resources that can’t be wasted. The same army that fights for our liberties is neglected in rations and forced to steal from citizens to survive. My brothers and I are forced into such means of combating the neglect as spying and mistrusting our friends, degraded to the task of defending injustice as necessity. The men whose responsibilities we endure charge their failures against their commander. They lie to be forgiven.

And, the man I admire most is left to manipulating our stakes at the expense of our personal dignity- at the expense of our admiration.

I would say anything to hear him deny it- I would give anything to believe it.
You cannot trust him with your personal honor.

It costs me my honor itself

Maybe this time I could save someone

I’ve never knocked on General Washington’s door. In the months I’ve worked on staff, I’ve never been the man sent to rouse him from his personal study to meet some officer or dignitary. The door’s barely opened to me, “We lost Red Bank, sir,” I say bluntly. “But, you knew we would, didn’t you?”

He pauses in the threshold, brows climbing in shock. I’ve managed to keep accusation from my tone, but this is still more direct than I have ever been. Already dressed in his banyan, I realize I’ve interrupted the General from retiring to bed- as if only to make the intrusion worse.

“If we truly intended to hold the Delaware all winter, you would’ve pushed for the exchange of prisoners. Wouldn’t you?” I push. “We would’ve been taking in refugees from the city- because you know they’d starve if we succeeded to hold it.”

He purses his lips.

“Sir.”

He lets an exhausted breath cloud the air before his face, closing his eyes for a moment before he steps aside and motions me to come into the Emlen house parlor. “Would you like tea?” he offers kindly.

I stare. Then give a nod.

A FEW MINUTES LATER, we sit in the Emlen family dining room, holding fine china cups and saucers, sugared tea brewed by house servants and served despite the irregular hour. A fire crackles in the kitchen hearth where they built it.

A errant tea leaf swirls in my cup.

“We held the river as long as we could, and I would’ve liked to continue holding it indefinitely,” the General says, fingers placed with a heavy sort of grace on the handle of his cup. I stare at him. Everything about him feels off- unbalanced and controlled. When he continues, his voice has gone dry, “Surely you understand why I’ve ordered refugees to be turned away.”

It’s not a question, but I nod.

He breaks my gaze and looks down at his hands, picks up his spoon and stirs his tea slowly. “Everything...that we do has consequence,” he says. “We fled Brandywine to preserve our army and we held in Reading to avoid marching into a trap...as a result, I lost the capital...as a result, I lost everything- and everyone inside. Hamilton salvaged what supplies he could, but everything in the city is our enemy’s spoils now. We...cannot afford to dwell on lost goods.”

“And what of soldiers?” I say. Then suppress a wave of shock with myself to press on, “People aren’t goods to be forfeited.”

His Excellency seems unfazed, “I’ve made strong demands of Congress, sent Boudinot to see what can be done for them. That’s all that I can do without diverting my attention from more pressing
matters. I’m expected to reclaim the capital this season, and whether we attack or feint into the
winter, I have to focus on making the best decision among many bad ones.” He stops stirring his tea
and lifts his eyes to mine, and it strikes me abruptly that he looks tired- exhausted. “If you would like
to speak with Commissioner Boudinot about your concerns, you have my permission. Your
concerns have always had my support- so long as they don’t interfere with your work.”

“I…” have nothing to say, knowing exactly which concern of mine he thinks would interfere...

He lifts his spoon from his tea and sets it aside to drink, replacing it gently on the saucer when
finished, “But, you’ll soon be less confined, I hope. When Greene’s division rejoins us with the
forces we sent to Hazelwood, I should have more volunteers to aid your translation.” And, with
Conway’s resignation, he won’t need me to attack his credibility in Congress- but His Excellency
doesn’t say this. “And, his vote should confirm our retreat to winter quarters…”

“Wait what?!?”

Washington looks at me, eyes falling dim. He’s suggesting we retreat. “We don’t have the means to
continue this campaign,” he explains. “Every response I’ve received of my generals when I bring up
the idea of attack has refused it.”

“Not from Wayne-”

A laugh, “Wayne doesn’t count,” he says. “Without rations for the men, all we can hope to do is
hold this position.”

“So then we hold it!” I say. The thought is an instinct, but as soon as the words leave my mouth, I
recognize some genius in them. I lean over the table, “Keep skirmishers posted north of the city- near
camp. Harass the British positions, but don’t engage them fully in any one place, and focus attacks
on loyalist farms with supplies- and hills for us to retreat into. It’s what General Greene’s been
doing- with success.”

Washington raises a brow, “Yes, I know…” he says, “I discussed the strategy with him when he left
camp. It’s what we fought against with the natives.” He frowns with some consideration before
nodding to himself. “And, it’s what I’ve wanted to suggest.”

I grin with encouragement.

And, he considers me, looks away and picks up his spoon to replace it in his cup, “When Greene’s
division returns to camp, you’ll have half a company…anything more would probably be too
large…”

GENERAL WASHINGTON holds another war council the following morning, convening upon the
topic of where to hold winter quarters. Three options were to be proffered- camping at Wilmington,
moving west towards Lancaster and Reading, or stretching out between the Delaware and the
Schuylkill. Each of the options removes us from our position within Howe’s current clout, placing
space between our army and the capital.

The subject frustrates me.

I had hoped His Excellency would wait to hear General Greene’s counsel before deciding to retreat
for the winter. But, before I can form my thoughts to protest, the door of the Emlen house’s north
wing swings open and footsteps march in. Two distinct limps, General Greene’s characteristic
hobble and the staggered clack of a cane hitting the floor.
All eyes turn to their attention as Greene walks in with the Marquis de Lafayette by his heel.

So, I hadn’t just imagined the boy, created a character to embody the revolution- he’s here, just the same as I recall, wide-eyed and pleased, untouched by suspicion. Lafayette holds a cane for his injury, though he carries his weight evenly without using it. It doesn’t take long for his eyes to find me and light in recognition. As the council resumes and diverts away from the subject of retreating for the winter, the Generals discuss the value of continuing the tactics that General Greene has been employing against Cornwallis along the Delaware. Lafayette stares at me and beams across the room.

I want to shrink away from his sight. He hasn’t changed at all, but I’m nothing like I was.

I WAIT OUTSIDE for the General while he speaks with Greene about the council’s decisions. The chill in the air does nothing to deter my satisfaction with the idea of staying in the field for another few weeks while we can withstand it. I rub my hands together in front of my lips, breathing hot air onto my knuckles to keep them warm while I wait. Father had sent some fabric to reinforce my clothing, but the wool gloves and new boots have not arrived yet.

To prevent my mind from fixating on the cold, I focus on considering tactics to employ with the half-company His Excellency promised me. Expediency would be key to make an attack before any redcoats could call reinforcements, so a column formation would be best. Each man would need a rifle. Perhaps station a sniper to cover our movements.

I wonder- if Hamilton were here- would he envy me for this position? No…he would wish me well, but how would he do it? Would he call me to his sick-bed to encourage bravery, in my stead, pull me into his arms and hope for my glory? *I need them to know you …*

It’s foolish to entertain the thought. This is only half a company and orders to skirmish, and Hamilton is well-occupied in Albany between recovering his health and overseeing our reinforcements…among other responsibilities. Without word from him, I worry for his health and his reputation between his fever and Gates’s implicit accusations, and I shouldn’t burden my thoughts of him with selfish whims of how he might express his proclaimed friendship…though he had called himself my friend…

“Monsieur Laurens!”

I turn, face flushed and words caught in my throat. It’s Lafayette. Before I can gather myself to respond, he’s draped himself over me in a tight hug, pressing his face into my cravat so his curls irritate my nose. I don’t return the embrace.

“I have heared great things of you in the battle at Germantown,” he says.

I blink away my surprise, considering the sources Gilbert must receive his accounts from- the correspondence he shared with Hamilton and His Excellency. Biased sources. I shake my head and press the boy back from his embrace. “We couldn’t claim it was a victory.”

He gives a shrug and smiles at me, hands still holding at my arms, “But, I am happy you are well,” he says. “His Excellency General Washington said to me you were shot.”

“Oh,” I detach my sleeves from his hands. “That’s true, I was. I’m alright now.”

Lafayette’s smile wans into a pout, but still maintains a pleased air, “I missed the best of the fight,” he whines. “See- I believed the war was over and I hurry back to camp, just to find Greene was fighting with Lord Cornwallis and I stopped to help him.” Lafayette speaks quickly, words simple but sure,
his English much stronger than I recall. And while hearing him speak feels abrupt and nostalgic— a remnant of lighter times, I was wrong to think he hadn’t changed at all. There is something stronger in his determination. It holds tense around him like a forestay, holding him at sail. He speaks about his work with General Greene, his new position as a Major General in command of troops, his own aides de camp and the missions he’s been tasked already.

I feel myself withdrawing.

When General Washington emerges from his meeting, I’m eager to step away to his side. I make a hasty escape.

MY COMPANY IS COMPOSED almost entirely of North Carolina militiamen. Backwoods farmers, they all carry rifles with tight bores and long barrels, slung haphazardly over their shoulders. None of them own swords or proper combat weaponry besides knives and a couple cherokee tomahawks and hatchets. They muster for me at four in the morning the day after General Washington’s council, gathered on the southwestern edge of camp, formed in a gaggle.

When I call them to attention, they fall in where they stand…

I need a moment to close my eyes and turn away. I gather myself before returning to form them into proper lines.

It quickly becomes apparent that they understand drill movements— in theory, but the application has never been attempted, or at least never practiced. Recalling how I’d failed to call drill under Conway’s instruction, and unable to remember how Hamilton had executed the orders when I’d watched him so many months ago, I dismiss the idea and order the men at ease.

“This is a raid,” I say to them, raising my voice. About twenty men listen to me, “And it’s designed to your specialty- we move in quick, we withdraw just as fast. Many of you are familiar with the tactic— I know.” A few more heads raise to look at me and I recall such heroic stories of these men’s country, Cary, Culpeper, Alamance and the Regulators. I imagine, given their age, these men fought similar battles as my father, made similar sacrifices. “Many of you fought beside redcoats ten years ago, so you know how they’ll react. If you work efficiently, I don’t mind unpolished form. Follow my intent, follow each other… and let’s make a bite at them!”

I take some satisfaction when their captain raises a cheer.

MY SKIRMISH is not the first to reach Germantown. The villages surrounding the peak, Limekiln, and Mt. Airy, all show the scars of prior engagements, houses and barns burnt to ash where they had functioned as staging points for attacks. The British have not been ignoring us this time— not as they did before Germantown. The countryside has all but fallen into its own civil war of militia outfits- patriot against loyalist with both sides stoking the flame.

When we reach Chestnut Hill, I’m familiar with the terrain— and the hostile sentiments of the people who inhabit the village. My militia captain rides to my side and gives a report from our foremost scouts and we arrange a small reserve force to lie in wait in a gully just before the market street up ahead. The main force of our company moves on.

Perhaps it’s a particular habit of militiamen, or perhaps it’s just a custom from the woods of North Carolina, but my men crouch behind buildings as we approach the British guards, so I follow their
example. This isn’t how the Regulators fought at Alamance…

But, shots ring out sharp and the uniformed guards in the streets drop dead before I can blink, and
my men rush out from their places as the streets of the market become a chaos of confused civilians,
pushing women and children towards houses, ducking beneath stands and wagons. We move in
quickly, disarming and engaging, finding those men who are a threat to our operation and directing
our attack to seizing this village’s supply- my men set food carts to flame and kick over barrels of
ales and cider, dump water on flour and throw tea blocks into the dirt.

In the anarchy, I would regret the waste, knowing the want of our army at camp, but a squad-sized
element of my men are already engaged in a coordinated attempt of corralling the village cattle into
ropes and guiding them into the woods.

I’m grinning at the ingenuity, enjoying the feel of having a sword back in my hand- when a knock of
blunt wood strikes me between the shoulders pushing out my air.

I fall forward, rolling over only in time to dodge another blow from the plank. It hits the dirt by my
head. Hard enough to send a clump of grass flying.

I’m shocked by the attack- more so by my attacker.

A black man- the soldier’s dressed in a sharp white uniform, clean despite the dust clouds thickening
the air. I barely have time to scramble backwards and avoid his next swing. I’m the only man on this
raid dressed in the proper blue continental uniform, shoulder-boards marking my status as an officer-
I should be a dishonorable target. But he doesn’t relent. I draw my sword. When his next hit splinters
his broken axe-turned club into pieces between my legs, he throws a rag of a banner into my face
from the street and I struggle a moment to kick off the fabric and dust- before I can, he’s pinned my
arms and pressed his weight into my stomach with bruising force.

I feel I might vomit from the pain. I can’t see him- can’t move my arms to defend myself against-
The man’s weight falling slack.

I wait for the blow to end it, a proper cuff to the head would end me in the most fitting retribution, a
parallel death for my neglect, delivered by a deserving executioner.

The man doesn’t move.

Suddenly- the earth beneath us does, and under the banner I can’t see- can only hear the low
rumbling of houses’ foundations creaking, people screaming in panic as the ground quakes and
moans.

Pressed beneath an enemy soldier, I’m already panicked- no more so from an earthquake. I struggle
still, try to push off his weight in this desperate blind wrestle even as God himself seems to condemn
the violence, throws the earth to heave and shake us off.

Then it stops. Everything stills.

After a moment, I can’t breathe under the dirty banner, can’t breathe under his mass, so I struggle,
squirm until the fabric falls away from my face and...he’s dead. I can see where the black soldier
was stabbed, blood soaking through the white of his uniform. His cocked hat pokes harshly against
my neck and I twist and wriggle my way free until I can grab the hat and read-

“Liberty to the Slaves.”
The Battle of Whitemarsh

I've been alone in a million places and I've seen God in some dirty faces

All that I could think about was you.

…

A LIFE IS A COLLECTION of divine signals, vague and fleeting and few. When they come, we’re defined by the way we react- if, how, and when we take action. If we cower in comfort and compliance, or if we step forward bravely to act on our beliefs.

An earthquake…

Liberty to Slaves.

No matter how I try, I cannot recall life before those hauntingly sweet voices, the sweating crew lifting barrels into place in a Charleston harbor, barrels of tar and rice...so much rice.

My father sold rice...but only after he’d sold people. After it’d made him a fortune. And, those people worked our land. A windy hilltop over the swampy rice fields where he’d seen their quarters built; in the summer there was no relief from the heat below that hilltop. So they sweated and slowed until the keepers raised their whips. And in Geneva, the actors sweated on stage, whipped in a farce of a production of the real practice I’d seen so often- and the crowd of genteel Genevans gasped in horror until I felt myself the brute, hiding in a gentleman’s clothes. So I pleaded my genteel friends, like I could clear my conscious, wrote my Francis frequently as my doubts turned to disgust, hoping he would share my disdain. He did- of course he did, but it was impossible in America- wasn’t it?

Change.

Francis wasn’t mine. Whatever hold I believed I had on his heart was imagined- or at least imagined in its intensity. And in my ponderous assumption that our fates were entwined, I allowed his dismissal to shake my faith in myself, his doubt to distract me from hope for my cause. As if I couldn’t achieve my end without him.

Freedom.

Black soldiers in white uniforms. White soldiers drenched in red.

I don’t need Francis. I need focus. I need to convince Congress- convince my father.

I won’t cower behind the common cause, empty ideals and dinner debates about fundamental rights. We’re already at war, what better time to stir a storm. I feel the weight of it. Convincing my father to believe anything he didn’t already design himself is….not a simple task.

MY THOUGHTS were still roiling when the letter arrived. We didn’t dally, making the march back to the main body of the army before noon, we moved quietly through the woods, far from British lines. I disbursed my half-company to their regular commands, returned directly to headquarters, and was confined back to my desk, still smelling of the cattle we’d stolen.

I barely devote any attention to the work at my station, sat between Meade and the volunteer boys. I
waste two sheafs of paper with editing marks over my mistakes. Weaving words into soliloquies, drawing on rhetorical tricks I’d picked up from my brothers on staff, I spend more time dictating my arguments in my own head than I do comprehending the words my hand transcribes. I can’t imagine the plans that are swirling in my head will be well-received.

A black battalion for the Continental Army…it’s…an idea.

“Are these the opinions of His Excellency’s advisors about winter quarters?” d’Arendt says, bringing a pile of his translations across the room to my stack.

His errant curiosity cuts into my thoughts and I slide an instinctive hand over my work.

“Monsieur Laurens is copying the General’s personal notes at this moment,” a voice behind me says simply- de Kalb, seated at a desk by the window with the volunteers.

I straighten my posture, “Yes…” I say, eyeing the Baron keenly. Though Tilghman’s ordered me not to include him in our investigation, I can admire his tact. “Just notes from friends in Congress.”

Across the table, Tilghman raises a brow at me and I know I’ve said a word too much. But, the Baron d’Arent just stares a moment and shrugs, turning on his heel and leaving without question.

I let out a huff of breath.

“Friends in Congress?” Tilghman whispers to me, tone taunting lightly. “How many friends could an officer believe Washington might have? In Congress? You might as well tell him Walker’s a spy for the Virginia delegation.”

I laugh, but Tilghman doesn’t, “Wait…is he?”

Tilghman shrugs, but a sly smirk plays along his lips. “d’Arendt tells the General everything he hears before taking his thoughts elsewhere. I don’t think he’ll give us any trouble. But, do keep your guard up.” His eyes fix behind me to where I know de Kalb is sitting.

I decide to ignore my disdain, “Why is he asking about the General’s advisors’ plans for winter quarters?”

Tilghman frowns, “We recommended d’Arendt for Inspector General, so he may wanna draw plans for our arrangements- as he should, but...we should trust our own commissaries to be making such plans as of now. Most’a the French officers think it’s shameful to be so indecisive.”

“It is shameful,” Meade whispers to my left. “Look,” he slides a letter across the table to Tilghman, one that he’d been summarizing for the General. “Washington’s own friends are disappointed with our inaction- with his constant consulting, but what’s worse- Congress sent three delegates to ask me about when he planned to attack Philadelphia. Attack! As if we’re not beyond our culminating point here- I mean, Lord, we’re starving…”

“Joseph Reed sent this?” Tilghman says, sliding the note to me. “Our Joseph Reed?”

“…It was intended for Mifflin. Fitz intercepted and copied it.”

Tilghman hisses his disgust.

And, I quickly understand why as I read it. My familiarity with the Washington’s personal affairs is lacking, but I now know enough of the men he keeps close to recognize the name Joseph Reed and know that he should love the General as a friend- he had served him as an aide-de-camp. He
shouldn’t be speaking such things as his letter describes- and he shouldn’t be sending them to Mifflin…

The web of dissention grows ever more intricate.

“And what did you tell the delegates?” A deep voice startles us all from the table and the letter falls out of my fingers and lands on the transcription of a letter from Fort Mercer- the ink was still wet…

Meade jolts to attention, but Washington just raises his brow, eyes sliding slowly to regard the soiled note near my hands, General Armstrong filing in behind him. He steps between me and Meade at the bench, a heavy hand falling on my shoulder.

“I explained our deficiencies,” Meade says, “that- with such meager supplies we will struggle to make an attack.”

Washington seems to ignore this, still glaring at the note from Joseph Reed. And, as if in direct defiance of Meade’s answer he says, “I’ve just received intelligence from Major Clark that the British are planning a surprise attack and are ‘in readiness to march’ from the Delaware. We’re taking the room to confer.”

Tilghman turns from the bench immediately, calling all the volunteers to vacate the tent. They lurch into motion, packing letterboxes, filing papers and corking ink bottles. The din is general, but Washington’s hand on my shoulder keeps me still.

“Meade, you know the route to Greene’s camps,” he says, “I need an accurate map of the enemy’s works in that sector and General Greene’s requested some counsel…” the hand at my shoulder squeezes. “Laurens has been working with the Marquis de Fleury, so he’ll be familiar with our forts- he can give a drawing.”

MEADE SETS A BLISTERING PACE, the likes of which I had only ever heard stories of. I’d known from his bragging- and the affirmations of our brothers on staff that he was His Excellency’s best rider, but I have always been able to keep up with anyone on horse, pressing my strength and pressing my horse. By the time we’ve reached the riverfront, my legs give out in dismounting and I grip my saddle to avoid falling.

He claps a sympathetic hand between my shoulderblades, grinning but not unkindly, and he nods towards General Greene’s stables.

I’m still gasping for breath.

A CLEAR SUNSHINE favors our observations. Though we had set out midday and ridden nearly four hours through the hills north of Germantown, the late daylight of autumn still grants visibility and we pass a telescope from hand to hand. From Greene’s headquarters, the General du Portail and Marquis de Lafayette join our observations, adding their opinions to my account as I write and sketch the landscape, sitting atop a grassy hill as they stand around me and scope.

Being up all morning on my raid, riding to camp, then riding out again so exhaustively, I don’t make conversation. And though Meade and Portail had not pressed me to talk, Lafayette doesn’t seem to realize I’m unsociable until my silence has already offended.

I don’t apologize for it.
The British had established redoubts of respectable profit, faced with plank, and the intervals between them closed with an abattis of sharpened logs. After a brief debate of necessary force, the General du Portail and Lafayette agree that only five thousand men would be needed to hold the fort against any preemptive attack. In light of that, it may be best to let them come out from their walls to meet us.

Our party’s conversation drifts and dissolves as I work on my sketch and what had felt like a cheerful outing slips into restlessness as daylight starts to fade. I can feel their eyes, impatient to leave. So, I speed my hand until the report is completed and a detailed map shows the strongest points of the enemy’s fortifications.

Meade is bouncing on the balls of his feet as I hand him my notes, eagerness to ride palatable. He mounts his horse in a sweeping motion, kicking into a gallop straight off and leaving us in a wake of dust.

I pack my pencils into my letterbox, feeling sedate, folding up the desk and strapping the package over my shoulders. Washington had said General Greene required my counsel and I assume that he referred to our works along the Delaware. Why that had needed his vague non-orders, I don’t know, but I decide I’m prepared to give my honest opinion about any question Greene might have. It feels as though His Excellency is anticipating that.

I UNDERSTAND Washington’s intentions when I present myself to General Greene and find his tent a nightmare of maps and shredded letters. Battlefield models are scattered in pieces on the floor and the chest that carries Greene’s veritable collection of books seems to have vomited its contents across the lot of it. A long trail of receipts have been annotated in blood-red ink, one name prominent among the scrawl- Mifflin.

I don’t believe it’s referencing the naval fort.

I had searched for Greene in his field headquarters and found his aides alone at their station, completing transcriptions of notes from his subordinate commanders. Pointed in this direction, I find the General himself, still in uniform, leaning close to a younger man in civilian garb.

Stepping inside the tent, I give the customary greeting, and, “General Washington said you had requested me?”

“Yes,” he says. “I wanted to speak with you about the engineering on the Delaware, and more urgently...about Mifflin.”

I glance to the second man in our presence, hesitating to respond in unfamiliar company. It is possible that he only means Fort Mifflin and nothing to do with the conspiracy looming over our heads.

Greene meets my eyes and sees my furtive glance, straightening his posture and motioning to the man, “This is Major Clark,” he says. The man gives a bow- which I return politely. Brown hair and brown eyes, he’s handsome in a forgettable way, easy to look at and easy to look away from. Greene explains, “He’s been performing some complicated...reconnaissance in Philadelphia. Tallmadge already performed his turnover, so he knows about your work.”

My work...with Tallmadge. A spy. I quickly gather- if they had performed a turnover, this man must be Washington’s new intelligence chief. “You collected the report that the British are in readiness to march...” I say, realizing it as I speak.
The man nods, one brow quirked with an interest in me that makes him somehow more attractive.

I look away.

“He spent nine months living undercover on Long Island, making observations of British troop strength,” Greene says, “but most of the British army’s being held outside Philadelphia in encampments, so Washington requires more traditional reconnaissance. You made an observation of their works?”

“Oh- I…” already gave that report to Meade to ride back to camp. “I can recount it from memory.”

Greene nods, satisfied. He can always cross-reference my descriptions with Du Portail and Lafayette, “Good, I’ll have you report that later, but…about Mifflin…” he turns away, gathering some papers that were distributed around his tent, apparently not having expected my arrival so soon; he glances at Clark, “We have some suspicions of treason that His Excellency couldn’t confirm…he said that you might be able to.”

So straightforward. I startle. While I had expected something of this sort as my purpose, we never speak of it like this. I’m not sure if it’s proper for me to- even if Washington wanted it. Greene had served as Washington’s closest confidant, I know this, having been the subject of his counsel more than once. I’ve seen him often by the General’s side, and I suppose I should be grateful for that. I had claimed my first life under his command, accepted the darkness of violence, been picked up and dragged drunkenly back to headquarters, received my position by his suggestion.

All at once I realize…there are some things His Excellency can say to his aides that he cannot say to even his closest confidant. And when he cannot speak…this is our discrepancy.

AFTER A FEW HOURS, spent reading Greene’s notes of the quartermaster department, his correspondence with General Trumbull, his own supply records, his intercourse with Congress, I’ve explained as many of his questions as I tactfully could, Major Clark providing surprisingly helpful information that I assume he either collected himself or was told by Tallmadge in the passing of his position. I attempt to remain neutral, explaining the function of the newly established Board of War and the staffing that Congress had selected for it, and though all the aides have agreed that it exists to control Washington through a committee of men who hate him, I don’t say as much aloud. Greene may already assume it by the expression he makes when I list off the names.

Once I’ve explained all I know of the plot, he nods. “Yes, well, there’s obviously a faction growing between our officers and our Congress. And, I think you boys have found your pivot in Mifflin.”

You boys …

“So then shall I go out to meet him?” Clark says by my left. I hadn’t even noticed him move there.

Greene reaches up and plucks at his lip in thought.

“Meet him?” I say.

“It may yet be too risky to tie him to any politics, and what I need you to do in York shouldn’t look to be tied to our quartermaster trails,” Greene says. “I believe it was a mistake to allow anyone to see the Angelica estate, but if you open a correspondence with him while Washington has him confined to recording information about our supply trails, it’ll seem that His Excellency is abusing our intelligence assets- as well as his own personal assistants.”
“Whom are we discussing?” I raise my voice.

“Sir, I believe he’s already in contact with Harrison- likely has been this whole time. Washington’s boys may be involving themselves without his discretion anyway,” Clark says.

Greene goes abruptly silent.

“Who!” I grab Clark’s arm, growing indignant. “I have been entirely honest to your questions- both of you. Now be clear with me!”

Clark’s eyes meet mine, brow raised with a frustrating confidence. “Lieutenant Colonel Fitzgerald.”

I drop my hold.

General Greene’s eyes are sharp on me. “Entirely honest…” he says, tone disapproving.

I quickly understand and regret my choice of words. But, I don’t regret what I said, “I didn’t lie.”

“But you withheld information?”

“As I should,” I say. “I’m privy to more information than anyone should know- that’s my position now, isn’t it?”

My own boldness surprises me and I feel it withering under General Greene’s furious look, but he helped see me to this role. “Respectfully, sir;” I lower my voice, “Washington employs his aides to help him be decisive. That’s…what he needs us for most. I loathe this business more than anyone, but His Excellency doesn’t always even allow himself to know everything that happens behind his back.” Without saying it, I wonder if Greene can understand why that may be- how any mortal man could carry the weight that Washington attempts to without buckling under the scrutiny that follows. “If we restrain ourselves from prying for information, regardless of whether we have his approval or not, we might advise him without the full scope of the situation.”

The anger in General Greene’s expression still burns through me, and I hold still for his response, but before he can speak, a tap at the flap of his tent startles us and the General du Portail pokes his head in. The conversation is over for now and our talk moves to the general army’s plans for our actions along the Delaware and in New Jersey on this side of the Schuylkill. Before I leave, I express Washington’s eagerness to make an attack while we still have the energy and supplies to do so.

Greene promises to send me the enumeration of his plans by morning so I can deliver them to Washington, but my ride will have to wait for the night. It’s too late to ride.

MAJOR CLARK walks with me to the tent Greene’s aides are sharing, a fire already placed just outside for warmth. He doesn’t speak much as we walk, hands folded into the pockets of his coat then, “That was…some gall you had in there- with General Greene.”

I look at him, brows raised. He has no reason to believe that I would want to be sociable with him. I haven’t spoken since leaving headquarters and this observation was unwarranted. I already know I was bold- rudely so.

He continues, “But you were completely right, of course. And, Greene’ll come round. As General Washington’s aides, I imagine you boys do more work than you could possibly be credited- and I understand how…particular types of work, of which we both are familiar,” he smirks, a pretty, frustrating thing, “would be a burden to your sensibility.”
He claps a hand between my shoulders and I bristle, narrow my eyes. He cannot now pretend to support our efforts after, “You exposed Fitz. If you hadn’t said anything, there would’ve been no qualm.”

He startles away from me, pretty smirk still firmly in place and I want to close the distance, grab his coat and shake it off him. “You exposed it yourself.”

“Excuse me- you accused us of-”

“I simply opened the suspicion...sir, you confirmed it.”

I hate that he still smiles, and I hate the warmth of it- as if he believes I’m being slow. And, upon reflection, I question myself- whether he had really said Fitz was spying on the Board or not...

He grabs my sleeve and explains, “I need a pass from General Greene to travel into York on furlough. He’s already assigned me to watch over Congress and the Board, but I plan to apply for a position as an auditor in the paymaster office. I’d need his recommendations, and he’s been wary of getting entangled in our finances.” His grip on my sleeve tightens as if he’s imploring me to believe him, and with the way he’s speaking- the offer he’s implying, I feel myself starting to. “Greene is a valuable ally to whatever you boys are planning...let me help.”

I recall the fears my brothers had expressed against openly involving themselves in the quartermaster and commissary troubles- how Meade had rejoiced in Hamilton’s ejection from the office as soon as he had tried. I recall my own disdain against their hesitation and my promises to General Trumbull…

Major Clark would fill in every gap in my correspondence with my father- the things he cannot see happening for lack of context or the things he cannot or will not report to me in his letters. And, he would simultaneously insert himself into the core of our finances...but, “Do you understand the risks of this- against your reputation if you’re caught passing along information about any of the conspirators?”

His eyes light with something like amusement. “You mean- if I’m caught spying?” he says, “Do you understand what they did to spies in New York?”

But one life to lose …

Nine months living undercover.

I can’t help but return Clark’s smile, a confident, breezy thing. I loathe this spying business, but to be capable of such a thing… “It would be a pleasure to open an intercourse with you from camp, if that’s what you’re offering, Major Clark,” I say, putting out my hand for him to shake.

He takes it with a firm hold, gripping it still, “It’s exactly what I’m offering, Mister Laurens,” he says, “if you can forward me any information you boys find.”

I nod.

He doesn’t drop my hand, giving a small squeeze, “You can call me John, by the way.”

I laugh, “It’d be strange if I did,” I say, shaking his hand once, “John Laurens- so you know. But, if it’d be a safer address for letters, of course two John’s signing off may confuse any scoundrels that intercept us.”

He grins, “I don’t anticipate that happening.”
And, I believe him.

THE NEXT MORNING, I wake to the steady sound of gentle snoring, the first notice I’d taken of having gained a bunkmate the night before. I’d slept so deeply I hadn’t noticed the disturbance, exhausted from my morning raid, riding with Meade, and a full day of tactical discussion.

I recognize the rhythm of the easy breathing of my bunkmate- Lafayette.

I gather myself into my uniform, smooth back my queue, and hasten from the tent before he can wake. He had been so eager to see me again yesterday- dropped everything to join our reconnaissance ride. He must have wanted to rekindle my friendship. I can’t face the weight of his expectations just now, so I escape, walking fast to General Greene’s headquarters to collect the plans for his division.

When I step into his tent-

“We cannot retreat from the Delaware, we’ve invested too much effort into this front and the river’s yet passable. His Excellency needs you to hold it until it ices over at least, and we-”

I would hardly recognize the voice for its intensity, raw anger laced into the words so that even though the words themselves don’t bite, the tone of their delivery cuts. It’s Meade. I’ve never heard him speak like this. It catches me mid-stride.

My entrance into the tent stops him and he glances at me, brow still drawn and finger pointed at Greene like a small blade he could impale him with. His posture seems to hold the authority of Washington himself. He turns back, lowers his voice, “we’ve relied on you to defend our decision to stay here like you’ve defended it in counsel. If you leave now, you’d betray your own word. We...Washington needs this division to endure...just a little longer.”

Greene’s arms fold over his chest and he narrows his eyes. They flick to me briefly. And, sensing the need for it, I step to Meade’s side. The General huffs, shoulders shaking with the weight of it. He steps back and drops to his desk, shoving aside papers and grabbing a quill to mark through his letter. “I’ve studied the numbers Fleury provided- and the remarks your reconnaissance provided. As I said- I can only promise we’ll hold this side of the river for three days with the rations we still have…”

Meade’s mouth opens to protest, but Greene cuts him off tersely.

“That’s all I can promise. For him...I’ll hold it a week.”

THE PLAN IS to march the army to the other side of the Schuylkill where we can wait out the winter and be close enough to the enemy’s fortifications to annoy their shipping and cut off any detachments of troops. Such a position might also have foraging opportunities, and it would force the British to make a bridge to attack us. We might relinquish our chokehold, but we won’t be surrendering the position entirely.

In a week’s time, the movement will be unavoidable.

We set out at once for headquarters. Meade guides our return ride at a calmer pace...my aching legs are grateful.

By the time we arrive in Washington’s tent, Tilghman has spread out our tasks, anticipating our
return and setting our usual places; he barely spares a glance up from his own work.

And I suppose the drudgery resumes.

But, taking up my seat, I find one of my letters already opened- which would be no surprise in this station, but it’s a personal note. Written in a familiar hand-

\textit{Hamilton} …

Tilghman looks up from his station, brow raised like an accusation.

I pick up the letter. Can’t help but note the shakiness of the lines of Hamilton’s writing- how obviously his hands must have trembled in the labor of writing. How weakly his pen had pressed into the paper.

My chest feels too light- like I may vomit, pushing down the ache of concern. His words are just legible, pleading in obscure terms for an update of General Washington’s personal affairs. He wrote me directly. Because he wants information, wants to know anything new in our study of Gates and our contacts in Congress.

I glance back at Tilghman. Hamilton had known he was leaving for Albany. He had known Fitz would be tracing his leads in his absence, that Harrison would be reporting from the Board of War, that Tilghman would be compiling the web. He had been organizing the army’s finances, making contacts with useful sources, fighting with Washington at a time when everyone in this office wanted to detach him from politics. I understand both sides of this conflict now...but I’m inclined to trust my friend’s judgment. If he wants to be included- “I should respond to him.”

Tilghman’s brow jumps higher.

“In code of course, so nothing can be intercepted, but he might be able to expand upon some of the things we’ve been finding.”

“He can find them easily on his own. Obviously,” Tilghman says, abruptly cold.

I startle at the force of his frustration, unsure what I’ve said wrong.

He doesn’t wait to explain, “Hammy’s been having meetings with Gates’s aides- Robert Troup. Apparently they’re personal friends from school.” Tilghman picks up a letter in unfamiliar handwriting, which I assume is from Hamilton’s acquaintance.

The name is vaguely familiar- as if Hamilton might’ve mentioned it at some point- I’m sure he did. “I mean, we already knew he was meeting with some contacts in New York...Colonel Hughes?” I’m sure it doesn’t bear reminding, but Tilghman’s expression only sours further.

“We know Colonel Hughes. He wrote to us on the twentieth and assured us Ham was well-tended,” he says. “Now, Ham’s never mentioned Troup, and according to this letter,” he taps Troup’s note, “I have to believe he’s been downplaying his fever so no one would report it and I’d send him information. It ends now, I won’t allow him to-”

“Downplaying...what do you mean?” I say, interrupting.

Tilghman picks up the letter, eyes skimming over the sheet, “Either Ham’s feigning fortitude or Hughes sent us a false report. Troup says he’s ‘unable to rise from the bed...a doctor tended him from the nearby hospital for some days, but was called to return to more pressing clients when his fever briefly abated...he’s now suffering from prolonged bouts of disorientation and the doctor cannot be
procured...um- indistinguishable babbling, seizing, a general weakness, coldness in the extremities’…”

Beside me, Meade bends over, covers his mouth in his hand. I don’t breathe. A month ago I had thought Ham was returning to us…now, this description…

Tilghman doesn’t seem to notice until he looks up- then takes pause and frowns, “He isn’t sure how much longer Alex can last without proper treatment. He wrote to warn us.”

Meade gathers his voice before I’ve even realized I’m still not breathing. “Why is there no doctor?” he says, indignant. “He’s General Washington’s aide de camp!”

Tilghman blinks, still frowning, “Governor Clinton is working to procure him one, seems there’s been a fever going ‘round- doctors have also been sick- and with the fighting in New York, they’re busy.”

“Busy!” Meade huffs and turns from the table, pushing a hand through his hair. I still can’t speak.

Tilghman sets the letter down slowly, “My point is, we have no place sending Hamilton anything work-related...really anything at all. He should be focusing on overcoming this fever and getting back to camp.”

My fist clenches on the note my friend had laboriously written out for me- “He wants me to write to him.”

“John, if he’s on his deathbed with fev-”

“Don’t!” I snap, voice cutting harsh and I’ve crinkled the note in my hand. Tilghman is sitting back now, staring at me with concern. A beat of silence passes, then Meade’s hand touches my shoulder- I shrug it off. “It’s not as though he’s doing any footwork himself anyway, right- that man said so, he’s been confined to his bed, if he can barely move there’s no way he’s out riding or talking to people, Ham’s probably got Gibbs out tracking his leads, so anything I send to him would just be a comfort a- a way to remind him he’s included, that we still trust him to help-”

“John!” Tench stops me.

I catch my breath. He’s frowning, apologetic- for some reason, as though he thinks I’ll blame him for these circumstances- for Alex’s illness or, “You... do trust him, right?”

He hesitates a moment and I narrow my eyes, take that as an answer before he even speaks and says, “All the information he’s been sending us is true- it matches our best sources here and in York,” Harrison, “But...he didn’t tell us he was friends with one of Gates’s aides...this Troup fellow…”

“Why does it matter?” I snap. Hamilton is a private man- always has been- “He’s not obligated to give character references of his old friends- that’s none of our business!”

Meade squeezes my shoulder again, “It’s...I mean, I don’t think it’s that we should distrust Hammy,” he says. “Just that...if his friend is collecting his letters for him, we shouldn’t pass any information against Gates- Troup works for him, it might fall into his hands.” I squirm away from Meade, but his fingers dig into my shoulder and I feel I’m being patronized, coddled like a fool. “The boy’s sick, John, so we can’t expect him to be lively at defending his parcels…”

Across the table, Tilghman nods.

I hate the grateful look he sends to Meade. I hate their coalition- how they’re confiding like this in
front of my face to force me to calm myself. I huff and reach to the desk, brush my papers into a pile and scoop it up into my arms.

“I’m going to complete these in my tent,” I say. I give what should be a polite nod to them if I weren’t so frustrated with them both, “Gentlemen.”

THAT NIGHT, I spend nearly an hour, staring at a sheet of parchment with Hamilton’s name scrawled across the top. I shift my seat several times, stand and pace, pick at my lip until I recognize the motion isn’t my own habit, sit back down. Loyalty to my friend’s wishes would have me write to him over Tilghman’s orders- take trust in Hamilton’s judgment of Troup.

But... he should be focusing on overcoming this fever...

If he’s on his deathbed.

I crumple the paper, push my hand against my brow and sit back at my desk for a long moment, gritting my teeth. It’s foolish to cry over something that isn’t assured, morbid to assume the worst. But...such a dishonorable death. It’s below him and it’s cruel to consider. Fate would’ve been kinder to take him at Daverser’s Ferry or Pennypacker’s Mill. Anywhere but a bed.

I grab a new sheet of paper and begin a new letter.

My dear Father...

THE WEEK PASSES in a haze. I try not to think of the passage of time or the silence I feel pressing all around me. Tilghman and Meade carry themselves casually; the volunteer boys on staff bustle about as always. I feel confined and quiet, unsociable and alone.

I spend my time tending stoically to epistolary matters, making polite acquaintance with the distinguished officers who drift to and from Washington’s office. My task of getting the truth to Congress develops through my correspondence with my father. I write by any courier that travels by the most direct route to York. Commissioner Boudinot, requests my introduction to him, carrying a request for prisoner exchanges that I’m sure will please Tallmadge. The General du Portail makes a trip to Congress to discuss General Greene’s progress with moving the army across the river and to discuss some important shipment of goods from France, probably coordinated through Baron de Kalb. Colonel Morgan meets me with a proposal for his militia and a visa to travel directly to York and meet my father- apparently he’d learned of my interest in Gates and was kind enough to share some stories he was itching to relay to my patriarch about a particular rumor- I hope that he can clear some heinous accusations...things that were hopefully never taken seriously to start with.

My father’s personal servant, James, delivers a package of gloves and more fabric to reinforce my breeches. He tells me that the gloves were a gift from a lady in York and I make a note to employ my father to say something handsome to her, push the note aside to complete my transcription of a letter from the Chevalier de Mauduit and the Marquis de Fleury about the completion of the bridge across the Delaware- it described the destruction of one of our ships, how Red Bank had been evacuated and now the army would be pressed to defend the river by ourselves...as General Greene predicted.

I suspect Colonel Green and Commodore Hazelwood would be displeased with this development- and their extended partnership. I’m equally displeased to hear that the Quartermaster officers that had been stationed in that sector had left muskets, tents, empty wagons, and entrenching tools scattered
around the area. General Armstrong had already been dispatched with militia in an attempt to collect
them before the British could get there and make caches.

I finish this letter and apply my seal, reaching for the next-

Abruptly at my side, Lafayette reaches over my arm to grab the wool gloves that had come in my
father’s parcel. “Are these your gloves, oh they are lovely!” He leans back and slips them on his
hands, flourishing his fingers and grinning when I turn to look at him impatiently. He leans towards
me, “A little small.”

“They were a gift,” I grab for his hands- and he lets me take them, seemingly pleased to hold them
out for me to fumble with until I can get the gloves off him.

He smiles, leans close while I’m still holding his hands. “Can you guess where I have been?” he
says.

I glance up.

He grins wider, corners of his eyes crinkling, “Colonel Morgan left his corps to me and we attacked
a Hessian picket- a good size one, I think,” he claps a hand against my arm, “Oui mon petit Laurens,
see I chargéd in on my horse and drove them screaming into their works. They brought new men
twice in the night because they could not hold us back, we killéd twenty, injured as many-” I
recognize the tone of voice Gilbert uses, the way he speaks of battle as a sport, expecting the
response I would have given three months ago, “took fourteen prisoners and killed two Captains.
They razed the forts at Billingsport and Redbank then quitted the Jerseys at once, so I am thinking
that the British will have learned to fear General Lafayette.”

I retract my arm slowly, “…Have you recorded the names and ranks of the corpsmen you lost? Do
you have a report of the ammunitions expended and rations you used?”

Lafayette’s smile wanes and he leans away. “Ah, ou-y-...yes…”

I say nothing, raise my brow.

He blinks, frowns, then pushes back from the table, “Right. I will get the report.”

The tent descends into silence as he leaves and I grab my gloves off the table, bringing my hands up
to my lips to huff some warmth between my fingers before slipping on the gloves and picking my
quill up again. When the silence stretches on- not even the sound of accompanying pens on paper, I
glance up. Meade is standing, rigid by a stack of parcels, hands suspended where he’d been sorting
them- and he frowns at me. Across the table, Baron de Kalb is wearing a similar expression.

I glare and resume my writing.

I don’t need their judgment. If they think themselves perceptive enough to see my coldness, they
should understand it’s cause- Meade at least has known me for months, known the shift I’ve endured
and the change that’s taken me as I’ve met the reality of this war- the sacrifice of my sensibility.
Perhaps it truly does make me a coward, a foolish child who misdirects his guilt and runs from his
promises- even those he’d most like to keep. But, this should all be well-known by now. And at least
I have been honest of my flaws. Meade saw my retreat- the growing void in my chest, how that ache
has made me unsociable, flighty and afraid. Harrison had seen it, Tallmadge and Shrewsberry…

Hamilton had seen it.

...he’d suffered it.
How should I feel now? Without word of his health—without even the consolation that he’s being well-tended, or tended at all. I cannot feign confidence, not of this kind. This is every ounce the weight I had felt, believing my friend drowned in battle, but dragged out to agony and haunted by the prospect of a less-honorable death for someone I still owe so much. I feel equally gutted as the day we had been assured of Alexander’s death, only now existing without that piece that’s been gouged out and unsure if I should remain in this unsteady state or if the next letter from Albany might announce my foolishness—my premature melodrama.

Everyone continues on as if they’re sure he’ll be alright. I know they’re all concerned, but—

I feel like a failure for being incapable of ignoring it.

*Be rational.*

I can’t. Not about this.

GENERAL WASHINGTON EMPLOYS ME to interrogate the prisoners taken by the corps Lafayette described in the report he brought to headquarters. It’s the first time The General’s mentioned making use of the *education* we had discussed and I’m glad it’s in the context of military affairs rather than political warfare. When I enter the holding tent, Major Clark is already there and he smiles to see me, closes the flaps as I enter.

“Thought you were heading out to the City of Brotherly Love.”

He cocks his hip, “I will…but I stayed with Greene a day too long; he made offer to work with you on this one,” he jabs a thumb towards the prisoner. “I figured I’d take it.”

Plain brown features and an attractive grin…Clark’s interrogation is familiar. He moves around the subject until the men betray themselves, slip information we had wanted into what seemed like casual conversation. ‘*We call it elicitation*’, my mind conjures Alex’s smile, focused and mine, a proud fire in his eyes and cheeks dimpled with infectious glee—

We learn that the enemy’s planning to make an attack.

They’ll be upon us within the week.

THE MARQUISE DE LAFAYETTE is still at headquarters when I return with our intelligence report, talking with Washington and laughing about some story of his campaign in Jersey with General Greene. His eyes meet mine briefly—until I break the look and stride directly to deliver the report to Washington’s hand.

I leave before they might include me in their conversation.

NOVEMBER HAS HELD nothing but grief and disillusionment, and on the last day of our captivity in this month, it brings General Trumbull to Washington’s headquarters, face flushed and furious, waving a note frantically in Tilghman’s face. “Where is General Washington?”

Tilghman snatches the note from his hand.
“Washington is reading supply reports from the Major Generals- he won’t want to be disturbed,” Meade says, frowning. It’s no secret that our camp lacks all the necessities of a campaign: guns, munition, warm clothes and uniforms, boots, food- meat...wagons to transport the lot of it. Trumbull is intimately familiar with our deficiencies, but Tilghman tries to avoid most subjects of our quartermaster suspicions when there are French officers in Washington’s tent- as there is now de Kalb and D’Arendt, glancing over to our commotion.

Reading the note, Tilghman jolts beside me, shoves the paper into my hands, disgusted with whatever he’s seen, “What will you say to it?” he looks at Trumbull.

I read the note...it’s from the Board of War.

“Did Washington know they would offer me a position?” Trumbull says, “Did he recommend it?”

Tilghman frowns then shakes his head, “I’m sorry, no.”

“Then I’ll refuse it, of course- as de Kalb did, but...did you know they were designing this?” Tilghman shakes his head again- as does Meade- I’m sure my own naivety is clear on my face. Trumbull huffs, grabs the note back, “Well, it should be clear now what it means.” My blank expression is mirrored in my fellow aides, so Trumbull explains, “They’re angling to keep influence in the commissary and quartermaster departments- between myself and General Mifflin, two former supply officers, they’re hoping to feign credibility…and prevent investigation of Mifflin’s work as quartermaster.”

I swallow hard, realizing quickly why such influence would be dangerous in the hands of Mifflin or Gates. Any complaints we would make to Congress would lose gravity when first vetted through a Board of War, hell-bent on discrediting Washington. Our growing desperation would be downplayed and censured, covered-up or dismissed.

“Washington should see the design of the Board now,” Trumbull says, looking to Tilghman as if he expects him to have information about whether His Excellency has actively responded to the threat of dissension, “The Board is confirming it’s staff.”

“Congress picked replacements?” Meade says, “Who else?”

“The secretary of the old board, Richard Peters is the newest one- but we got yesses back from Richard Henry Lee, Pickering, Conway, and you know Harrison-”

“Conway?” I startle.

Trumbull just looks at me, “Yes, he was one of the initial choices for-”

“Conway resigned two weeks ago- he should be on a ship back to France,” I say, slightly tearing the note in my hands in surprise. The thought had been a small comfort these past few weeks- the only comfort. I look incredulously to Tilghman, but he seems just as bewildered as I feel.

“Yes, well the Board decided not to accept that resignation,” a voice behind me interrupts us, “And Conway’s not even the worst of it.”

I don’t recognize the handsome officer stepping into the tent, but Tilghman abruptly bumps past me, rushing to embrace him. The man doesn’t smile, but returns the hold warmly. And, I startle to see such a raw display of affection, used to gruff ribbings and personal taunts as the sole indication of Tench’s attention.

Who is this man?
“John…” Tilghman says, drawing away from his friend, still looking at him. “Did Fitz find you?”

“Yes,” the man lowers his voice so that only Tilghman should be able to hear, but I understand the words, “he’s been making friends of couriers that carry personal mail from Congress, slipping letters and copying them when he can- unsavory work.”

“But, you’ve brought something new…” Tench whispers back.

The man raises one brow with a small grin, the crook of it coupled with the nearness he takes with my fellow aide seems almost suggestive- salacious. He slides something covertly into Tench’s hand, leaning against him to whisper into his ear, then he steps back, cuffing his shoulders.

Then he’s gone from the tent, Tilghman turning back to us with the letter he was handed, reading over it. He grabs Meade by the shoulder and gives me a look, guiding us from the tent to stand just outside- out of earshot of the volunteers. “It’s a letter from Richard Henry Lee to Samuel Adams,” he says, lowering his voice to read it aloud, “General Mifflin has been here, he urges strongly the necessity of having Gen. Gates to be president of the New Board. He thinks the military knowledge and the authority of Gates necessary to procure the indispensable changes in our army. I believe he is right.”

“So then…Gates will sit as president of the Board…” Meade says.

Tilghman is quiet, and I consider our situation- how anything we might say to protest this would be taken, “We won’t be able to prevent it,” I realize, “If we speak against Gates, we’d have to explain it- and he’s just been crowned the victor of Saratoga, we’d have no reason to put our word against him without voicing our distrust of Mifflin-”

“And exposing our investigation…” Meade mutters. “It’d be enough of an insult to even say we suspect them of plotting for power...but then if we were called upon t’prove our suspicions, we could only do so by explaining the underhanded means that we…”

“We won’t do that,” Tilghman says sharply. “Think how it’d reflect on Washington.”

“So then we can’t prevent it,” I repeat.

This receives no response. We stand in heavy silence, attempting to rationalize how to collect the sparse threads of our General’s support, gather them to strength and salvage this sinking ship.

“What about Conway?” I say. “He was embarrassed enough to submit his resignation after we caught him and denied him rank.” I look between them, desperate for some other way, “So, maybe if we draw out our complaints against him, against the fact that he hasn’t left-”

“Trumbull said the Board claimed him, Congress must’ve deferred his resignation to the already-existing Board members,” Meade says.

“They cannot just make him stay!” I snap, “It’s not their decision if Washington has already dismissed him!”

“Well, it sounds like the Board wasn’t designed to allow General Washington to keep his decisions.” Behind me, the tent flaps sweep open and the voice that speaks has a light German accent- hardly noticeable. Baron de Kalb. He steps out, chasing our covert conversation and leaving Washington’s tent open.

The eyes of several volunteers and curious french officers are on us- including d’Arendt and Lafayette.
Kalb says, “It will seem like a mark of weakness for a military commander to lose authority to command his own troops to a panel of appointed advisors.”

*Weakness,* the word makes my teeth clench. It’s a taunt too many good men have used against the best one our country has to offer, and I had wanted to admire the Baron for his wisdom- his friendship with Lafayette. I feel it fading, “Sir, this war is fought for the merits of republican ideals- for the equal voices of many men, coming together to make the best decisions-”

“The army is not a republic- you know that,” de Kalb interrupts.

Several brows are rising at me.

“Yes, I know that!” I growl- he had not let me finish and my frustration expands out of my control, defensive and blind to loyalty, ready to lash out with calculating detachment. I’ve had no feelings for weeks, no warmth in my chest for the men that should be my friends, or the causes we all hold so dear, just a logical, and grossly cynical view of our weakness. How we’ve become capable of allowing a beautiful dream to drive our movement to futility. There are costs to all good things- and the cost to a republican military will be loyalty in our hearts- something this army gravely lacks. “We all know that- Washington knows that!” I step in towards de Kalb, shorter than him but imposing my anger with a pointed finger. “Public trust- public support of this cause is the greatest weakness this military endures. Do you think a man can exert absolute authority over such a force of men when the ideals that drive them to fight are contentious of authority itself?”

“A good leader would assert authority without seeming to demand it. He would have such success that no one would ever want to rule him with a Board of War,” the Baron hisses the word with as much contempt as I feel for it, but his implication infuriates me.

“No one who knows him wants such a thing!” I say, “This Board is all a design, a plot for a few scheming Whigs, so lacking in their own natural merit that they’re desperate to defame those better than them, and if you think Washington’s weak for allowing it, you’ve already bought into their-”

“We are not having this conversation!” Tilghman says. He had been speaking while I talked, but a shove to my chest knocks me a step back and stops my words. His brows are raised imploringly and he throws a glance at Lafayette who has moved to stand near the opening of the tent, watching us with wide, confused eyes.

...I’ve said too much.

But, this is the most passion I’ve felt in this Godforsaken November.

And, it seems to have had an impact.

Baron de Kalb seems just as shocked as Lafayette, just as shaken as I feel and he regains his voice before Tilghman can dismiss the subject, “And you believe that Conway orchestrated this...defamation?” he asks.

I don’t answer- because I truly cannot prove who the pivot of this scheme had been between Mifflin’s plotting and Conway’s slander- de Kalb pretends to know our methods of learning about this scheme, but I cannot confirm them.

Baron continues without a response, “Well, I am no friend of Conway’s- I want him expelled from this country before he can tarnish it further.”

This earns a recoil from Tilghman and raised brows from Meade.
“General Conway?” Lafayette says, raising his voice from inside the tent, he starts walking towards our covert discussion circle, “He has...tarnished America?”

The Baron touches my shoulder and leans towards Tilghman, “I will be waiting to see this Great Man you all seem to believe Washington is…” He turns to Lafayette, ignoring the question the Marquis had asked, giving a smile, “But, until I see him, be assured- you have only one Conway, and I am keen to assure that.”

Tilghman narrows his eyes and I’m confused what he’s implying.

Lafayette pipes up, “General Conway is a...good officer…I do not understand.”

I glance at Tilghman and the look he returns is sharp. So, before I can be tempted to overstep tact or divulge something that Lafayette should not know, I step away. I walk past my friend and collect my papers, leave the tent. With the British planning an attack, and with Hamilton away from the office, I’m no longer a supernumerary on staff.

There’s work to be done.

FOR THREE DAYS, we wait, patrols on constant vigil with strong defenses, and each day we’re disappointed. We grow impatient, even consider the possibility of instigating the fight despite the enemy’s strong defenses. In absence of more qualified aid, I accompany General Washington on a ride to reconnoiter Philadelphia to see if it is truly as impregnable as we had feared.

It is.

So, we wait. The third day of this arrangement, General Washington holds his regular conference with General Greene, when he steps out and invites me inside his tent- I assume to confer on a matter about the landscape we had seen, maps spread out over his desk and over a standing easel as I step past the flap. It falls heavy behind me.

Lafayette’s standing by the General’s chair.

His hands are clasped behind his back attentively from whatever conversation they had held, but they slip as if by accident when he sees me. He turns his gaze away fast- as if to pretend that he hadn’t.

I’ve spent the morning helping the commissaries count and collect sacks of flour, checking over their reports, and I must look like a nightmare of ink and white powder. Shrewsberry will not be pleased when he sees the state of my uniform, but this will provide an excuse to wash it where the dropping temperature had deterred that possibility.

Lafayette’s uniform is neatly pressed and impeccable as ever.

Washington finishes explaining whatever maps they had been discussing and he looks up, motioning me to stand at the other side of the table. I glance at Lafayette and he avoids my eyes. His face has grown thinner- jaw more defined over the course of our separation. Last time I had stood with him like this, we had been advising Washington how far to station troops up the Brandywine river…

He seems older somehow.

The General addresses tactics, a plan to move in and ambush foraging parties with hit-and-run strikes, staging snipers in the treelines. I recognize my own words. “They must expect us to be moving into winter quarters now- we’ve spoken of it enough. They’ll hope to catch us in the open,
so we will hunker down and allow them to believe it.”

Lafayette points to the map, “You have General Irvine’s militia moving here to block any...flank, so they should make campfires- as you did at Princeton. Howe will probably believe that we are still spread on the Schuylkill where I and General Greene...were having our skirmish- at Glouchester. We can let them believe we were still there- put up campfires.”

Washington gives a nod of approval to the suggestion and General Greene motions to his aide to jot it down. There’s easy understanding between the three generals, as if they had decided upon these tactics already and these details were final minute adjustments- spare notes and reminders of tasks. They wrap up their meeting without Washington having consulted me at all, and as Greene and his aides pack their papers, I feel awkward standing beside Lafayette- who also stands unoccupied and silent.

Washington breaks the tension, “Marquis,” he says, and Lafayette perks, “I was going to say- bring Laurens on the raid we discussed. He’s led skirmishes in the area and we rode it yesterday morning so he knows the landscape.”

Lafayette looks at me, a fleeting glance that I don’t meet- but I feel it.

Washington notices it and seems to falter, “It was my understanding you two would enjoy the assignment together.”

“If...ah,” the Marquis holds his arms at the elbows, posture closing off, “If he wants to join me, I welcome him.”

Caught by that response, I give a helpless nod, “Yes, of- of course, your Excellency.”

Washington gives a thin-lipped nod, eyes shifting between me and my slighted friend. He hums, gives me a pointed look, “Dress warm, boys.”

“He MEANS THAT we should wear overcoats,” I explain gruffly as we trudge from the tent, feet sloshing in cold, wet soil where daily commotion had created ruts in the mud and allowed puddles to soften the dirt. “Ones that help us hide in the trees,” I explain, “and cover our lapels and buttons so we won’t be seen.”

“Why did he not just say...?” Lafayette says, keeping pace with my stride and watching me perplexed.

“He cannot always order things straightforward that would dishonor his reputation as a gentleman, so he trusts us to understand what he’s asking implicitly.”

“Ah- je comprends,” the Marquis nods, slipping me a small grin and lamenting, “mais Dieu! How many languages must I learn?”

I grant him a small amused smile, but it fades fast.

So, he tries again, “I think that, with your coat powdered like that...you may need two cloaks. Did you miss your hair?”

It’s not funny, but I can tell what he’s trying and ignore it.
I GUIDE a small company as Lafayette’s second, and we ride fast through the hills outside Germantown, reaching the outlying town I had raided with my North Carolina militia at the end of October. Stowing the horses in the nearby hills, an advance team scouts ahead to find how the new command of the British strongholds configured their fortifications.

While we wait for their report, Lafayette finalizes his commands, repeats orders he had already given, and comes to me when he’s been understood.

He talks about Washington’s strategy meetings, the trust that the General had placed in him recently as he waits for confirmation that he will have a Division to command, the counsel he had requested—how flattered he feels to be so valued. I remain unresponsive to my friend’s babbles, but I listen to glean the most important points he divulges of our strategy.

Knowing Cornwallis’s particular habit on the battlefield, our army is expecting a flank— for both tactical and symbolic reasons. Lafayette reasons that, because there’s no strategic need to destroy our army at this time— with winter impending and Philadelphia held, the best course of action for Howe will be to attack our pride, evoke the humiliation of Brandywine by repeating the tactic that had worked against us in that field— the same tactic we had tried at Germantown with some success. Expecting Howe will make a direct attack at our center with the majority of his force, we’re placing our strongest defenses in our center— and our most skilled forces on our flanks.

WE WAIT FOR NIGHTFALL, hide in the treeline until the lights of the town go dark, lanterns illuminating the roads outside stout brick houses. Having the women and children tucked away in their beds makes our work easier, and our cloaks do more than warm us.

Afterwards, riding from the town with caches of flour and blood on our blades, I feel something like a bandit. In essence— this is stealing. An ambush by the cover of dark, the alarm that woke the troops being the only thing that kept us from killing men in their beds. Hamilton would judge the morality— whether that was truly an excuse if the intention was there…

As a child, I hadn’t even been able to steal fruit from the market to impress my playmates. They’d laughed at me and called me a prude when I ran back to return the apples they’d nicked. I can still justify myself by my causes, the pit of hunger in my stomach assures me that the enlisted men must feel worse, and the guilt in my chest assures me that I’m still refined enough to deplore this trade. I couldn’t be a man who lives like this.

I’m still far from right.

As we stable our horses at camp, Lafayette hands off the reins to a servant and stands at the gate where I pass my horse off to Shrewsberry. His hands rest impatiently on his hips and he stands in the way as I throw my bag over my shoulder, adjust my sword belt, and step to leave. He blocks me.

"What’s wrong?" I ask— looking around, I see nothing amiss.

Laf reaches up and pushes the hood of his cloak back. "I want to talk to you."

A serious conversation, "Now?"

"Yes. I wish to ask—" he says, then stops, looking frustrated, and gestures toward me. "Will you remove the hood, please?"

I would rather not—I’m sure whatever conversation he intends will be easier if I stay hidden behind folds of fabric, but I drop the hood, leaning against the hilt of my sword to effect nonchalance.
"There," I say. "What?"

Gilbert looks me in the eye and says, "Why did you stop being my friend?"

I'm not prepared for it, stumble where I'm leaning and my hood drops over my eyes. "Wait, no, that's not—dammit!" I can see Gil watching me, mouth twisted in annoyance. "That wasn't intentional-"

Gilbert watches in silence, unamused. "Answer my question."

His tone is sharp, commanding, and it dawns on me that we're doing this now- here, in uniform, because he's not Gilbert. This is the Marquis de Lafayette, forthright and afraid of nothing, demanding answers.

I take a breath. "I didn't stop being your friend. We're still friends."

He shakes his head. "No, we are not. Don't lie."

"It's not a lie," I say, flippant. "Friendships become strained with distance, that's all. Sometimes you're together, sometimes you're not." I pause when I see the way Lafayette's glowering.

"No." His jaw is clenched so tight his lips barely move, arms folding over his chest.

"I've been busy- and your wig powder makes my nose itch...Tilghman told me I'm not allowed to be your friend...is any of this working?"

He shakes his head again.

"Well, then I'm out of excuses," I admit.

"Try being honest?" he asks, with a thread of sarcasm.

He is right to ask that- to demand it. But, it's a conversation I don't feel strong enough to have again, and I cannot take the self-righteous bite from my tone, even speaking honestly. "I know what it is to love someone more than they love you. It's not a feeling you deserve. And, I...haven't felt as much affection for my friends recently."

Lafayette frowns at my inverted speaking, eyes narrowing, but he seems to lose his anger, "Then may I ask what changed?"

It's an astute question- the right one to ask, and I shouldn't be surprised that he has noticed the difference in me, "It's just been a long few weeks since Germantown with the defense of the Delaware falling apart and with Alex leaving-"

"You miss him."

"I-" can see what he expects me to say, and if I were to truly ask myself such a thing, the answer's irrefutable- the feeling unmistakable. "I do, yes."

"Did you miss me?"

He had demanded honesty, "I did. I really did." An aching pit in my stomach each time I carried a letter, each time we crossed paths without meeting.

He hums, raising a brow, "I see. Well, I don't care if you love me. I love you and you are my friend."
The words come so simple to him- as they had always come so simple to me, but he trusts me more than I trust myself and, “Then why didn’t you come to see me when you visited headquarters?”

“I did ask for you-”

“You didn’t write to me at all!”

My tone startles him- as much as it startles me, and he frowns, dodges my eyes, “Your father said that you were too busy to write. I assumed that you were not having personal letters.”

My father...his early letters when I’d come joined General Washington had often complained of my slow responses. He must have assumed...must have been upset. And, when father’s upset…

I can’t blame Lafayette. “Ah...alright…”

THE MARQUIS RECEIVES CONFIRMATION of his assignment to command of Stephen’s Division. He spends a few hours at headquarters as his bags are collected to be carried to his own encampment, sitting in General Washington’s tent with me. He reads through letters from his own personal correspondence, explaining how he had spent his time in recovery, writing to the French court and his friends there in the Army, passionately promoting the revolution and his friendships with the best men in America, General Washington, Henry Laurens, and General Greene.

He smiles so much it’s nearly blinding and he speaks quickly with excitement for his successes, the suggestions he had made to prominent people. I’m not sure when I lost such poetry, but in the way that he talks and the smile that lights the air around him, I feel it’s absence and loathe it.

When he finds a letter from his wife among the stack, he reaches abruptly for my hand. Gripping it, “She was due to have our second child this month, I wonder…”

So, I squeeze his hand and help him open the note. Draw him into a hug when he bursts into tears.

He tucks his face into my collar, “A second girl,” he says softly.

I draw far enough away to see his mouth curled into a smile, helplessly pleased. Confused, I pat the plane of his back between his shoulders, “Would you have preferred a boy?”

He shakes his head against me, “Anastasie…” presses the note to his chest fondly. “No, she’s lovely-I will have a thousand lovely girls.” He pulls away, grin stretching wide, “Besides, she will be an excuse to try again when I come home. I will still need a boy.”

I laugh and he jumps up from our bench to tell Washington the happy news.

But, before he can cross the tent, the flaps open and Meade clatters inside, cheeks ruddy from rushing to us with a message. His hair is coming loose from it’s tie so he pushes it back from his eyes before making a salute, “Sir, the enemy are in motion; they have a number of flat-bottomed boats and carriages, they’re pressing horses and wagons to meet us.”

AT THREE O’CLOCK in the morning, December the sixth, alarm guns echo through camp. We had marched out in columns overnight, set up in the positions the Generals had planned a few days ago. Within minutes after, Captain McLane of the light horse, brings a message to Washington from his patrol at Beggar Town- the British are coming.
Soon after, General Irvine’s aide meets me at Washington’s post on Camp Hill, shouting that his General had been shot— one ball grazing his head, another taking three fingers from his left hand. Dozens were wounded and the company was in retreat.

But, we had expected that. The militia always retreat, and wise to that— their force was not the focus of our effort, only a buffer. And, the lure had worked. Retreating towards camp, Irvine’s men were intercepted by the Hessian column Howe sent to flank us, but, sprinting only a few more meters through enemy fire, they jumped into parapets, reaching prepared fortifications and ready reinforcements.

Waiting on a hilltop, we outflanked Howe at every attempt.

It won’t earn back the capital, but with Philadelphia held, another loss would be a blow to morale— so harsh it may mean the capitulation of the entire region. It’s here we prove ourselves— prove that we will survive to keep fighting.

The fight may be all I have now.

*I FEEL TOO OLD, unsure how long I’ve climbed, but I feel this age is my last. I feel I won’t have the strength to reach her— she rises too fast and my limbs are weary, arms sore as if I’d been fighting for days. The flames spit at me from below, and I lean in and let it burn—*

When I fall in the dream, it simply ends…and I sleep on.

FROM ATOP CAMP HILL, Washington’s post allows us to oversee the battle. On the seventh, we receive a report from Daniel Morgan’s rifleman that Howe is shifted towards them at Edge Hill. Using the rocky, forested terrain as cover, Morgan and Colonel Gist’s Maryland militia fought back the British infantry— until Cornwallis brought another regiment to the action and they made a pragmatic retreat.

I watch as Howe makes a probe to our center, watch the militia retreat as planned, and watch as Howe charges into our abatis— directly into the range of artillery. I recognize General Grey in the distance, pointed out by Washington’s hand as the man responsible for Wayne’s agony at Paoli— a pretty morsel diving straight into our throat.

His charge is quickly disbursed before our eyes, blue soldiers pressing red back with a fierce clatter, bodies falling between the clash. Grey is quick on the retreat, but his counter-marching troops seem to have swept up two of our officers— one fallen from his injured horse and now pinned under it’s thrashing body, beset by a host of Hessians with bayonets and their tall furred hats.

I recognize the handsome officer standing vanguard over his friend’s body— Tilghman gallops to Washington’s side, “Sir!” he shouts, “That’s John Cadwalder— my friend!” The plea *let me go to him* seems suspended in the air with his desperation, but it’s such a foolish plea it dies unspoken.

“And that is Joseph Reed…” Washington replies lowly, “My friend.”

All we can do is watch— Cadwalder draws his sword, a certain gravity gathering around him as if an unearthly power strengthens his stance, drives him to defend his position to the death. Even from this distance I see, he draws a deep breath—

And then the rumble of hooves and another familiar face— Captain Lee’s cavalry with McLane at the
head, charging in, they drive off the Hessians, push them to follow the rest of Grey’s retreat- and the officers on Camp Hill raise a cheer that’s heard in the valley below, fists and musket bags clattering with a small victory.

I want to run to them- itch for inclusion.

Hamilton had asked me if I understood his anxiety, being held from battle. I had assured him I would...and now I can confirm that I do.

WE MAKE CAMP in the field, strong patrols from each company guarding our position while the enemy hunkers down for a cold night. As suggested, we place campfires along our flanks to give the appearance of a larger force than actually exists. At the center of camp, men huddle in packs around small fires, spread conservatively.

Tucked between Tilghman and Meade for warmth, I only have the energy to move my fingers, transcribing reports from militia generals. When the courier comes to Washington’s tent with the General’s personal notes, Tilghman takes the stack and sits to sort it. His fingers stop a moment before he grabs a letter and holds it up, “A report from Gibbs,” he says. “And a note from a doctor.”

Meade shifts beside me, “So they found him one!” he throws back our shared blanket to join Tilghman at the desk and I groan at the cold, pushing upright with aching bones. It had been an easy day of riding- a few small engagements, a few reports to collect - but the *cold*. It should be happy news in the note- that Hamilton’s found treatment, but my complaints drift away at the growing grimness of Tench’s expression- an appetence I’ve seen once before.

Haunted.

Meade plucks the note to read, glances frantically between the two letters- then drops heavily into the seat beside Tench and covers his mouth. “He’s-” his voice cracks and he clears his throat, “His doctor says, he seems to have all the appearance of drawing nigh his last...seized with a coldness in his extremities...remained for a space of two hours…”

I stand. “Re...remained?” past tense.

“He then survived, but…” Meade glances at me, at my growing confusion- *but*, “the doctor wrote this the day before Gibbs sent his report and Gibbs said ‘I found Colo. Hamilton much worse than I expected, labouring under a violent fever, and raging to the greatest extremity, he continued through the day, & was last night very ill’, so I believe you were mistaken,” he says to Tench, “that Hammy downplayed the fever...it seems to rise and fall suddenly and has been growing increasingly violent.”

I sway on my feet- make a grab for the note, which Meade gives up easily. Gibbs's words draw an unwelcome image: Alexander, weak-limbed and pale, thrashing and struggling, in the throes of inferno. Tracing my eyes to the last paragraph, some degree of violence drains from the image, ‘Colo. Hamilton bears his sickness with becoming fortitude but is confident he shall not survive long’ and it replaces my friend’s stubborn struggles with a hateful resignation, loose-limbed and hollow, a cold echo of graceful Death, stifling a boy’s whimpering, calming a mother’s aching cries. ‘P.S. Colo. Hamilton desires his Love to the Gentlemen of the family,’ tacked on at the end- final words an afterthought.

How could he just submit?

He had wanted my friendship, given his own- he *had* to come back...hold me to my promises. I had
thought he would—thought he’d demand it now that he was my friend.

Tilghman takes the letter where my hands had started clenching around it, throwing himself back into his theories. “I thought—yes, it also says Gibbs forwarded it to be sent with the stationary express—so why is this coming so late? He wrote that we should know the boy’s fate in three days, but that was over a week ago now—is there nothing else from the doctor?” he turns to check the pile of letters again.

His frantic motion irritates me.

“Since that last note from the doctor was forwarded by Gibbs, it may mean that the Captain’s been preoccupied with making arrangements—it’s likely that Hammy’s already—”

I turn from their conversation.

I SHOULD WANT to be alone—I think. But, I don’t. I truly don’t. If I march into the forest, I will be cold with my thoughts, with fear too heavy to carry alone.

I find Lafayette’s camp on Fort Hill, find my friend by the sound of familiar songs—ones we had sung in Philadelphia when the air was thick and warm, and victory in the north was something to celebrate wholeheartedly, no political games and intrigue, secrets and rumors. When I was led by only innocent ambition, high hopes and a veil of lies to pacify me—mold me to the tool I’ve now become. And, Hamilton was a beautiful challenge, the deepest reservoir to dive into—and I was willing to drown in a spring current, drag anyone down with me.

Lafayette’s party welcomes me warmly, and their whiskey warms me better.

I drink more than I probably should, considering how well I know the words to their songs. I don’t have the spirit for singing, but something about shouting lewd rhymes, squeezed between two officers I don’t know, makes me feel that Hamilton would be pleased with us were he here—laughing and teasing our clumsiness, and that thought is somehow a comfort.

I have missed the Marquis, even knowing I should leave him alone and spare him my solemnity—even recognizing that I am using his company as a crutch to avoid sorrow. He doesn’t seem to mind it. And I don’t mind when he makes a show of throwing his own crutch into the fire, cursing it and mocking his own injuries for being unable to hold him down. This performance meets a drunken roar of approval. And, I adore his childish grin.

The men love him. And, I feel a press of pride on his behalf, seeing how happy he is, knowing he has another healthy daughter to meet in France, friends in Congress and the Army—he speaks warmly of men I cannot love, John Adams, General Gates and General Lee. Conway slips into his stories when he babbles of Brandywine, of rallying Conway’s brigade before being wounded in the leg. He remembers fondly scenes that have been eclipsed in my mind with personal affronts—with spying duties and schemes that force me to jeopardize my own honor. I understand what Tilghman meant.

We’re all still golden to him. And, I can’t break that illusion. I don’t want him to see me any other way.

“Did you see the battle at the base of Camp Hill today?” I say, throwing my arm around the Marquis’s shoulders.

“I was with Wayne’s division,” he replies accent slurring his words awkwardly. I’m fond of it. “I saw!” he says.
So, we revel together, the heroics of friendship that Cadwalder had displayed on the battlefield, “Trapped under his horse!” I say. “And you could see on his face, he was ready to die in that spot—”

“I would have done it for you,” Lafayette laughs, letting his chin rest on my shoulder to grin at me.

I give in to the urge of putting my hand on his head. The curls of his wig will be ruined— the powder makes me want to sneeze. “And of course, I for you.”

He laughs, “Ah, but, I would not let you.”

“What?”

“You would have to battle me first— because I wouldn’t allow’t.” He smiles warmly, but something aches again through the haze of liquor. “You are my first friend in this country— and I would cut off my leg to keep you.”

Keep, he says. And, that something snaps, the weight in my chest dropping again. I push my head against his, cheeks brushing. My eyes grow sore and wet.

He startles briefly at my sudden emotion, but says nothing about it, shifts clumsily to wind his arms around my chest and hold me until I can stop the tears, stop shaking like a leaf. When I pull away, he gives a mild complaint about the tears on his uniform, but his expression is patient.

“Hamilton is ill…” I say, but he nods and this does not seem to be news to him. “You...knew that?”

“Oui- ah...your father wrote to me that you had mentioned it to him in a letter.”

“Oh...well he…” I can’t bring the words- can’t admit that Alex is likely...

“He is not...doing well?”

I shake my head.

Lafayette hums, lips pressed thin- and his own eyes shine as if he may weep as well. “You...would not say this if there was a chance that he-?”

“I need you to not ask that.”

He nods. “Well...he is Lieutenant Colonel Alexander Hamilton, so we should not be afraid,” he says. “He would never be conquered by a fever- of all things!”

I give a weak smile, seeing what he’s trying to do.

He presses on, squeezing the arm that’s draped around my shoulder, “Because I know you are a gentleman of good taste- you would have only the best of men as your companion.”

There’s something suggestive in his tone and I give a skeptical look. When his hand finds my face, I recoil, “Sir, you don’t...me and Hamilton don’t- we’re not…”

“Still?” His brows knit and he scrutinizes me, “I would have thought that by now…”

I laugh as if it’s absurd- though when the sound comes, it feels defensive. I suppose it should given the number of times I had considered Alex’s body, felt an unwelcome pang of lust. But, “I have some restraint you know!”

His brows raise at that, “But why?”
My incredulous look should convey the multitude of reasons he’s being ridiculous. “We’ve not been so close recently- as I said, I haven’t felt much affection for my friends, and even if I did, that’s not something we’d do.” Even in Europe- even in cities where views of depraved pleasures are more libertine, what I would want is still uncouth- rakish and illegal. And thinking of it now- with Alexander’s life so uncertain, while I’m held so powerless to help him or even see him one last time-

“Well, I am certain that he wants you to-”

“I know what he wanted!” I snap.

I know how I disappointed him- continued to do so, wasted all our time and the pleasures of a life that may not be there for much longer. There’s nothing I can do now to reconcile it. Nothing I can do to make him return so I can be better. I ignored every warning and wallowed in undue self-castigation. So guilt is the price to pay for cowardice, and sorrow for loss of potential and ruined opportunity.

“Your father said to me that you had lost a friend at Germantown,” Lafayette says, an abrupt turn in subject. “Was that still upsetting you?”

I drift off, unsure how to speak about this now- so soon after such heavier thoughts. “What no, that...I mean, of course his death unsettled me, but…”

Lafayette stares, brows creased, “Unsettled…” he says skeptically, then seems to understand, “You were not close to him.”

“I…” really wasn’t, but, “should have been.” When this earns a raised brow, I explain, “He considered me a good friend, died trying to protect me, and I...don’t miss him- barely mourned him at all. Tell me that that apathy is not unsettling.”

“It is not unsettling.”

I can’t tell if he’s trying wit or being serious so I glare at that.

“Truly!” he says. He leans close again, puts his chin back on my shoulder, “Would you mourn if I died?” he says.

“I...don’t want to think about it,” I say honestly. If I had been his first friend in America, he had been mine in returning. He had saved my life at Brandywine.

“Would you cry for me?” he says, hand wiping my cheek where it still feels sticky from weeping.

“I’d have no choice.”

He smiles, self-satisfied. “And wallow in my loss for days- neglect your duties and fix yourself upon your grief? Would you be inconsolable?”

It would feel wrong to lie about this and I don’t know what he would prefer to hear, but “I-”

“I wouldn’t want you to,” he says before I can speak.

“But I should feel capable of it,” I insist. “I don’t know how I would feel if you died, I’m sure the loss would strike me, but I want to care for you so deeply that I can know truly I deserved your affection- that I honored you with due return.”

“Hmmm- do you love me?”
His expression implies he already knows the answer. “I...you’re very dear to me...”

“Then love me while I am alive- if I’m dead, I don’t care.” He shrugs and sits back. “And, I think that monsieur Hamilton will be flattered to know how you wallowed and moped for him- then cried and abandoned your duties.”

I laugh, startled, “Gilbert, no!”

He grins at himself, “I can be fair! I’ll tell you how he praised you when he rode with me to York.”

It’s a rude offer, and I hope entirely a joke, but I take him seriously, “No, Gilbert.”

His smile warms to something genuine and he wraps his arms back around my shoulders affectionately. “My Division will be chasing the British retreat to Philadelphia tomorrow- to harass them. Would you like a company?”

ON DECEMBER ELEVENTH, we break camp at Whitemarsh and begin a march back over the Schuylkill River. Washington dictates a letter to Congress, describing our engagement in that patch of land, “I sincerely wish they had made an attack,” and it’s a common sentiment despite our cold aches and exhaustion. The design of our fortifications had been flawless. It would have been favorable to see more troops committed to the trap. But, as it is, with our supplies low and the enemy fortified- prudence, principle, and policy forbid us from making an attack.

So, we march by day for eight days. Between Pennsylvania and Delaware- we may as well be marching through the Alps with how the weather treats us.

And each day brings new distractions, new pieces to fit into this puzzle of intrigue.

The fourteenth, I am surprised to find Fitzgerald returned to headquarters, carrying news from the temporal capital in York- the proposal we had sent for the position of Inspector General had been deferred to the Board of War for advice...and selected General Conway for the position.

There is no word about Hamilton.

The fifteenth, a letter arrives from my father, describing a complaint he had received from General Gates, concerned that his letter had been transcribed and predicting that the same traitor who had committed this nefarious act would leak military secrets. The implication remains against Hamilton, but my father seems to have taken my word- or heard Daniel Morgan’s appeal on that matter because he believes my friend’s innocence.

There is no word about his health.

The sixteenth, Trumbull makes a visit to Washington’s tent, reporting that the clothier General, Mease, had quit his job because his ‘generally weakened’ constitution made it necessary. Trumbull made a personal visit to see the man- a former subordinate. He was suffering a cold.

There is no word of how Hamilton suffers- if he preserves at all.

The seventeenth, Fitz comes into the office with a letter from James Lovell, cursing the man furiously. I recognize the name as one of the Congressmen we had seen at the Angelica Estate when Washington had sent us to observe Mifflin’s ‘illness’. Apparently Lovell had been entrusted with the transport of the Continental Congress’s papers from Philadelphia to York. He had entrusted them to the Congress’s papermaker, Frederick Bicking. But Bicking was a coward, too afraid to carry such
documents, so he recruited his friend to carry the journals to his farm and bury them. By coincidence, Bicking’s friend was a loyalist- so Lovell needed an active Pennsylvania officer to go dig them up and return them to congress. I’ve never seen Washington’s face so red.

I can’t imagine what Hamilton would say.

The eighteenth, we receive orders from Congress- to join the rest of the nation in observing a day of Thanksgiving on behalf of the success in Saratoga. Another way of heralding the hero, General Gates. No one feels particularly thankful, passing the line of shoeless soldiers leaving blood tracks on frosted soil. Washington and his staff- myself included- are particularly disenchanted.

I only want a letter.

The nineteenth, we march up the Gulph road, a rutted dirt track, and reach a suitable swath of land. It’s an attractive plot, a small village on the Schuylkill, Valley Forge.

TO SAY THAT WE SETTLE into camp would imply some degree of comfort that doesn’t exist. The village around Valley Forge offers few homes for officers, and His Excellency grants those to French guests. All American officers of the line take tents as we’ve done while marching- and Washington himself chooses a similarly spartan design. His staff stays with him.

There’s nothing comfortable about the conditions- lacking shoes and clothes, food and shelter. Winds strip the land every day, and though Washington has sent out orders detailing how the men are to build huts to share between themselves, it’s immediately apparent that we won’t have enough tools to accomplish this quickly and without wagons from the quartermaster department to transport such supplies as are needed- there aren’t prospects of improving this situation.

When, on the third day of this encampment, Major Clark sends a report from the outskirts of Philadelphia that General Howe and several of his subordinates were conducting foraging expeditions to acquire large amounts of meat and grain for their soldiers and hay for their horses, Washington immediately disburses orders to meet them in the field, sending a notice out to our supply General.

Tilghman reads the reply, “There’s not a single animal for slaughter in the entirety of our commissary department- only twenty-five barrels of flour and no prospects of resupply.”

It doesn’t need to be said. We won’t be able to make a coordinated attack- not even to defend our prospects of foraging. Starving, naked men won’t be able to carry on, and the uprising among the soldiery is bordering on rebellion. Just last night, reports had flooded into headquarters of the men chanting in their tents ‘No meat! No meat!’, clattering their swords and rifles, screeching like owls and cawing crows, suggesting they’d fly their coops.

But if we’re fast, we have a chance to beat the British to it, I say, “Sir, we’re strong enough to fit scouting teams to forage for supplies, if we can take the supplies first-”

“We don’t have nearly enough officers to lead such small groups as we would need,” Tilghman says.

“Boudinot has been cleared to make trades for several officers that were taken at Brandywine and Germantown,” I reply. “And, Charles Lee- has been approved for trade for months now…”

“He’s made no movement to join us so far as I’ve heard,” Washington says dismissively. His tone forbids the topic further and he looks at me, “Write your father,” he says. “We’re sending fifty-man scouting teams. If we can make this a race, we can at least race them for supplies.”
We need any small victory- I desperately need any good news.

ON CHRISTMAS DAY, a heavy snow pushes Washington to move his quarters into the Potts house. It presses in and collapses tents, fogs the air with chilling blustering sheets. It would ruin our stationary if we endured another day in the field. And, while we move the General’s professional documents and affects, three servants work in the Potts kitchen, preparing something of a Christmas dinner to honor his esteemed Excellency.

It isn’t much- unadorned mutton, potatoes, and cabbage washed down with water, but it’s enough for us to fix our uniforms, hanging on our frames loosely, powder our hair, and make ourselves presentable as if for a proper dinner party. It’s enough.

The aides sit to eat first, and we wait as a small party of the General’s guests are seated- fifteen Generals and Major Generals around the table. Rather than bowing heads in prayer, we join hands and listen as Washington gives a speech, thanking Providence for our victory at Saratoga- for what it means for our cause, for friends returned- a nod in Lafayette’s direction, and for our health and safety.

The General’s mention of health has my eyes finding Meade and Tilghman, turning to Lafayette and glancing away. A particular absence at the table weighs heavily on all of us- until, as if Providence dines with us, a knock comes at the door.

Washington sends an apologetic look over the table, rising as Billy walks to answer the door. As he opens it, a courier stands with the Potts house servant, still shivering from his journey, “Whatever this is- could it not wait until after…” the General motions to the spartan meal.

“Sir, you’ll want to read this,” the messenger says- and astonishingly, smiles. He brings the note, walking across the dining room followed by twenty sets of eyes, delivers it to the General’s hand and stands back as he reads.

Washington face slowly loosens, jaw going slack- he looks to the messenger who gives a nod. And he smiles too. It’s been so long, the expression looks strange. “It’s from Gibbs,” he says. “They’re on their way back.”

A beat of silence then, “They’re?” Meade says, “…as in…”

Washington’s smile stretches, and he nods slowly.

A hard cheer goes through the room- from the aides and Lafayette, Washington laughs- a deep booming noise, and the messenger leaves with a grin on his face and several hearty claps on his back. The letter passes between Hamilton’s friends, each of us touching it and verifying the news. It isn’t much, but it’s enough- he’s well enough to travel, but as his health has been so unpredictable, they will move slowly and take many as pauses on the road as are necessary.

It’s enough to drink to- though our rations of whiskey are low. I’ve saved mine for a week, and it’s enough to share with Lafayette; on nearly empty stomachs, it takes us fast.

In the comfort of the Potts house, among this distinguished company, the commanders of our army joke together, give a small celebration for the holiday and good news. With whiskey, General Wayne becomes boisterous and shouldering his way between me and Lafayette, he brings a grand proposal of a game. We draw up a bold plan to attack Philadelphia, laughing with high hopes and toasting ourselves and our tactical genius.
THE NEW YEAR doesn’t approach with so much promise. The only work that Washington’s office offers is rations redistribution and translation. With Hamilton still on the road, the General keeps his volunteer translators on hand, and with the army encamped safely, Lafayette spends most nights with His Excellency’s aides. My father sometimes sends me letters of business transactions between Congress and the French court, asking my opinions of translations, and Gilbert reads letters over my shoulder, explains the meaning of technical terms I can’t read.

The ironic reversal of our translating roles amuses him endlessly.

With more time to myself, I return to my own notes- the pleasure of a plan quickly becoming so vital, my father can’t continue to ignore it. A battalion of slaves, ready to be freed.

I’ve been toying with rhetoric since my raid in late November- just over a month, mulling over the idea and how best to present it. Knowing my father, if I devote an entire letter to the plan, he’ll see that I’m serious, but…if he disagrees with any point I propose, he will see it as cause to reject the plan altogether- and if I present it all at once as a serious consideration, he will seriously refute it- and all at once it will be dismissed.

I decide it’s better to tuck the plan into another letter- the most important idea an afterthought- like final words.

I’ve written to him recently of heavy matters- Conway’s note to General Washington and his appointment to Inspector General, Mifflin’s misdeeds in the quartermaster department and his new position on the Board of War. Conway recently arrived at Valley Forge, was received by General Washington, expecting that he would be allowed to immediately begin his work. But, seeing as how an official notice of his appointment hadn’t reached our office and seen by the Commander in Chief himself, we simply couldn’t allow him to begin critiquing the state of the army.

These matters would overshadow my plan, so I wait for a smaller, still-vital reason to write. The opportunity comes when a familiar face crosses the General’s tent- dark brown eyes and round lips, the Chevalier de Mauduit.

Speaking to His Excellency, I overhear him saying, “I understand that such promotions cause uneasiness in your Americans, but I cannot continue thus, ordering men over my rank without distinction. The Marquis de Fleury requires my authority, so I must appeal to your Congress-”

I step forward and say simply, “Speak to my father- I’ll give my recommendations.”

He turns and sees me, smiles warmly- and I recall his strong arms, how they had dragged me limp from the field and lifted me onto a horse- without him I would be dead…

Washington nods his approval.

I JOLT AWAKE again. It’s becoming a strange pattern, falling out of dreams.

Lafayette is usually a heavy sleeper, so when my thrashing disturbs him, I assume he must have already been awake. He grabs for my hand, and his voice comes groggy, “Ça va?”

I roll over to face him, clutching his hand in return. “Yes, sorry…bad dream.”

“You have dreams…often.” He hums, thumb dancing a pattern along the back of my knuckles.
It’s a simple observation, and one that I should expect from the friend who shares my bed and sleeps close for warmth. It still surprises me.

“You are not tired enough,” he decides, pushing our blankets back so an unwelcome rush of cool air reaches my bare chest. He pulls my hand and I groan. “Is good I’m not tired either. Come!” he says.

He drags me from our cabin and we race to the edge of camp, breath forming clouds of steam. If I thought Washington was weak to Gil’s wiles, I must be a puppet in his hands. He finds a tree and drops his hands to the ground, kicking his legs up to rest against the bark.

I assume I’m to follow the motion, but it takes me two tries and he falls from laughing at me, having to kick himself back up. After a few moments in this posture, the blood rushes to my head and my hands feel like ice in the cold soil. We drop down, laughing and I look at him. “What was that? Why did we do that?”

He gives a grin and shrugs, “I wanted to see if you could.”

I shove him, laughing.

“What? You could!”

“So what?”

“So…you have seemed…heavy for days,” he says.

When a silence passes, I understand what he means and feel compelled to explain, “I know. I’m just…concerned for my father and Hamilton and the capital and our men and-”

He rolls over and covers my mouth with his hand. “The weight you feel is gravity, someone must tell you this.”

I grab his wrist and remove his hand, “You’re making vague poetry again.”

“I mean that we all feel it- your worries.” He turns his hand to take mine again. “Qui adhuc dicitur caelum sustinere- mais, if you look around- we are all holding the weight with you.” It’s a nice thought- and I understand what he’s trying, but I’m not sure I believe it. He wouldn’t understand why I don’t; he huffs at my silence, “Hamilton is the same,” he says. “So quiet when I ask to help. I believe he withholds everything he knows from me sometimes…”

I wince at that, knowing everything we withhold from him- how he admires Conway and Gates, how I haven’t warned him against that…but he’s looking at me and I feel pressed to speak, “I…also feel that way- about Alex. That he doesn’t always tell me what’s bothering him.”

“I would be surprised,” he says. “If you allowed that.”

MID-JANUARY DAYS pass sluggish and cold. Even at headquarters, tucked around the Potts family hearth, we wear gloves to write. Our supply shortage has run so far to reach even such essentials as firewood. I have been helping Tilghman keep record of the rate of our depletion and track which companies require the greatest redistribution. I’m sure Hamilton will make better work of it when he rejoins us.

When we stay after dark, we huddle around the fireplace to work. Even General Washington has no candles left to write by, so he rarely sends personal letters. He mostly stands by the windows,
ponders which fires he can see from the house are campfires- and which ones are makeshift burials…

for horses or for men.

Both are starving.

I can feel my spirit darkened by it. Meade brings a report one day that demonstrates my unfamiliar humor. Unable to bathe or wash clothes without soap, soldiers are becoming infested with lice and contracting scabies. It begins with a small sac between the fingers that itches until a man scratches it and the fluid that oozes out spreads the disease like warts.

“Irvine’s company’s caught the itch,” Meade says, reading from the general’s note. “A man covered his body in mercury ointment- and died. Another guzzled a pint and a half of rum- also died.” His blasé delivery draws a bewildered laugh from me, “Joseph Martin’s foraging party says they found a cure- he and some other fellows borrowed sulfur from the artillery, mixed it with brimstone and tallow and added some “hot whiskey toddy” then applied that to each others ‘outsides and insides’.”

“…insides?” I say.

He gives me a bland look.

I still don’t understand.

“They rubbed it up their bums, Laurens,” he says, looks back to the page, “By the time they finished, they were so drunk they didn’t notice two of them had passed out and left them laying naked in the field.”

I burst into laughter.

A moment later he joins it.

It’s not a laughing matter though, and within two days the scabies have become as epidemic as the camp fever. Washington orders infected men isolated in separate huts- which we don’t have to spare, and our few doctors are occupied in covering their bodies with sulfur in hog’s lard.

TO MAKE MATTERS worse, Conway’s presence at camp is an unavoidable problem. After His Excellency’s graceful snub, a furious letter arrives on Tilghman’s desk, a tirade veiled under polite praises. Conway implies that Washington knows nothing about military matters in the worldly (European) field. He compares him mockingly to Frederick the Great in insolent persiflage.

So this time, Washington doesn’t hesitate to order me.

And, I sharpen my quills.

I REALIZE UPON REFLECTION that all the army had been so eager to fall into winter quarters, and now that we’re here, this hell seems intent on turning those same men to madness. Death and starvation run rampant, and the images of disfigured horses and cattle haunt my dreams, beasts rotting in the snow, crawling in their confinement. Between nightly threats of rebellion, soldiers cawing and clattering their weapons for food, officers drinking and brawling, disease and deserting and dueling, the tension snaps on the twentieth.

An issuing brigade commissary was murdered by his infuriated clients.
His death sparks widespread disorder in the militia unit responsible.

When Foreman’s aide rides to Washington’s headquarters to request officers to help break up the fighting, I follow the team of volunteers that forms, there are no strong horses left to ride, so we run, I between the Baron de Kalb and Trumbull.

Before we can make it down the hill of the Potts house, Meade is running up the front walk, shouts when he sees me, “Laurens!” he says. “Come now!”

I stop, step out of formation as the others blur past me. Frozen in confusion.

“Hammy’s back!”
The Congressional Committee

"All are lunatics, but he who can analyze his delusions is called a philosopher."

... 

I HAD FELT THE GHOST of Hamilton’s presence at camp these past near-three months, sat idly while he suffered. Now, it’s hard to tell- if the form approaching camp is really him or a corpse with a familiar face.

If he can be considered familiar- the framework of hollow cheekbones and pale, bruised skin. His eyes find me staring as his party approaches, flanked by Gibbs and Fitz, the men begin dismounting. I jolt into a run and meet him by his horse as the other boys gather him up in their arms, clapping his shoulders and kissing his face. The moment he’s released from the crowd, he looks at me again.

I step forward and grab his arms, pull him up into a hug. He falls against me limp as if but for my arms catching him he may collapse, but the moment passes and he finds his feet, fails to return the embrace.

“Where’s headquarters?” he says, turning to Meade, “The Potts house?”

Meade nods.

“And McHenry?” he turns to Tilghman, “is he ready to see me? You said he'd be here?”

“I'm here!” behind us, a shouting voice interrupts, two men running at us, feet loud on the frosted soil. Billy escorts a shorter man, stout and carrying a thick shoulderbag, wearing the cocked hat of a surgeon.

“McHenry?” Hamilton confirms as he holds out a hand to shake.

The man takes it, “Yes- and I presume you're the Hamilton I’ve been writing to?”

“Just so.”

“Well, I've heard great things about you, young man,” the surgeon pulls Alex's hand to draw him closer, “and a few worrying things.”

Alex keeps grinning, “All about my health I hope.”

McHenry’s glare breaks into a laugh, “Well, mostly.”

A certain warmth already seems to grow between them and I wonder about the content of their correspondence. Hamilton’s smile is too wide for his face- or maybe his cheeks too thin. A face so gaunt, has no place looking so cheerful. “Well, I’m in your hands, sir,” he says, clapping the man’s arm. “I’d like to see His Excellency by tonight if we can manage that.”

“I think we can.”

As we walk, Hamilton keeps pace between the surgeon and Meade, occasionally reaching for his fellow aide’s arm to steady himself- covertly, a small motion which Meade assists discreetly.

I grab Tilghman’s hand, the nearest source of information, “McHenry?”
He leans towards me to whisper, and we fall back a few steps, “He’s from the hospital outside camp. We need to be sure Ham won’t spread whatever he’s got to Washington…”

“And, Alex opened a correspondence with him to ask for that? That’s...considerate.”

Tilghman nods. “That’s what I’m worried about.”

I LOATHE THE IMPLICATION, as if Hamilton would bother making a show of clearing his health. If it were me, I’d never endanger our commander, and knowing Ham, it’s too useless- not a pretense he’d bother with, an unnecessary courtesy to a man who already considers him indispensable.

But, Tilghman scoffs at the diagnosis McHenry makes as he steps from the Potts house guest room, announcing Hamilton safe to report. And, when the General comes to meet him, Tilghman steps to the door, tries to follow him inside, but Gibbs blocks the door to His Excellency’s reunion. We wait outside, even as voices start raising, and I stand back far enough to hear through the walls, too muffled to be clear- just loud enough to make out one name when Hamilton starts shouting- Wilkinson.

I imagine Washington’s told Hamilton of the accusations- saying he’d copied Conway’s letter while in Albany- an impossible crime, but one that had smeared his name in certain circles nonetheless.

“-’course, not like Doctor Rush counts the beds himself, but he’s been saying six or seven-thousand men to his friends. When did he report we had five-thousand sick?” McHenry’s voice catches my attention- Doctor Benjamin Rush. It would be hard to forget the name.

“His letter got here the twelfth,” Meade says. “Are you saying it’s untrue?”

McHenry’s lips are pursed thin and he folds his arms over his chest. I turn to watch the conversation, worried that Meade’s made an accusation against someone with conflicting loyalties. But, McHenry baulks, “Either a lie- or heinous negligence. I can’t imagine why he’d do it unless he enjoys being undersupplied and understaffed.”

“Has he hired guards or officers to command the hospital yet?”

“No, I think he reasons, the more men lash out and escape, plunder and harass the locals, the more support he’ll garnish for shutting down the camp altogether. The doctors and staff loathe the place much as the sick do, wanting food and clothes and blankets- the ones soldiers bring always have lice. He’s been pushing a plan to let out the sick into the countryside to get them ‘air and diet’.”

“We saw that plan,” Meade says darkly, and I recall how he had yelled at General Greene, revealed this strange side of him, usually so kind and good-natured.

“I’d like to see his letter if you’ve still got it.”

Meade nods, “Of course yes-” and he grabs McHenry’s arm to lead him into the General’s study.

I stand in their wake, unsure if Meade noticed I was listening. Whatever qualm Doctor Rush is attempting to raise with General Washington, His Excellency has no involvement in the appointment of doctors- just as he has no involvement in the appointment of commissaries or quartermasters. It falls to Congress.

And, that body has remained unmoved by our letters thus far.
ALL THE FAMILY is eager to hear Hamilton’s report— to know what had happened in Albany, how he had acquired the troops that had met us. We all wonder how he feels, if his appearance is any indication, our friend is weak and yet animated, frail yet relentless.

We wait outside the guest room in the Potts house parlor, lounging in chairs with uniforms untucked and cravats untied. Tilghman’s friend, Cadwalder, and our new doctor, McHenry, join us, and with an excuse to remain in headquarters where it’s warm, we use our company to talk about factions, grudges, and plots.

Since I’ve snagged the seat by the fireplace, I’ve got the light to sort through our own personal letters, checking our pile to burn before tossing notes in the fire as fuel.

“Harrison’s established another informant,” Tilghman says. “Fitz, you know about this- Ephraim Blaine recruited an innkeeper near Windsor Forge to write down quotes and names of general officers, so we’ve got routes west of York.” He tosses our wooden ball across the room to Meade.

He catches it, “I delivered a note from James Craik,” he glances around to the new faces in the room, “A friend of His Excellency’s. Someone Craik met on the road while out raiding for flour told him ‘bout the things people were saying in the hospitals.”

“Wouldn’t I like to know who,” McHenry muses with a grin.

“Who doesn’t matter so much as how often,” Meade says. “Craik says no one’s willing to name names anywhere between Bethlehem and Lancaster but everyone’s talking freely of factions in Congress. Seems he’s realized Richard Henry Lee, Mifflin, and Gates as plotters, so those names are probably floating about as common talk-”

“Good…” Cadwalder hums approvingly.

“So, we’ve just gotta get people putting the two together then- at least in their heads,” Tilghman says. “That’ll be simple.”

The boys laugh at his sarcasm. It’s all we can do when such simple solutions are so out of reach. Opening the truth of this faction-forming to public scrutiny would do more damage to our cause than help our commander. No matter our feelings about Gates and this grab for power, we can’t confront this political war in any open field.

I set aside a letter for Hamilton from General Knox, but the handwriting catches me. I’ve replied to letters from Knox before while working with Greene. I’d recognize his handwriting and the letter isn’t his… “Does anyone know Hugh Knox?” I say, glancing over the room to the raised brows of my brothers. They obviously don’t, and when I look back at the letter and see it’s origin from St. Croix, I cast the letter into Ham’s pile and let it alone. He can burn it himself.

Another letter falls from his stack, slipped from the same package. It’s unopened, with a name I do recognize. *Hell, Ned thinks me lovely and fears he may be my brother.* I break the seal so quickly it feels like an accident. But, it’s not. It’s not the right thing to do, but I’m skimming the words before worrying of that.

It’s a moving note, sincere words of worry from a patriotic friend. I submit my own approval of the writer when Ned denounces the favorable terms of surrender Gates offered to Burgoyne, ‘the Puffer, the Boaster, the Savage’, speaking wildly against the inhabitants of Britain from within the heart of Edinburgh. Whatever self-righteous fury exists in Hamilton, Ned Stevens mirrors it, paralleled by
origin and by path. I can glean some pieces of his history with my friend, seeing that they had shared their childhood and come together again in New York.

He must be important to Hamilton- or at least perceive himself so by the ‘vows of eternal friendship’ they had ‘so often mutually exchanged’. But, one thing is certain by the letter- mentioned several times, within the first line and then again every two or three.

Hamilton hasn’t written to him.

His most recent update of Hamilton’s well-being came from Hugh Knox nearly a year ago. I wonder if he would recognize the man in council with General Washington across the hall- the man who had flirted and seduced me for sport, dodged advances of genuine feeling until pressed to accept them. Would he have recognized the man at Parker’s Ford, spitting salt against the idea of friendship, beaten and bruised after a barfight, who had demanded motives and percentages, delayed himself months before committing to any sort of vulnerable feeling. I wonder what Stevens had done to earn his trust.

Or if he had known a different man.

Distracted, I miss the wooden ball tossed to me, Meade saying, “And you, Laurens? Anything to report?”

I scramble for the ball, “Clark.”

Meade laughs.

It’s the first thought I can muster of our present work, and I take a moment to return to those thoughts and explain, “Clark got the position as the paymaster’s auditor in York, so if Mifflin’s been skimming from his quartermaster purchases, we should know about it soon-”

“That’s excellent, Laurens- is this what you boys’ve done while I was gone?” Hamilton leans in the doorway, hip cocked against the frame and giving off aires of nonchalance. The strength is missing from his posture as if he needs the support more than he’d like us to know, but he stands aright easily enough and steps into the parlor, dropping to sit in front of the fireplace by the pile of letters I’ve been sorting.

His eyes catch on the opened packet from his friend.

Then on me.

“Washington would say it’s not our job,” Fitz says with a smile. I’ve learned to recognize when he thinks he’s said something funny.

Hamilton throws him a grin.

“We’ve carried out our investigation in private,” Tilghman grabs the pile of our notes, the divided folders of pages and letters we transcribed and filed away. He sits on the floor in front of Ham, spreading out our work and explaining our assignments. Ham nods occasionally, lifts our notes, thumbs through the pile of individual reports, and listens until he finishes speaking. It’s silent, the crackling of the fire, some soft conversation beginning between Meade and McHenry on the other side of the room, and the sound of Hamilton turning pages as he reads.

Then he begins- lays down the reports one by one and savages them. “Our study of Mifflin is too widespread, Clark working as an auditor in York is good, but we’ll need stronger surveillance over any information Mifflin passes in and out of the Board of War itself. Tell Harrison to have informants
posted to track everything he does, every tavern he visits, every guest he hosts, letter he writes. If we’ve noted him as our pivot, our best efforts should aim on him. And Fitz- you’ll have to explain to me who was suspecting you and how-”

Fitz gives him a nod which he returns securely before turning to the next file. “Your leads on Gates are disparate and geographically distant- most of them are Washington’s personal friends, therefore liable to exaggerate what they’ve heard to reinforce their faith in him. I’ve secured my own informants close to Gates- who we’ve discussed,” he gives a nod to Tilghman that I’m surprised to see returned. Tilghman had been so wary of Troup, I assume Ham’s either found different informants or given him a reason to believe his friend is reliable.

“Conway’s covered as far as his appointment to Inspector General. As of now, he can’t enact any damage, but to ensure that a day doesn’t come when he can, we’ll need to convince Congress that he should be replaced by someone more amenable to working for Washington- for that we need you, Laurens, and your father.”

I’m nodding before I even realize it.

“As to Congress itself, the men you’ve noted are problems, the Adamses, Henry Lee, James Lovell...but they’re just whisperers right now. The worst they’ve done is appoint inept officers to vital stations which I don’t believe they’re doing with nefarious intent- yet.”

He pauses to reconsider that, shakes his head and presses on, “Then there’s Rush. McHenry, you said he hasn’t staffed his hospital, and he’s been exaggerating reports. We should plant some men inside, healthy enough to report the real numbers of his patients and staff. As for supplies, William Shippen’s hospital in Princeton should be depleted to relieve him- he was told a hospital was unnecessary in that place.”

He speaks fast and sure and no one questions any of it. Pens and paper are fetched, Meade and Fitz grabbing up their writing boxes to take notes, mark through names of useless informants, jot down new ones, new leads and possible plans. “If you want to lead an investigation, be thorough about it,” Ham says, when all the pens have stilled, “and in the meantime, we should be working to improve General Washington’s actual performance so the dissenters won’t have anything substantial to complain about.”

A gravity centers around him, commanding all our attention for the moment. The family had denounced Hamilton’s involvement in the quartermaster department, his spying, and loud accusations of factionalism, but their fears have either dissipated after his brush with death or been assayed by some mark of his competence. They were wrong to claim he would be ‘safe’ in New York, but out of all of us, Hamilton has been most successful in the mission he was assigned.

For all that I threw my support behind him in his absence, I’m more sure of it than ever. He’d make a fine Quartermaster General.

“Could we have a word?” My heart drops from his touch, gentle at my sleeve. He’s holding the packet of letters- including the one I had opened.

I should be ashamed of my curiosity.

We both stand, he moving slowly to have his footing, and walk for the parlor door and out into the dimly-lit hall. I haven’t had time to consider what I should say to apologize. There’s no excuse for prying into his history, “Hamilton,” he shuts the door behind us, “I’m sorry I opened it, I swear it was just the one-”
“May I...?”

He interrupts and I startle. “What?”

His arms are held out towards me and when I meet his eyes he looks away. It almost seems shy, but I know he’s incapable of that. He sways a little in his place, waiting, so before he can retract the offer, I step and pull him to my chest. For all that he filled the room, plotting to save Washington’s reputation, he feels small in my arms, leaving spaces empty that I remember being filled in previous embraces.

His hands clench in my coat, face presses into my neck, taking a considerable measure of obvious satisfaction from this private reunion. I assume from the warmth of his hold that he isn’t angry I opened his letter.

Then he pulls back and glares. I reconsider. “You didn’t write to me.”

Right, “I’m sorry.”

“Yes, I’m sure,” he says. “You apologize too easily, especially for something you don’t regret.”

“I...do regret it.”

“Then you should’ve written.”

“Yes, but I didn’t. So, I’m sorry.”

“You’ve said you’re sorry, that’s my point.”

I stare at him blankly. “Your point.”

“I don’t need an apology.”

“Then what?” I glare. “What do you want me to say? That I’d wanted to respond to your letter—because I did. But we no sooner received it than a note that you were ill and tended by General Gates’s aide. That made it seem improbable that you’d be capable of collecting your own letters or doing anything productive to respond to them.”

He steps back and folds his arms over his chest. “I wanted a response, productive or not.” He looks at me as if this should mean something significant, then huffs when I raise a brow. “You didn’t have to write about work. That should be obvious. Why would you think I’d…confine my,” he motions vaguely, grasping for words, then looks at me pointedly, “...desire to hear from you to matters of this office—did you consider, perhaps I’d want some comfort from you or just...a welcome distraction, a few lines or an amusing poem, anything. God, I cannot believe—... If you’d really wanted to write...”

He speaks as if he believes I’m lying, brows creased in anger and confusion. It strikes me with a pang of guilt to see how I’d miscalculated, thinking that my silence would protect him from worrying about the family rather than leave him isolated. There’s an echo of that hurt in the tight press of his lips, showing how he had teetered on the edge of death without the encouragement of a worried friend or even the assurance that he had one.

“I didn’t...think it would be right...” I say, but it’s a poor excuse.

His mouth drops open as if he wants to bite back, but stops himself, dropping his eyes and blinking. His lips press shut again. “That’s...fair, I see,” but he won’t look at me. “Well, for the record, I would have liked to hear from you. But, I’m not sure I would’ve had the strength to reply, so it’s...probably
for the best.”

He says this like an assurance, but I’m not sure to whom it’s intended, and I want to argue it.

Before I can, he nods securely. “And, if you would’ve regretted writing or thought that I wouldn’t have wanted it, I’m glad you didn’t.” He reaches out to clasp my shoulder, putting a little too much weight into his touch for it to feel affectionate rather than necessary. “I don’t want any regrets between us.”

I was not wrong. The hold is more necessary than he wants me to realize, and he sways back on his feet. I catch his arms and hold him up, but the moment I do, he steps back and braces against the wall instead. “Are you alright?” I say.

“Yes, of course.” He lifts the packet from Stevens in his other hand, “And, thank you for saving these,” he blinks strangely and avoids my eyes, “I’m...not sure why I put them in the burn pile.”

He turns away and walks up the stairs, and I watch as he turns into General Washington’s quarters and disappears for the night.

IN THE MORNING, I work on a letter to my father, proposing the plan I had offhandedly mentioned to arm slaves for the war. Started a few days ago, I keep the original date on the page so that, when he sees it, he will know the amount of time and thought I’ve placed into this particular proposal of the idea and perhaps respect it.

Revealing how strongly I feel about it has the adverse effect of risking his complete rejection if I fail to present a totally viable- totally unassailable argument. He will think my entire plan must be encapsulated in this one draft, and if he believes I’m speaking from anything more than an impulse, he’ll decide I’m unequipped to carry it out and subsequently dismiss it.

I’ve scratched through my words a dozen times and rewritten them practically the same.

I hate my own hesitation.

But, there’s time to hesitate. Hamilton’s return to camp has occupied Washington’s attention, and in that distraction, the General leaves his aides without tasks, and with free time for gossip and personal correspondence. There is opportunity to ride to the post and collect our letters, but each time I had ventured outside headquarters in the past few weeks, I’ve found Conway in the vicinity of the Potts house, speaking jovially with Lafayette. The sight is nauseating.

Fitz, Meade, and McHenry use the morning to make the arrangements to supply Rush’s hospital-whether he wants it or not. Tilghman entertains Cadwalder who brings in reports of the foraging parties that regularly move in and out of camp.

The morning after Hamilton’s return, the Baron de Kalb brings a note to me from my father, forwarded from Doctor Franklin, a few lines of warning that I should anticipate an introduction of an important officer from the French court. “A possible replacement for Conway? I’m understanding we need one,” de Kalb says, grinning widely. “I will be happy to add my name to his support, especially if he is a man preferred by President Laurens.”

I stare at him. When Baron de Kalb was promoted to Major General, it peeved Conway enough to rouse his complaints- loud complaints. He tried to quit our army in protest. In so doing, he degraded the promotion Kalb was given, insulted him as inferior to the rank. I’m not sure his hatred is enough to trust him. It had not been enough for my brothers, and it had only taken a few miscalculated words
to dislodge what trust I was intrinsically willing to give.

“I appreciate your eagerness to aid our cause.” I set the letter aside and meet his eyes steadily. Washington’s office is a flurry of motion as always, men in and out carrying notes, boys working through plans or papers. It’s not the place for this sort of talk and we both know it, “But I do have to wonder...if you have so much to offer, experience and connections we obviously need...why do none of my friends want your help?”

He seems to recognize the accusation- of his true purpose in this country, and it seems to sadden him, but if he’s done something to merit our distrust it’s not as though he can explain it here. I’ve cornered him. Our investigation has been secret to the entire French corps for obvious reasons, but Tilghman’s distrust in particular has centered around the Baron.

I want to know why.

His expression confirms that there is a reason. “I just...hope you will call on me to support this appointment.” And, as if to unnerve me, he puts his finger over the letter from my father and says, “An officer from the staff of Frederick the Great himself would certainly send the message you’re looking for...given the nature of Conway’s most recent insults. And, I believe Lafayette would be pleased with that reply.”

I stare at him, training my face neutral and calm. He means to make it clear to me that, with or without our assistance, he knows every bit as much as we do. And...Lafayette...

Nodding in a show of deference, he stands from the table- then looks behind me to where someone must be standing and nods again before leaving.

I turn.

Hamilton’s arms are folded over his chest and he squints at the Baron as he leaves. He seems to want to say something about whatever part of the interaction he had just witnessed, but he closes his mouth as if he’s thought better of it. Dropping down beside me, he straddles the bench, holding papers with a stiff awkwardness, “There will be a Congressional Committee visiting camp to make a report this week and I was thinking that we should go over the presentation that His Excellency would like for us to make. He said you had worded it well when he spoke to you about concern for our deficiencies and how they hinder us-”

I realize my suspicion as I speak, “Did you tell him?”

“...what?”

My question catches Hamilton, so I give him a moment to understand it. When he says nothing, I explain, “Baron de Kalb knew the wording of Conway’s letter- the jab about Frederick the Great from earlier this month. There’s no way he could’ve known unless someone-”

“I didn’t!”

“Someone must have.”

Hamilton stares at me a moment then grabs my sleeve and pushes himself from the bench with an uncharacteristic clumsiness. He pulls me to follow him from the office and into the hall, but the activity of Washington’s office makes that space a thoroughfare of couriers, so we duck into the empty parlor and he braces himself against the fireplace, breathing heavily from the short walk. “You shouldn’t be bringing these things up in there with the volunteers,” he looks at me, “Why would you think I’d show him Washington’s letters after what he’s tried? It was probably Gilbert.”
He’s said too much too quickly for the full meaning to register at once. Several things are unclear, “What has he done? Wait- why Gilbert...you mean- why would Lafayette have...he’s seen the letter from Conway?”

His brows raise. “Washington showed them to him several days ago?” he says. The uptick in his tone questions how I hadn’t known that, then his brow shifts and he seems to understand- and loathe that understanding. “Wait...you didn’t tell him? About Conway? Gilbert- your dearest friend- why?”

The judgment in his tone is enough to warn me he doesn’t sympathize with the decision, and if General Washington has made the decision to show Lafayette the letters anyway, he’s taken the matter out of our hands, but “We thought it was for the best, and you didn’t answer- what’s de Kalb done that’s so bad?”

“He was sent to find a way to replace Washington with a French officer in the event of an alliance, now you didn’t answer my question.”

He speaks so quickly I hardly hear the answer I’d wanted- hardly have time for it to shock me before his tone makes another jab, “We couldn’t risk exposing our dissention to the French- and it didn’t involve him anyway-”

“Of course it involves him!” Hamilton huffs, fully grabbing onto the mantle for support. I want to reach out to steady him, but he steps away from me when I raise my hands to do so, hissing, “Spare me your chivalry, I’m not some damned maiden who might appreciate it.”

And, I step back, stricken.

He slows to catch his breath, then explains, “The Board of War has been eyeing the Marquis for weeks, trying to place him in a command with Conway and make the two of them friends, and with the correspondences he’s opened, it’d be disastrous if he swayed any of his friends into the cabal’s support.”

“...Lafayette didn’t-”

“He didn’t tell you because you didn’t tell him,” Alex bites, stealing my words.

“Tilghman ordered me against it, my hands were tied-”

“Because Tench told you not to?”

“He’s my superior, Alex.”

“Gates is your superior! God, you are an idiot- Lafayette’s been writing his friends on His Excellency’s behalf- powerful friends, turning the French army in our favor, he’s an asset not a risk-”

“That’s what I had said to Tench! That we should tell him everything- include him, but-”

“But you didn’t.”

“Alex-”

“You knew what felt right and you doubted yourself!” I reach to grab his sleeve, calm him somehow, but the motion has the opposite effect, and he throws me off as if burnt, “No! This is a pattern with you.”

“I did what I thought was right.”
“Well you thought too much.”

He is probably right on that account, but his words are cutting at me too harshly for me to do anything but defend, “Why didn’t you tell him yourself? If you’ve had these suspicions for so long, you could’ve said something before you left—” _he could’ve said he was leaving,_ “—could’ve said a lot of things.”

The way his expression twists in anger, I can see he regrets his choice and would turn that regret on me. “I wrongly thought that you’d be strong enough to judge your own loyalties instead of blindly following the family or submitting yourself to rank—”

“Maybe _you_ thought too much.”

“Obviously!”

I roll my eyes and fold my arms over my chest; I see no point in defending myself if he’s already decided that I was wrong. I want the conversation to be over, could turn from the room and make it so, but some part of me enjoys watching him throw his hands up in frustration and press on furiously—ranting and raving. The staff has all been pressed tempers and bottled emotions. There’s some satisfaction in feeling furious with him.

“You asked me to release you to make your own choices of who you should trust, and I believed in you! But—Lafayette? He’s been courting the French alliance since he came here—Comte de Pas, Vergennes and Germain—he deserves to know what obstacles our army is facing if he’s throwing his reputation behind us—”

I lean into him, “And do you think he’d have _any_ convincing words for them if he couldn’t invoke the name Gates? We just won New England—New York is ours again and that’s all by Gates. Our most remarkable achievement is written under his name, no one cares of Trenton and Princeton anymore. The only way we convince the French is by flaunting Saratoga, and for that we need Gates—”

“I know that!” he spits.

“Then do you think Lafayette—_our_ Lafayette, could possibly brag of that achievement, if he knew what Gates is doing to oust Washington?”

Hamilton’s glare loosens, brows creasing, and realizing how close we’d drawn together, he backs away.

It’s always satisfying to surprise him, but it frustrates me now, where he seems to not see himself. It takes so much to gain his trust and admiration, but once it’s given, he’s quick to imagine those he admires capable of more than they are. While that faith is sometimes inspiring, in this case, he hasn’t been around to inspire it. “Do you think _he_ could’ve sacrificed his personal honor to brag of a name he hated?” I say. “Would he have been able to write to his friends about how highly he regards Gates if he honestly didn’t?” More importantly, “Even if he could, would _you_ have asked him to?”

His glare makes it clear that he would— that my accusations don’t reach him. But, along the fringes of that anger and offense, there’s understanding— that we are not the same in this regard.

“I couldn’t. I allowed him to believe in the words he wanted to write, and if you want me to apologize for that, then I am sorry.”

His lips press tight and he finally takes a step back from me, but I don’t feel vindicated. Thankfully, he just straightens his posture. “Well, it doesn’t matter. His Excellency’s done it for you.”
I sigh. Recognizing the end of an argument in a forcibly neutral statement, I allow my own posture to loosen, “The Marquis will not be pleased…”

He presses a hand to his temple. “He won’t be pleased with us…”

I’M NOT SURE what Lafayette feels. When he comes into headquarters that evening, I sit outside the General’s office with Meade and Fitz, pretending to read a letter from my father while they work on rations receipts. He’s brought Hamilton back into his office now, and whatever conversation is passing between my two friends and our commander, I hope one of them will forgive me enough to recount it.

I shouldn’t raise my hopes.

Since our conversation in the parlor, Hamilton had not looked at me once, just gone about his duties, brought notes to each of the other aides and discussed the committee he’d mentioned with them. Whatever he had wanted to say to me about that committee, he doesn’t.

I cannot stop thinking about what he said of de Kalb…the French plot, how the court in Versaille thought so little of us that they believed we would submit to the total command of a foreign officer over our nation’s greatest man. I’m not sure what to make of it. Whether my feelings even matter.

Despite that assignment, de Kalb has been supportive of General Washington since we made camp here, seems to have even formed a friendship with the man. So, what changed his mind? It’s hard to tell if he’s working his way close to Washington for this plot or whether he truly wishes to see the Great Man I had insisted he is.

The office door creaks open and I look up from my father’s writing, hoping to see my friends. But, it’s only Tighman entering with a satchel of letters. He shuts the door behind himself and the soft hum of voices on the other side of the door quiets. When it opens again, Washington steps out of the office and we stand to his attention until he waves it off and follows Tench from the room.

And I watch the door and wait.

When Lafayette emerges, his eyes meet mine briefly and slide quickly away.

Something about his posture is off, as if he is projecting his pride- or that he always has been and I only just now see the cracks in that mask. When he passes by my table in his quick retreat, I see his eyes are red-rimmed and too bright.

“He’ll be alright,” Hamilton follows from the General’s personal office, shutting the door.

Meade and Fitz acknowledge the assessment with resigned nods, and I realize I must not have been the only one concerned with the boy’s distress. There’s something so personal in Lafayette’s friendship, it’s easy to forget it’s not mine alone.

Hamilton walks to the bench. “I don’t believe he’s angry with anyone but himself,” he says, sliding his leg up over the bench and sitting with careful slowness. His movements still seem dangerously brittle and the hollow revines of his cheeks make the bones of his face seem frail, bruises under his eyes sinking deep into his skull. He braces his elbows heavily on the table, and it strikes me how his uniform hangs loose at his arms. “He might be short and distant for a while, but I think that’s more from embarrassment than any grudge.”

I’m glad he’s chosen to sit with me, but now that he’s here, I can’t find anything worth saying- not
about Conway’s letters or de Kalb, or Lafayette’s shattered image of us. I feel awkward and Alexander looks too exhausted to save me from it with his characteristic babbles.

I had missed him so much.

Having him back is strange. I’m pleased with it and yet so unsure what to do with that. When Lafayette returned from York, I had recognized the gap between us as a product of how I had changed and how he had grown. I knew too much and he too little, he had earned so much and I so little. But, if anything, I match Alexander now more than ever. If he told me the true nature of his work, I don’t believe it would shock me as it may have starting out, stealing from citizens, spying on our officers, distrusting superiors. I’m resigned to necessity and how it drives us to sacrifice character. I cannot pretend to judge him for it.

I can’t admit my resignation. To do so feels like it may degrade me somehow, make me less than the ‘finest gentlemen’ he likes to keep. But, if I match him now, it’s hard to imagine I’ve made myself less...

“What are you working on?” he says finally.

I slide him the letter and admit, “I really wasn’t.”

He breathes a laugh and takes the note, eyes flicking rapidly over the words. After a minute, he hums, “Well, you’ve done a good job of winning your father into our favor,” he says, giving a nod and looking up at me with a soft, unexpected admiration. “He’s confirming what I suspected was happening with that original letter.”

“Conway’s?”

He nods and slides my father’s note back across the table, “Says Conway asked him about publishing the original letter he wrote to Gates, but he hadn’t brought it to show to him. Your father objected, but he thinks Conway’s been out showing the letter to members of Congress nonetheless.”

I sigh and push a hand through my hair, anticipating my father’s next subject of complaint.

Alex shrugs, “Conway’s realized the number of those men who’ll remain loyal to Washington and it frightens him.”

He says this as if to reassure me, but I’m not sure I share that confidence. When I look down to read the letter myself, I find a line he seems to have ignored, “Where were your loyal men when our suggestion for Inspector General was made?”

He raises a brow.

I explain, “When we offered the Baron d’Arendt as Inspector General, someone shouted ‘As great a rascal as any in the army’. Doesn’t exactly demonstrate overwhelming loyalty.”

He looks at me sharp, “Honestly, I don’t think it matters who takes that post. We survived two years without it, and now with the precedent of all the nothing Conway’s done with it, I don’t think anyone can do much damage we wouldn’t be capable of blocking.”

“We should be doing more with that post than leaving it to some inept officer we’ll do nothing but block. D’Arendt recommended the post to assert discipline, so we can start behaving like a real army, and with the right man in that position-”

“We can enact real changes?” The quirk of his brow takes on an air of amusement and I realize how
unrealistic I sound, considering all the politics I’d seen around promotions.

Alexander just grins.

SOME TENSION BETWEEN us seems to unravel as we talk. Alex explains that he had been working to provide unshakeable defense for some solutions he had drawn to our concerns of supply, and his meetings with the General that have been sessions of debate for those arguments. As Trumbull warned, the real threat remains in the quartermaster department. Any plans that Washington makes will have to be passed through the Board first- and while Mifflin sits on it, he will ensure that any plan Washington supports will be immediately deemed impractical or impossible by the quartermasters and promptly rejected.

Hamilton speaks slowly, tiring so that he has to take moments to rest until he can resume. It takes great effort not to protest it. The darkness flooding through the General’s office offers the escape I’d wanted and we pack our papers. Even General Washington lacks candles to write by, so I offer to show Hamilton the cabins since he can no longer continue to press on at work.

The boys of the family had all lived together when the cabins were originally constructed, but recent desertions and deaths have opened enough spaces that many of the officer’s cabins are half-empty or being scrapped for firewood or lumber.

As we come inside, I’m surprised to find my bed taken by a familiar shape. Long legs protruding from the edge of the pallet, Lafayette sits up as the door opens, but if I thought he had returned by some desire to speak with me and perhaps mend our broken rapport, that thought flitters away when he looks at me, pushes up from the cot and plants himself by Meade’s side.

He grins, but I can quickly see that it’s not for me. “Hamilton!”

Beside me, Alexander’s posture softens and he leans forward in his approach, steps to embrace Gilbert who expresses earnest joy to have our friend back. He refuses to meet my eyes.

I temper my gait, taking my side of the cabin to undress and pull on my weathered nightshirt.

They begin talking of the congressional committee, the first member having arrived today. A Gouverneur Morris from New York, apparently familiar with Hamilton and by Meade’s account, “said he was eager to see you, Hammy...”

There’s a question in his tone which Alex answers with a laugh, and a cheeky grin, “He would be, of course. Lord Livingston happens to be a mutual friend- and frequent host to the both of us. No one else enjoys the stories of Mister Morris’s...amorous interludes as I do.”

Lafayette’s smile holds a bemused question that Alexander goes on to address, talking vibrantly about the galas he’d attended, the familiar names of ladies they’d flirted with together, and the stories they’d shared between themselves of bawdy dalliances in lewd detail that would have most gentlemen turning up their noses disdainfully. In friendly company, noses turn up in laughter, heads thrown back and hands clapped to chests.

I don’t join in their banter, don’t even feign amusement. I feel unwelcome to this interaction, crippled in some way I had not noticed until their happy talking had invited me to touch it. Lafayette’s friendship has always been a mark of honor, bestowed without any expectation in return. I’m not willing to continue in avoidance- such a loathsome thing, a well-deserved wound. One I should want to heal...but I have never needed a plan of approach to be at ease with Gilbert, and until I can figure
a way to span this distance, I’m left to let it yawn and stretch against me.

Their talk grows earnest as Lafayette directs the course of the subject, waxing poetic about ladies- his wife in particular. He regales the story he had already told me, eager for his new baby girl, Anastasie.

I watch their conversation long enough to see the strange shadows pass over Alexander’s face. Something like pity twisting his smile into something condescending as Gilbert raves on about his love for his wife. It vexes me enough to turn and tuck my legs under the blankets.

“You sailed all the way to America to taste the thrill and adventure of war- but half your heart’s still across the sea?” Alex chides.

“Oh, but love is the greatest adventure!” Lafayette replies without pause, “To be so entirely at the mercy of another person- it is dangerous, isn’t it?” Alexander shifts his weight away from me where I have my back turned to him. “In war we fear what will happen when we meet the enemy- what he will do to us. In love, we fear ourselves and when we will part- what we will do to ourselves.”

“You make it sound like madness…” There’s a taunting lilt in Hamilton’s voice that tells me he’s smiling while he says this, laughing, but I think if I looked, I’d see the veneer, how much truth he tries to tuck away in his tone.

Lafayette laughs anyway, “Only if you try to avoid it.” That hangs in the air for a long moment, and when Hamilton doesn’t pick it up and respond, it holds heavy between us.

After a moment, Hamilton shifts from my cot and I hear him rummaging at the desk where I know we’ve kept a pile of books. The room descends into silence as he presumably reads over the covers. I don’t turn to look, pretend I’m already asleep. He settles on the floor by the hearth to read and I feel his absence at my back while Meade and Lafayette fall quickly asleep, snores rising from the other cots, swallowing up the crackling sound of the fire and the occasional turning page. The sound is enough to distract me from sleep where it would usually comfort.

“You can stop pretending,” Hamilton’s voice comes in a whisper, closer than I expect.

I start, shoulders tensing, and it’s enough that I’ve lost the ruse. How he could recognize that I was awake, I do not know, but there’s no use in pretending. I turn over.

He holds the book open in his lap, staring at me steadily. “Saying that he may be short and distant didn’t mean you should be so…” he says.

I shift my weight up onto my elbows and glance up and over at Lafayette. “I...had nothing to say.”

He opens his mouth to speak but seems to think better of it. He closes the book and pushes up from the floor, sets it on the desk then reaches down to remove his trousers and fold them neatly on the chair. When he steps towards the bed, I turn over and face my back to him, only glancing over my shoulder when he speaks again to complain, “You never talk about your own ladies.”

He draws back the bedclothes to slip under the covers, and the subject has me averting my eyes.

He must notice something in my expression that has him withdrawing his curiosity and rushing to amend himself, “...unless you’re uninterested in ladies...which is fine if not unfortunate- I mean...to miss out on their particular sort of wit and sweetness- not as a pity or anything...or unless you intended to wait for marriage to dabble- which, if that’s the case, I should apologize again for advancing on you when-”

I cut off his assumptions, too sharp not to cut, “I’ve told you, we’re fine. No more apologizing for
that.”

He hums in acceptance, but his curious gaze lingers and the question still hangs in the air. Any time he’s asked intimacy of me, he has always managed to find questions that would pierce directly to the core of my inhibitions and draw me out in my rawest state, openly admitting my own most embarrassing depravity. And, when I have hesitated, he’s revealed just enough of himself to have me returning his exposure ten-fold. Somehow, he has always managed to see me- or have me wanting to be seen.

But, not this. Not Martha.

Not when she was so much the same. Her fanciful stories, so creative and lofty, I sometimes think she was more sly than even I recognized, planting ideas and dreams in my head and making me sure of myself even when I had no right to be. Sure I was safe to share parts of myself no one should’ve seen. His pernicious love I couldn’t seem to shake from myself, I had told her about Francis and she hadn’t condemned me for foolishness, folly, or sin. She raged as my heart broke, then grew life from my grief. As estranged as we became after ’dabbling’, we had been close before that travesty.

“There’s no need to tell me if you don’t want to,” Hamilton holds back the blanket in a clear invitation.

His gentle enunciation pulls me back to his attention and I carefully accept the coverlet from his hand, wrapping my fingers over the wool slowly and replacing it under my chin. He vexed my curiosity for months and I would not subject him to the same treatment...but, thinking of Martha with her stomach protruding obscenely while Alexander turns over and tucks his back into the dip of mine seems to pervert whatever chastity remains in either relationship.

“...I’d hate to think what rough abuse of your heart would make you shut it up,” he muses. “I assume you’d gush endlessly like Gilbert does- were you properly ensnared.” On that, he leans back and glances at me as though to check that his musing hasn’t offended, “Though I shouldn’t assume,” he says, entirely unapologetic.

I want to tell him just how ensnared I had been; it’s a wound he keeps prodding at- whether he sees it or not. Kinloch and Martha...Frances, it’s all suddenly on my tongue, so easy to say, but... “Are we going to use this opportunity for rest or to discuss my romantic history?”

My tone bites. He doesn’t protest, just shrugs and turns over, his shoulder a bony protrusion in the blanket that I want to wrap my arms around and encase.

When he was dead, I wanted nothing more than to hold him, to feel the familiar rhythm of his heart under my fingertips- had needed it like the cool relief of seawater on sunburnt skin. In my gutted, unsteady state, I had felt hollow- like the thought I might never hear the ocean again, and in the desert of this bitter winter, that thought haunts me still.

Under our wool blanket, the heat that drifts off Alexander’s body comes humid and distracting, drawing memories both welcome and far from it. Sticky and forbidding like Carolina heat before a storm or the remnants of a fever he had supposedly shaken. His posture is a clear invitation, but even as he folds himself into the curve of my side, making himself soft and open to be held, it wouldn’t be right. As if it might imply a comfort that I don’t feel.

I’m sure now that granting him my affection wouldn’t see me discarded from his side, but...there is still something defensive in his advance, something that stops me when I so want to invite him into my own walls. At least for now...
ON THE TWENTY-THIRD, we receive a report from Captain Lee, detailing an attack his dragoons had deflected about six miles from camp at the Spread Eagle Tavern.

The family celebrates in the cabin Fitz and Tilghman share, and I feign comfort, glad for the success, but feeling isolated nonetheless. Lee’s force of twenty-five dragoons had captured over a hundred German and British soldiers, including four officers, and the story has bolstered desperately-needed morale across camp. Lee’s men had taken on one-hundred and thirty dragoons led by Major Tarleton and kept the British out by a thin barricade.

Meade sits against me, slurring words of praise for Captain Lee, acclaiming his work in Philadelphia where he’d taken up the espionage operations left in Major Clark’s absence. My attention drifts between him and Tilghman, recounting the report that had come in from Spread Eagle.

My eyes drift to the fireplace, the only source of flickering light. Curled with his letter box flipped open, Alexander is sitting with his quill out, writing steadily among the talk and laughter. The light spreads over his face and cuts shadows over the angles, skin attenuated and made hollow. He tilts himself to see while he writes, and in so doing catches the light in just the right way for me to see an unguarded rawness in his eyes, the force of a storm in his focus.

Wherever he is right now, I don’t feel welcome to follow.

He glances up and turns to me as if my staring had registered like a physical touch. I startle, and that must show on my face because the intensity drains from his look and his mouth pinches with some wry emotion that has him turning away from me with resignation.

I still cannot place this hesitation.

WHEN MY FATHER’S RESPONSE to my letter, acclaiming the Chevalier de Mauduit on my recommendation, it’s placed on my stack already opened. As I read through the lines, I find no real response to the allusion I had made to my black battalion. Just a small denunciation- like he’s concluded the scheme was an offhanded thought, sent for his approval- not a plan I wholeheartedly intend to execute. Whoever had read through the lines would never guess I’d even mentioned it.

Before I can finish reading the letter in detail, Meade’s voice catches me from across the room, “Laurens, you should see this!” he says, far too enthusiastic for this time of morning. “Rhode Island’s raised a militia unit we think you’ll be interested in-”

But, with my father’s letter, far more important matters hold my attention. “Congress passed a resolution for our prisoners- do you know where Major Tallmadge is?”

Meade’s grin slips, a flicker of frustration touching his brow before the smile is back and he claps a hand on my shoulder, “Probably with his regiment, we can go to him, of course…”

I don’t miss the acquiescence and wonder why it seems like he’s obliging me. I don’t question it.

WHEN THE GENERAL comes into the office to dismiss us from our station that night, Hamilton rises to meet him at the door, lowering his voice to inform him that “the last delegate arrived from Congress and is being settled into Moore Hall with the others.”
To which the General asks if the boys had completed their preparations for greeting the committee in the morning. I’m not sure if I was to hear the conversation, but I turn to Tilghman and ask, “We’re greeting the committee tomorrow?”

He looks at me and frowns for a long moment, sets his letterbox back on the desk where he’d picked it up in preparation to retire for the night, “Yes, we are...but, if you were to be coming along, we’d have told you.”

I feel the confusion that must be evident on my face, more than a little offended, “But, I...you could ask my advice- I know several of the congressional delegates personally, several of them are family friends. Or...I could have contacted my father for advice in our approach if diplomacy is a concern-”

“Well, you didn’t offer this while we discussed it, so you weren’t included in the conversation,” Tench says simply.

“I would have liked to be,” I say, “I-...I would have been useful-”

“You don’t get an invitation just by merit of existing on staff,” Tench glances at me plainly as if those words aren’t meant to cut me down. “If you wanted the opportunity to greet the committee, you should’ve asked. You get nothing in life if you-”

“We couldn’t let you meet the committee,” a voice interrupts.

I turn and Alexander is standing by my heel, looking distractedly at a pile of letters he’d just placed at the desk. “The work we’ve been discussing involves persuading and inducements,” he picks up a pen to scratch some note on the top letter as if hardly paying attention to what he’s saying to me, “-things that are only possible for those of us who don’t have intrinsic attachments. If you met with the committee, it would imply partisanship for those connections you have in Congress- namely your father.” Reassurance that I wasn’t disincluded by any mark of my character, only a name- I don’t know if Hamilton’s words are meant to placate me or comfort, but they work on neither account and I don’t appreciate the blase way he delivers them.

He doesn’t look at me. But, I want him to.

“And you didn’t think to explain this to me?” I say. “You didn’t think I would be reasonable enough to accept that?” He cocks his head back and looks at me sharp, the sort of glare I had wanted for the sort of protest he would make, “You didn’t think that my opinions and advice about some of those intrinsic attachments might be useful?” I doubt that. And, I hope he sees what I imply in saying, “I’m an asset not a risk…”

He sees it. My words spark a flame that has him spin towards me, chest drawn up, “And you think I’d argue with that?” he says. “Do you think I’d say anything but what I just did had you asked me...or made any effort at all to involve yourself?” he sways on his feet, words rushing together. “I tried to approach you with these plans. I would’ve consulted your thoughts, asked your advice of how to address members of Congress with whom you’re familiar- do not presume that this is the same as when you…”

I reach out instinctively as he sways towards me.

“You didn’t ask, so we decided without you,” he says, “and whether or not I would’ve liked your thoughts, they weren’t offered and it’s not my job to retrieve them. Do not presume that I’m trying to push you aw-”

He sways a little too far towards me and I grab his arms, holding him aright until he struggles back,
“Please,” I say, “go lie down…”

He glares, jaw set. “I’m fine.”

“Right…”

He steps further away, “You heard McHenry’s report, I’m fit as can be.”

“You’re swaying on your feet.”

“I’m fine.

“Give the same answer enough and it starts to sound like a practiced lie…”

He picks up his pile of letters, and tucks them primly under his arm. “Ask the same question more than once and you get the same answer.”

IF HAMILTON STILL CONSIDERS HIMSELF my friend, I’m not alone in that respect.

During his time in York, recovering from injury, the Marquis de Lafayette formed a friendship with my father and it doesn’t surprise me to find letters addressed to him. What does surprise me is how quickly the Marquis gets up and walks to Hamilton’s desk when I set the letter by his hand wordlessly.

I watch them open the letter together, watch Alexander dip his quill in ink and begin marking the note, circling lines and underlining. They speak in hushed voices, shaking heads and gesturing indecipherably- until Alex points towards me across the room, an obvious referral that Gilbert should come talk to me- receive another opinion.

He shakes his head without looking up.

And I look away before Alex can see that I was watching. I can’t risk my pride to see it. The pity.

When some time’s passed and I judge it safe to look back, the Marquis is writing a letter of response, Hamilton leaning towards his shoulder and dictating at his side, brow creased in thought and shoulders hunched with fatigue. When Gilbert looks over at him, seems to perk with energy he obviously doesn’t have.

I try to seem I’m deciphering a letter from Major Clark, but mostly, I watch their work from afar.

The General’s door opens and Tilghman steps out to call Hamilton into his council. Both my friends rise from the desk together and Lafayette leaves quickly, avoiding my eyes. I listen as Hamilton collects his letters, resist the urge to look over when the sound stops. I nearly flinch when his voice is suddenly close. “The Board of War confirmed the appointment we suspected. A command in the north and Conway as his second.”

“What?”

“You wanted inclusion, right?” he says. “Conway was your assignment. The letter of warning came from your father. You should know this is happening.”

I stare for a long moment, trying- and failing- to understand what he wants me to say...why he’s speaking to me at all.
His lips purse impatiently and he leans one arm against the table, “Go offer your thoughts.”

I drop his gaze, straightening the corners of my letters just to have some use for my hands, make the motion prim instead of petulant, “He obviously doesn’t want my thoughts or he would’ve asked.”

“Is that what you think?”

I shrug, “I made myself available.”

There’s suddenly a scrape of wood and Alexander is pulling out the chair across from me, ignoring a summons from General Washington to glare at me over the table. “I understand...your compulsion to relinquish Gilbert’s affection to me,” he says voice low and clandestine, eyes dark like a thunderstorm. “I know that assuming responsibility for expressing honest sentiment can be...overwhelming, and I understand your trust that I might- recent experience considered, be more fit to the task. But, I think you’re doing both of you an injustice by deciding not to try.”

We pass several beats in silence and I can see none of the soft spots in him that had grown so familiar. He’s hard and closed, pressing up from the table before I can gather a response.

“Tilgman had said you would need to hear it, that status and wealth spared you the experiences that make it obvious to the rest of us, but I…” he frowns, seeming to question himself, “Just...make this right.”

IT SHOULD BE SAID that I tried. Taking my ignorance to Tilghman, he explained the Board of War’s plan for an expedition into Canada, detached from Washington’s command and intended as an easy victory that would overshadow His Excellency’s ‘insignificant’ squabbles in Philadelphia, serve to bolster the northern army and General Conway, pluming Lafayette as a figurehead.

I approached my friend, perhaps too casually, with maps and plans we had drawn for our expedition to reclaim the capital. An olive branch, a happy memory from Christmas night when we’d been full of hope, building castles in the sky. He pursed his lips on a strained smile and made a hasty excuse to leave.

That afternoon, I arranged to take supper at Lafayette’s table. He avoided my eyes, went silent when I started conversation. He ate quickly and left his plate to be excused. Washington raised his brows at me from the head of the table, disappointed for having lost the company, and I felt keenly ashamed.

When I came to my pallet that night, Hamilton was already asleep, snoring lightly- an unusual sound from him. He had spent all day writing and scratching through papers with that same single-minded focus that had griped him during our celebrations for Captain Lee. A piece of newspaper was spread out over my blanket which I lifted to read by the firelight. A Rhode Island militia unit had employed slaves to fight alongside colonists in exchange for their freedom. It was a perfect example of what I had suggested to my father. I glanced around for Meade, but he hadn’t come back to our cabin.

Hamilton stretched his legs in his sleep, rolling over.

The next morning, I make a more direct attempt, bringing in the post, sorting through letters and setting them at their respective places. I step to Lafayette’s seat where he’s been helping Washington with translations and managing his own correspondence, and I ask if he sent the letter he wrote to my father-

Before the Marquis can reply, the office door opens to General Washington and we rise to his
attention as he rounds the table and gathers up the letters placed at his desk.

Washington’s fingers sift through the stack of paperwork from the Board of War, tugging out one particular letter. He glares at it a long, tense moment as we all still stand at attention. He looks at Gilbert, “I have been demoted to your postman, it would seem,” he drops it at the boy’s fingertips.

The Marquis looks at it with wide eyes as Washington evens the corners of his papers and tucks them under his arm, turning into his private office and leaving us with the echo of silent judgment.

I glance back to Lafayette. A cord stands out on his neck as he picks up the letter. From this distance, I cannot make out the name of the writer, but knowing the correspondence my father had shared with my friend, I know it’s from Gates and his Board of War. After reading, Lafayette draws a deep breath for courage and follows General Washington into his office, door slamming closed behind him.

THAT EVENING, Washington comes to my desk. I had made several trips around camp to deliver messages and take reports from commissaries for Tilghman. Lafayette was sitting beside Hamilton by the time the General had come out and sat among us to read through our notes of the day. He keeps his head down as if he doesn’t notice the General moving seats.

“I received a message from your father,” Washington says, and it surprises me- the letter hadn’t passed through my hands first.

Across the table, Hamilton’s lifts his eyes, watching with blatant interest.

“And, I would like your recommendations for my response. He received a copy of the pamphlet we found in our camp in September, placed at the front step of Congress.”

I resist the urge to glance back at Alex, where I have a vague feeling he’s smirking. I assume I should thank him for this conversation. 

I certainly hadn't sent Thoughts of a Free Man to York.

Washington’s voice drifts in explanation, “He had wanted to warn me about the pamphlet, and I was not sure if it would be wise to indicate that I’ve seen it…”

“Tell him you have,” I say. “Send it back and insist that he read it to Congress.”

Washington’s brows jump and he stares at me, mouth open and wordless.

“He won’t actually do it,” I say, “but he’ll be impressed you suggested it. He appreciates absolute candor, and he’ll see the gesture as one of good faith- in Congress as a whole, and especially in his own discretion.” Something which would endear the General to my father forever. “He’ll know you intend to remain accountable to that body, but moreover, he’ll know that you value his reputation- should anyone else find out that he’s seen it without having shared it with the entire body of Congress, it would reflect poorly on him and you should seem mindful of that.”

The General frowns.

I assure him, “I’ve impressed to him the importance of defending your name. He won’t risk reading it to anyone.”

When Washington seems to accept my word, something warm and proud unfurls in my chest. Then, he glances over at Lafayette and gives him a strange look, eyes dropping back to me before he gets up from the table with a secure nod. I glance over the desk and find my friends staring, Alexander
with a smirk and Lafayette dodging my eyes.

I STARTLE AWAKE, believing for a moment that I’ve had another dream of falling when in actuality I’ve been hit. A satchel falls into my lap, and when I jolt aright, spills a pair of worn breeches, a shirt, cravat and boots.

“Well, I packed for you, but…” Hamilton laughs under his breath as I gather up the clothes, confused.

“Packed?”

“I arranged a meeting with the congressional committee to discuss His Excellency’s proposal before we deliver the presentation of it.”

I stare at him as he turns away and starts gathering pieces of my uniform, dusting them off and draping them over his side of the pallet. There’s a defined indent in the stuffing of the mattress where his body had habitually laid, a good distance from me. “You...want me to come?”

“Why do you think I packed?” when he finds my cravat, he throws it into my lap. “Get dressed.”

He turns away and starts talking about the ride to Moore Hall and the difficulty he’d faced in securing horses for the three-mile trip, moving about the cabin feverishly, gathering his own clothes and his books into a pile, he strangely avoids my incredulous gaze. I realize he hasn’t begun packing for himself, electing instead to ensure I would wait for him.

As if I’d refuse.

I consider it- knowing he’s seen some logical reason that I should, but not seeing it until I realize we’re alone in the cabin- Meade absent from his cot and presumably bunked with Tilghman and Fitz.

“Wait…”

He stops talking and sways on his feet, leans on the desk for support, then turns and looks at me.

I hesitate to look a gift horse in the mouth, but there’s a determination in his eyes that assures me- he won’t retract the invitation. “I thought...it was agreed among the whole family that I shouldn’t meet with the committee-”

“Because of your connections, yes. But those could also be useful- as you mentioned.”

“And dangerous- as you mentioned…”

He looks down at his hand, thumb picking absently at the polish of the tabletop as he considers his words. “The committee was designed not to appear partisan and His Excellency was prepared to treat it as such,” he says. “But, when Meade brought word that new delegates from Congress were coming to assess our camp, we were worried the committee would become a tool of Gates’s faction, so Fitz and Harrison began watching prospective members in York and collecting information of their leanings. The faction wanted to send General Gates and Mifflin from the Board along with three congressmen, but after Washington effectively snubbed Conway, they gave up the idea and picked five congressmen from New England, Pennsylvania and Virginia...”

I push myself to the edge of my pallet and stare at him, unsure if I should be impressed that he’s managed to remain involved in political games while he travelled, or if I should be concerned that he’d become so paranoid to keep working on this while he’d been sick.
He seems to see both these things on my face, “Tench wrote to me about how Washington crippled Conway’s power as Inspector General,” he explains. “We knew he was only in that post to make reports that would exaggerate Washington’s deficiencies—slide in any insults he could. But, I considered to what end our own officers would want to embarrass our Commander.”

I frown.

“Conway’s resignation was rejected by the Board— and the Board sent him back with a post vital to give Mifflin and the Boardmembers reasons to deny Washington’s plans and divert his power to Gates. In Congress, the faction expected Conway’s reports would justify their whiggish politics.” He moves from the table then to continue packing as he talks, “So, when I heard how Washington had blocked Conway’s maneuver— and the faction soon thereafter relinquished their push to place Gates and Mifflin themselves into our camp, you can understand why I was wary. These are not men so prone to give up— I thought, perhaps they’ve just realized we’re keen to them. Perhaps we should expect something more creative.”

“So, you kept Fitz on the trail...” I say when he stops to take a breath. “What did he find?”

“Familiar names and familiar connections,” he says. “Tucked in with the unassuming—Mister Morris—as genial as anyone and a personal friend to me, and John Harvie fellow Virginian and friend to Washington and Walker.” A spy for the Virginia delegation. “Just barely outnumbered by likely enemies. Francis Dana from Massachusetts is a good friend of the Adams’, college roommate of James Lovell. Nathaniel Folsom from New Hampshire’s famously been party to some rude insults of our commander, and Joseph Reed...”

I recall the name, surprised to hear it again. “Joseph Reed is one of the delegates on the committee?”

“And the one Tench is most committed to turn in our favor,” Hamilton says. And, I recall a blustery hillside, watching the battle down below as Tilghman’s friend raised his sword in Reed’s defense, how Washington himself had ached to join them in the field.

I’m silent in thought, “So...you want me to come because the committee is slanted?”

He stares at me, expression dark and imploring, when he speaks his voice comes deep, “I think...it’s time we dropped the pretense that anyone in Congress has the option of remaining neutral.”

I can hear the question in his tone, the warning that, if I follow him through that door—meet the committee on behalf of Washington, my presence in itself will become a political statement for both myself and my father. One I should be prepared to honor. But, my fate and General Washington’s are already entwined. My personal honor is already his.

If Alexander believes I should come, I pack my bags.

MOORE HALL is like any other fieldstone house, windows arranged symmetrically in a mimic of the Georgian style. A gable roof and sunporch, it’s been converted from a comfortable stately home into a headquarters for Colonel Biddle and the quartermaster department. I recognize the building by the description Tilghman's given as he's kept a close correspondence with Colonel Biddle and the commissary officers that had filled Trumbull’s office.

When we arrive, a slave takes our horses out to the stables and Hamilton gives his letterbox to another one to carry. “I should warn you,” he says and a lump of apprehension forms in my throat. He turns to me at the steps of the house, but his expression is unreadable. “The committee has
arranged a party.”

I stare at him, blink, wait for him to explain further, “In...our honor?” that wouldn’t make sense.

“In the Marquis’s.”

No. I want to say no, want to step back and away like this was a trick, but I can’t. He’s going on,
explaining that Gilbert had ridden here with the letter from my father about his appointment to the
expedition into Canada to receive confirmation. When this meeting was drawn for the specific
purpose of taking advice about the expedition, he’ll be in such a position that avoiding me would
make him seem rude. He won’t have a choice but to listen if I speak.

I don’t want to give advice that my friend doesn’t want.

As if reading this on my face, Alex says, “-and, of course, if you choose to say nothing at all that’s
fine. There is a message in itself to come out here and not give advice he’s already refused.”

It’s a cunning maneuver which I should expect. For the past few days, Alexander has been nothing
but helpful in my careful- albeit clumsy, efforts of apology. “I...we’re not dressed for a formal party.”

He gives half a smile, reassurance as if he sees through my distress. “It’s better that we’re not.”

I HAVE LEARNED how easily my friends maintain the facade of calm in the face of the
unexpected. The men I’m drawn to are always excellent actors. It still unnerves me to watch. The
Marquis’s expression hardly moves when he sees me. Smile firmly in place, he kisses my cheeks
politely after bestowing the greeting first on Hamilton. I try not to flinch.

Whatever meaning Alexander foresaw in me not saying anything, that’s the meaning that’s going to
have to suffice. As the meal progresses and talk flows from one subject to the next, I find myself lost
in strained undercurrents of communication. Lafayette addresses the command he’s been assigned by
the Board of War and the news seems to shock and worry the delegates each in turn. If they had
heard word of the expedition before its passage, none of them will admit to it. They all agree that he
should travel to York and address it with Gates in person.

The subject moves to the proposal Hamilton had been writing with General Washington, outlining
their solutions to our army’s issues of supply. The commissary and quartermaster officers that are
hosting the committee shift in their seats, but Alexander pretends to be heedless of that. As we sit and
partake of a spartan meal of beef stew and potatoes, he describes the scarcity throughout camp, the
rarity of the meat we’re provided by the privilege of our company. Even those subjects where I’m
knowledgeable enough to contribute, I don’t. It seems that all the things I would say, Alexander does
in my stead, and he bemoans our plight eloquently.

Too eloquently.

His concerns border on complaint. As they should, but since he’d returned to camp, received the
same scant rations as the rest of us and suffered the same hunger, I hadn’t heard him complain once.
If these are his true feelings, they’re not ones he would ever express like this.

I’m suddenly realizing the play I’ve become an actor in. My clothes have grown loose since
November, breeches requiring a belt to stay up. I wonder if I look the part. Hamilton certainly does.
I’m unnerved with the performance.

Morning becomes afternoon and, as we finish our meals and the Moore house servants collect the
dishes, we stand and move to the parlor. Alexander’s letterbox is already on the cabinet by the sofa and Mister Morris retrieves it for him, helping him open it when his hands shake too much to unlock the fasteners. A knot of worry twists in my gut, but it doesn’t feel right. Hamilton had been fine for the ride here, perfectly sturdy in his saddle so far as I could see. I’m not sure if I should consider this a part of the act.

I usually understand my friend well enough to at least see when he’s being honest. But I feel too adrift and confused to help.

I listen as he reads through the proposal he had brought, submits the essay to them in sixteen pages of closely-defended argument. They listen and sip brandy, interrupt to raise concerns over wording, argue amongst themselves. Alex throws me glances over his shoulder while they talk. Even before he finishes reading, the presentation has dissolved into a debate between the delegates, the quartermaster officers, and my friends. Alex extricates himself, sliding to me as their voices raise and Lafayette joins in on their talk.

“A word?” he says.

I nod and step back a few paces.

He doesn’t move towards the door, but privacy isn’t much of a concern as it seems each man is already consumed in individual conversations. “You’re quiet,” he says bluntly.

I consider him in silence which does nothing to dispute his observation, “I just…” should be used to the roles we’re to play by now, it just worries me that, “You truly...don’t look well.”

I expect him to baulk at that. If he’s as unsteady as he seems, he wouldn’t acknowledge it; if it’s an act, I doubt it’s one he’d admit. Either way, I feel vulnerable, as if pointing out my own worry exposes me more than anything.

But, the look he meets me with is plain, “I am weary.” I’d suggest he sit down, until he says, “But this meeting is vital. We have to have the committee’s support in this proposal, and if I’m to be here-presenting it in this state, I’ll use it to my advantage.”

“This...this state. I want to demand he go rest. I want to send him back to headquarters and demand Washington confine him to bed. But, the rawness has returned to his eyes, some primal drive that seems to demand reality bend to his will or he’ll break himself trying to bend it by force. Suddenly the lines are blurred and I’m not so sure that I’ve seen him right- whether he’s as sickly as he seems or if he’s exaggerating more than I can see- using his illness to bolster our plight. “...You’re shameless,” I say, but there’s no bite in my voice.

He watches me as if to make sure there’s no bite in my eyes either. Then relaxes a little, “Well, almost. I think if I wasn’t holding up a dozen other men’s reputations I could be.”

Speaking of reputations, it occurs to me, “I never did ask...I mean, I assume His Excellency gave his blessing that I ride out here with you. I thought he’d decided against it?”

“He changed his mind?” I say. “He decided to risk it.” That I was worth the risk.

“I...put in a word for you.”

I stare at him, shocked. “Why?”
Alex glances at me in a way that truly does seem shy, “I seemed the best person to suggest it,” he says. “Washington’s been unusually amenable to my suggestions since I came back.”

I don’t know what to say. “That’s...good. Thank you.”

He shrugs, “I suspect it has something to do with the fretful letters from...my friends in Albany. Not that I should complain. Despite our obvious struggles, my life just got marginally easier,” he gives a self-amused grin. “I should die more often.”

It’s a joke but one that shakes me and when I grip his arm, I feel my own bones rattling under my skin.

He looks at me and the amusement fades, about five different expressions passing over his face, each more devastating than the last. He touches my wrist, but not to remove my hand, holds it steady as if to apologize. I say nothing. There are other people around us- they’re not listening to us, but I won’t chance speaking. With Alex touching my hand and understanding, I don’t trust the words I might say.

He sighs, “Well, easier in some ways. This piece,” he gestures between us, “is considerably more difficult.”

My brows draw.

“The...talking and smiling and wit,” he says. “I use to have better control of my face, I think. I could get my mouth to move just so to have you smile instead of...this…” He laughs at himself as if to dispel this awkwardness. It doesn’t work and he dims again. “Well, I should get back to the party...”

As nighttime approaches, the conversation continues. I try to involve myself. Hamilton’s words hold a certain pull on me. I had been so sure that, as soon as he returned, he would hold me to my promises and I would know how to allow it, that I would be so ready to tear down my walls. But now that he’s here and solid and available, I’m more apprehensive than ever.

Lafayette talks about his reservations in approaching the Board of War. The delegates and officers in the room offer questions he should ask, the best diplomatic methods he should use, and which topics he should avoid or feign ignorance upon. Those that we know have submitted to the faction promote confidence in the plot and suggest that Lafayette approach the Board with eagerness for the expedition. Particularly, Joseph Reed seems eager to assist him, to send Lafayette eagerly into Gates’s arms.

Watching Alexander interact with Reed is surreal. Their words dance around each other, seeming to agree at every turn but with nuance that reveals the stark contrast of interests. To anyone unaware of how they diverged, they would seem in complete harmony, equally driven for the Marquis’s success.

I don’t feel the need to contribute, and with the audience of the congressmen keeping them occupied, I step aside to read Lafayette’s response to my father and find the marks of Hamilton’s counsel in his writing- the denunciation of Conway as his second in command, the demands for enough supplies and money to fund his expedition, and the assertion of Washington as his superior.

Moving back into the conversation, I’m reminded of dinner parties I’d attended in Geneva, a shadow of Francis as he held center stage and courted all the room’s admiration. Hearing others talk has always helped me to organize my own mind, but once I’ve gathered my thoughts, I could never be content until I’d said them aloud. With Francis, I never wanted to interrupt his spell over the room.
With Alexander, it doesn’t seem necessary.

He does all the work for me, voicing my thoughts through his own tongue and arranging them in a way that makes me feel calm, content to follow, relieved to let someone else make the arguments I would otherwise be left to fight myself. I’m comfortable in the ringing of his voice, deep but bright, forcing my attention to his meaning with sharp enunciation. Besides just the sound, I’ve spent so long missing his distinct way of talking: his rambling explanations, apprehending every question or comment before anyone else could bring it up.

I focus so intently on his words that I nearly miss it when they start to slur. He loses his ‘t’s first, tongue going thick and heavy before touching his teeth. I look over at him in time to see his eyes rolling back, and I step forward to catch him by the arms.

He faints backwards into my chest, going totally limp.

The congressmen and commissaries are staring—too shocked to do something.

I shout at them. “Get McHenry!”

THE MOORE HOUSE SLAVES draw water and heat it at the fireplace, lugging it frantically up the stairs and emptying their buckets into a brass tub. I imagine the routine is one they’ve practiced several times while hosting the committee of distinguished guests from Congress, but the movement is more rushed than it might otherwise be if it hadn’t been ordered by Doctor McHenry.

After waking him with salts and inducing him to vomit several times, McHenry had directed Hamilton to be carried upstairs and put to bed. After sitting with him for several minutes, watching him sweat and shiver unconsciously, he decided that his body would have to be properly washed before he would start feeling better. The luxury of a bath isn’t available to patients in the army’s hospital camp, but the filth that accumulates on soldiers makes it impossible for the body to naturally replace the oils it must dispel to flush out a fever, and so a bath is necessary.

I sit removed from the commotion, listening to the water pouring and the barking voices in the next room over. It’s a welcome distraction. Better to listen to men working, being productive in some way, rather than sitting here useless, agonizing over whether Hamilton’s breathing or not.

His hands suddenly grab the blankets. Slack expression twisting in some unconscious pain, eyes tightening. I cover his hand in mine without thinking, scoop up his fingers and try to soothe them where they’d clenched. I realize after I’ve grabbed him, that I haven’t touched him softly—even in part like this—in months, we had embraced, but he was cross with me moments later...

So, even after his fingers loosen and relax, I don’t drop his hand immediately. I sort of just…hold it. Trace my fingers lightly over his wrist—find where his pulse flutters against the skin, move his fingers while he’s too pliant to resist it—note how delicate the bones feel and how calloused the pads are.

When the bedroom door creaks open, I nearly startle away from him, but it’s just Lafayette. He peeks through the door before stepping in, feet falling quietly as if he’s tempered his gait. “I…wanted to see him.”

I nod, settling back in my chair.

He approaches the bed, pulls up the chair McHenry vacated, and reaches for Alex’s hand. He looks at where I’m holding the other one, and stops himself, reaches up and touches Alex’s shoulder instead, giving a friendly squeeze. I’m not sure what the motion means and decide not to question it.
“Monsieur Reed insists that I should leave for York tonight,” he says. “All of them agree.”

I raise a brow at his tone, “You don’t want to.”

He looks at me flat, “Of course not.”

It’s understandable, but “Why are they saying you must leave tonight?” He stares at me, like I’m being dense. “What?”

He points at the window.

I turn and look. It’s snowing. Heavily. “Ah…” I say, “how long has it…” I don’t need the answer to that question, and I don’t feel foolish for not having noticed. But, if the Marquis waits even a few hours, travelling over the Delaware will be impossible. I can only imagine how difficult it must be, reuniting with his dearest companions in a foreign country, constantly concerned for them, and then compelled by scheming political plots, to leave them when their condition is most delicate.

“Your father has warned me that this command is not meant to honor General Washington,” he begins slowly. “I have no interest in elevating myself to stand beside him like his equal. It...insults me that General Gates attempts to do such- and assumes that I share that...ambition.” He slides his hand from Alex’s shoulder and folds his hands over each other with uncharacteristic nervousness. “I will demand my...expedition be called a detachment of His Excellency’s army. I think that this ‘Board of War’ would have people forget- that is what we are. I am...grateful for the command I have here, to be a Major General when I have only just come. And, the time I spent with your father, discussing his plans for this country, I appreciate greatly. And, the time I spent with General Greene-”

“Gilbert…” I stop him there. I’ve read his letter to my father, “I know all this.”

He bites his lip and his hands fidget over the blanket. For a long moment he’s quiet, turns to look at Alexander and seems lost in thought. “I know that the army...America is watching me,” he looks down at his hands, “to see what I will do and who I will support, and I...do not want them to misunderstand. I cannot allow these men to use me and my name without consulting my Commander in Chief. I have hear’d that they did this before- that they...reassigned his officers, and we have allow’d it gracefully, but...I don’t want...” He shakes his head. “It’s not me.”

It takes me a moment to realize that he isn’t saying any of this to defend his character. He’s asking my advice- or trying to. “My dear Marquis…” I say, rubbing my fingers over the back of Alex’s hand as I look over him to our friend. “I’m not going to tell you what you should say or how you should approach this. I believe you’ve done more to guide me than I have you, gotten as far as you are- as well-loved as you are, by doing what you believed felt right.” When I look at him again, his hands have stilled and posture straightened, “You’ll do fine.”

He turns from me and nods, hopefully finding his answer- or just reassurance- in what I had said. His hand moves back to Alexander’s shoulder, palm flat over the top of his chest, riding the rise of his breath. His voice comes out as a whisper, “I have to go…”

I nod.

“You will take care of him.”

It’s not a question and he doesn’t make it one, but I nod again. He should have that consolation. “I will, of course.”

When Lafayette leaves, the room feels too quiet and I hear the snow outside, the shifting sound of ice blowing like sand. I imagine his ride will not be a pleasant one.
Alexander had been snoring recently every time he slept, and I suspect that it was a symptom of this illness, but he’s quiet now, unsettlingly. I’m left to occupy myself, focusing on the dry texture of his knuckles. When I look up to his face, he’s awake and staring at me, bleary and obdurate. His eyes, like the rest of him, had lost their color. More grey than blue, but I remember the stormy skies they should be. He’s not supposed to look like this, cold ashes of a funeral pyre. He’s supposed to look like gold.

“Oh God, stop crying…” he says, tone too light for the way his voice comes weak. I’d think he’s trying to roll his eyes, or whine about it, if his expression wasn’t so soft and implacable.

His eyes drop to our hands, and I move to pull mine away, feeling like he caught me in some intimate act. Before I can, his pinky and thumb reach up and hook weakly at my fingers- a miss to catch me, but it stops my retreat, leads me back with a touch of fingertips. He gives an inch and seems to offer miles. So, I take his hand back carefully, curl my own more securely around it and place them- joined- over his chest.

He closes his eyes and lays back. Breathes out slowly. “I’m only tired,” he says, lips curled in something too much like a smirk. “No need for all this production.”

He thinks it’s amusing.

I dig my thumb nail hard into the side of his hand and he yelps, his eyes flying open in surprise. “We got a letter from Gibbs with your ‘love’ to the family,” I say, voice too cruel for the side of a sickbed. He deserves it. “He said you were confident you wouldn’t survive long. He said we shouldn’t keep our hopes that you’d return.” Alex frowns but his eyes are worried, “And we had to exist in that state for weeks, so you can play your health as a convenient act to underscore our plight here, you can pretend to bear your sickness with less fortitude than you’re actually able to put on a show and prove a point, but don’t you dare dismiss it as a ‘production’ to me. I thought you were dead.”

He closes his mouth and we hold frozen together for several long moments.

Then slowly, his thumb stretches at my palm and curls to trace small, devastating circles over the back of my hand. He doesn’t speak, and the silence unnerves me the longer it stretches.

“Our…hosts are drawing you a bath.”

“That’s generous,” he says, then smiles slowly, “Such sympathy just because I’ve been ill. I should die more often, right?”

That joke didn’t amuse me earlier and it doesn’t amuse me now, but he says it softly as if he knows it won’t. As if he’s acknowledging that he’s been callous and is trying- in his own way- to apologize by pointing it out.

“You’re horrible,” I say, but I don’t drop his hand and I don’t stop his thumb from tracing those stupid circles.

THE DELEGATES from Congress wait outside the bedroom. All but Morris wearing expressions only vaguely concerned with the procession as McHenry leads a commissary officer, carrying Hamilton from the bedroom down the hall to the front room.

As soon as he’s brought inside, he’s braced against the wall for support and I touch his arm, offer my own to him. Then the servants and commissaries leave, the front room closes, just McHenry left inside, and he starts undressing Alex without preamble.
“I’ll go…” I say.

“You’re fine.” Alex’s fingers brush deliberately up my arm as he raises his hands to assist McHenry’s task, removing the white buttoned shirt he’d been stripped down to. He doesn’t look at me, but I can feel his attention as the doctor undresses him. Skin uncovered by parts, chest, shoulders, arms, he’s paler than I remember, bruised along his chest in a familiar pattern. Blistering. McHenry’s touch is professional, but somehow watching this still feels obscene. “I don’t mind the company.”

McHenry glances at me and nods.

I hold Alexander’s arm so he’s steady, bare feet shifting over the floor and stepping in search of the rug, he reaches for the edge of the washtub and stumbles in one foot at a time, fingers digging into my shoulder. He sinks down into the water and lets out a sigh of relief, head falling back to the edge of the tub. His skin quickly turns red from the heat, but if the water scalds him he’s not complaining. I don’t think I’ve seen his expression so calm since he returned to us.

Then McHenry pushes back the sleeves of his shirt, getting to his knees on the floor by the tub.

Alexander cracks an eye open, and before the doctor can grab the washcloth and move to scrub him, he pulls it into the water and hides it under his leg.

McHenry protests, “Sir, you’ll have to wash.”

“I’m comfortable,” he says.

“The water will get cold.”

Alex frowns, eyes pleading for more time.

Steam is rising off the water in tantalizing tendrils and, I have to admit, given the opportunity to wash in a warm tub with soap- something rare enough at Valley Forge to be traded like gold, I wouldn’t be eager to rush the experience. I exchange a look with the doctor, and it’s obvious that he’s less sympathetic. Not many men would have the privilege Hamilton’s already had here. Now he’s asking patience on top of that, and the doctor has other matters to attend in camp.

“Tell...the servants to heat more water,” I say.

He looks at me and sighs.

I give a nod to usher him to it. “You don’t have to stay, I’ll sit with him.” In case he passes out again or goes weak and sinks under. McHenry seems satisfied with that, unrolling his sleeves and standing, he leaves us there.

Alex relaxes again. His head drops back against the rim of the tub and, with him so at ease, so comfortably exposed beside me, I turn and face towards the window, watching clouds of snow lift up in the wind and throw themselves violently over the hillsides, the trees in the yard thrashing dangerously. The frosted glass is darkened translucent at the center. Steam from his bath fills the air inside.

He allows the silence for awhile, then, “You’re distant…” he says bluntly. When I look back to him, he’s staring past me to the window as if he’s trying to see where my thoughts had been. “Is it the philosophy?”

“What?”
“Philosophy…philosophizing...” he runs his fingers through the water, making lazy waves that catch his hair and make it sway where it’s loose and brushing the metal under his neck. Wet auburn darkens to black where it touches the air, fans out in the water into vibrant tendrils like flame. He rolls his head to look at me, “When you’re hurting, angry or afraid, you draw inward for some way to rationalize how you might deserve it. You make your own preemptive self-torture as if that might prevent whatever strike you most fear from ever making contact...” His eyes are narrowed at me, as if my fears are written across my forehead. “You were afraid that you would disappoint me,” he says, “so you punished yourself as if you already had.”

I stare at him, jaw set, frozen.

But, if the warning on my face is clear, he ignores it and goes on, “I’ve been trying to rationalize it. At first I assumed you had grown to value my opinion of you so highly you were dreading some condemnation that would never come.” he says, “But I’m realizing- you’ve held yourself back as long as I’ve known you, this is nothing new and certainly not something I earned.”

He’s too rational for me not to feel unnerved, but I’m not sure how to stop him without showing how close he’s getting.

“So, I’m wondering...” he says, too calm, content with himself. “In whose name have you been torturing yourself all this time?”

“In whose name?” I laugh, but it comes sounding as tense. “That’s...a strange question-”

“No, it’s not.” He closes his eyes and leans his head back against the rim of the basin. “You once told me you’d been alone all your life, but...that’s not true. By nature, we fear the unknown. Fear makes us clumsy- and what you’ve been doing, drawing away...you’ve been nothing but calculating. I think...you expected a particular outcome if you allowed this friendship to develop...and you hesitated to continue along this path we had already drawn out together...because you’ve been down it before.”

This conclusion he reaches so casually jolts me like lightning striking sand, turning me into glass. Suddenly fragile, like Alexander can see right through me. I watch his fingers treading absently through the haze of soapy water, praying he won’t look.

“I would ask...who walked down this path before me?” he says. “And where did it go...?”

I don’t want to recognize the anchor of my inhibition for what it might mean about the excuses I’ve made. It scares me to think Hamilton sees it- terrifies me that he’s so intent to dislodge it. If I can’t keep that tether, I’ll be adrift, and who knows where the tide might take me.

He doesn’t press for an answer- probably doesn’t expect one, just lets the silence stretch on like torture, sits back as if he’s unaffected. When he speaks again, it sounds like he’s musing to himself. “Ned Stevens was my best friend...like a brother,” he says. “Way we acted, people often thought we were- and...I dunno, it doesn’t matter. What you read was true. I haven't written to him in years- since I left King’s...”

I am, once again, unnerved by his impersonal tone. The fact that he somehow knows how much it had surprised me to see that he’d neglected his friend. How he admits it so easily. “You should wash,” I say. “The water’ll get cold.”

He looks at me, keen to my dodge and ensuring I see that, that I know he’s allowing it, “...right.” I assume he'll sit up and grab the cloth to wash himself, but seeing that there will be difficulty in that, he lifts the rag with his toes instead and holds his leg out to me, “Could you-?”
I stare at him blankly.

The thought of touching his skin- so much of it after so long- washing him, has me shaken. It’s a servant’s task, but if I show discomfort at the idea, he would see how I fear enjoying it, and how that fear still unsettles me. I have to believe he doesn’t see through me that well, but he probably does. And, the thought that he asked this of me anyway…

When he’d been punched in the mouth, beaten and bruised for kissing a taken woman, he hadn’t let me tend his wounds. He’s always guirded his pride so closely he’d never show the weakness that exists in asking for help taking care of himself. I must either believe he trusts me enough to forego that pride or...that he sees the power he still has over me.

I take the cloth and wring it out carefully.

If he needs to see the control he has, there must be a reason he needs it. If only to have him expose that reason, I’ll indulge him- what he gains from letting himself be weak and taken care of in private with no one to show but me, no politicians to prove our plight to. These thoughts are distracting enough to absolve my worse fear- perverting my touch with desire. I barely notice my hands, dragging the cloth over his shoulders and down his chest. He sits forward when I guide him there, lets me wash his back and lift his arms, pliant and malleable in my hands.

When he speaks, he’s casual. “I’m surprised Ned even thinks of me anymore. I lose touch with most people a week or two after leaving them…”

I push back my sleeves and get to my knees by the tub to wash his legs. His words grant me a new topic for distraction, considering how he could think he loses touch with people when Hugh Knox and Ned Stevens are still writing him after all these years. Perhaps he’s simply acquired so many acquaintances that he could easily dismiss it when he retained one or two.

“I was thinking about what you said in the woods-” he says, “about losing interest in me and leaving me, and I thought at first you were trying to deny your interest, or that you didn't want to get my hopes up unduly, but you’re obviously interested- and you’d already gotten my hopes up once before.”

I’m not sure he’s talking about just friendship anymore. He spreads his legs, and I’m sure he’s not. It makes me cringe. He knows the affect he has- of course he does. But why is he using it? I grab one of his feet by the ankle and lift his leg out of the water to scrub.

He keeps talking, unfazed, “I considered, perhaps you were afraid, and moreover ashamed of how you see me, but I realized that’s probably presumptuous and you haven't acted on any desires.” His hand moves to his chest, tracing the trail of a water-droplet down his own skin.

When I make the mistake of glancing over, he quirks a brow coyly and I purse my lips and look away.

“The absolute pinnacle of self-control,” he says and there’s a smirk in his voice that makes me want to pinch him again. “So, I thought maybe...it wasn’t desires that haunted you, but there was definitely some prior experience, holding you back. Maybe you’d known someone who’d dabbled in such things and were revolted by the idea that you had even wanted that; or maybe you’d seen the way men can take advantage of those weaker than them and didn’t want to confuse yourself in such a thing, knowing that attraction is there; but...I realized, with how highly you value friendship, how important it was to you that you honored your friend, Mister White, by valuing him in the way you believe he wanted, maybe you were actually just ashamed of how some earlier, more important relationship had ended-”
I drop his foot back into the tub.

He stops his tongue and I can feel his eyes on the side of my face where I won’t meet his gaze. He seems to reconsider his pursuit of this subject, steering away from it at an angle, “As I think I should be ashamed of my neglect of Ned.”

I’m sure this tangent is deliberate, and falling into it is playing into his hands, but it’s easy- Ned Stevens, such a tempting subject, and much easier than Francis. “You’re not? Ashamed of that.”

“Not particularly,” he shrugs. “If he truly aches with my absence, its his own fault for allowing himself that attachment. I never promised I would keep him.”

That’s a lie and we both know it- the ‘vows of eternal friendship’ Ned Stevens had lamented in his letter. *I don’t keep friends.* With how deliberate he’s being, every word carefully chosen to carve away at me until he has whatever he’s after, blatantly lying in a way we both see, I have to suspect the memory is intentional. He’s trying to remind me of my own broken promises and, “I’ve apologized for that…”

He reels at me, surprised I caught his allusion. “Well, strangely, that doesn’t make me feel better,” he bites back. “You promised to keep me, and I allowed myself that attachment. I won't be made to retract it,” he says- as if by dodging his friendship, I’d made demands on him, tried to strip him of his decision to keep his interest in me.

“I’m...not asking you to.”

He seems to have expected that, shrugs with his mouth set tight, “So then we’re here. I accepted your friendship, you ran from me. I relented, you chased. I clung and you ignored me, I offered and you didn’t accept. So what do I do? Should I go away, because honestly it’s an attractive option and if you’ll let me alone once I do-”

“I don’t...want you to.”

He blinks, and the glare he had set on me loosens. Whatever he’d had to say, died on his tongue, left with a simple, “good…”

I nod and lift his other leg, “…good.”

He lets me wash him in silence, for which I’m grateful. It gives me time to reflect on everything he’s said- everything I let him say about me. Words that flayed me raw in ways I hadn’t expected...but I needed. We’ve always been able to share an understanding that rarely required words. I’ve always known he could see me in ways I wouldn’t expect, but sitting there, vulnerable and naked under my hands, he’d thoroughly dressed me down. And I feel good.

I’m familiar with the trick- the way he shares just enough of himself to have me wanting to share in return. And, while I would see it as obscene, trading secrets in such a way, it seems like this subject that he’s broached, speaks more to our current selves than our histories with others.

I gather my thoughts while a servant brings in another bucket of warm water and Alexander maneuvers in the tub, sits back so I can pour it over his hair. I could tell the servant to stay and do this part for him, but...I send her out again. Thankfully, Alex doesn’t question it.

When all the dust from camp and powder left over from his travels are clear, I lather soap over his head and rinse again. There aren’t combs or pomatum to work through the tangles, but his hair is so thick and well-oiled that I can run my fingers through it instead.
“Have you ever…” I start carefully, trying to ease myself in, “had a person—someone you truly wanted to keep, someone you know better than anyone, whom you fall in with so easily it’s instinctive and they recognize you in ways no one else ever could…” his brows have raised, staring at me upside down with wide eyes. I press on, “Maybe they don’t know it or—maybe it doesn’t even matter, but you’re losing them. And…you see it happening, have all the time in the world to stop it but you just can’t— it’s not in who you are to make it stop, they’re suddenly changing— or the world around you, you’d have to alter some fundamental piece of yourself to keep it together,” he narrows his eyes, “so you don’t. But, once they’re gone you just aren’t yourself,” his mouth falls open like he wants to stop my words, “—like they’d changed you and what you knew and how you behaved so much that you hardly recognize yourself. Everything you do has some echo of them, of who you might’ve been together. Without them there to recognize you, you just don’t—”

“—I haven’t.” He stops me, sits forward and curls his legs up, turning to the side in the tub to look at me. “I haven’t had that.” It’s a blunt admission that he doesn’t know the feeling—can’t, and attaches no emotion to the absence. But, “What... what is it like?”

I dry my hands on the legs of my trousers, stare down at my boots and I can feel his eyes on me. “It’s...the most sublime feeling I think a man can have. While it lasts.”

“And, so then...when it’s gone?”

I should have expected that question, but I don’t have an answer. He lets the silence drift on for awhile, turns back around and drapes his hair over the rim of the basin again. I take the invitation for what it is and thread my fingers through it once more.

When he talks, it’s slow and deliberate. “I left everything...and everyone,” he says. “I know you like to think I’ve been guarded for some fear of loss, but it isn’t fear. When the opportunity’s been there— to have what you’re talking about, I’ve never...wanted it. I always kept it easy to walk away.” He closes his eyes and it’s easier to look at his face again while he talks like this. “It must be strange— how easily I could leave everyone and everything...and just...not care at all.”

_Spent a few seconds carrying out their dead...before they just... recommenced..._

His voice takes the same, detached tone. I swallow thickly. His words seem to beg reassurance— that his apathy isn’t strange. But it is— and he doesn’t need affirmation. I feel he wouldn’t appreciate words spoken just to fill the air. So, I focus on untangling his hair.

“I’ve left everything over and over...sand and dust. When all it takes is a breeze to rearrange it all, why should I bother wanting to keep anything?” he sighs and leans his head back into my hands. “You doubted yourself— feared you'd disappoint me, but you should know that I have never expected permanence. If anyone should fear that they have manipulated their friends into overestimating their worth, it should be me. I’ve never given the pretense of loving anyone more than I did— never flirted or philandered for petty affection I wouldn’t happily reciprocate, but...I’ve also never wanted to keep anyone…or to be kept. And I have certainly failed my fair share of commitments...”

He delivers the admission so easily it seems powerless over him. As if by saying vulnerable things casually, they lose their importance. He leaves the room quiet for long enough that I feel compelled to speak. “You...think you’ve failed Ned?”

He shrugs, “I think that I never cared if I did, and that was a mistake,” he frowns at himself. “I should clarify that this is….” he motions between us, “you were the first reason I ever felt I could want something to last...”

He closes his eyes again and I’m immensely grateful for that, for the permission to stare at him freely
in shock. Biting my lip, I drop my fingers from his hair, tracing them instead down the sides of his face. He leans into the touch, fitting his cheek into my hand, encouraging the affection, and it seems right- in the moment, to lean down and brush my lips softly over his temple.

But he startles, and I want to draw my hands away, my touch suddenly burning. Doing so would feel like a retreat, and we are so far beyond that option.

He searches my eyes to be sure I won’t pull away, then his hand finds mine at his cheek, holds it there, fingers cooling my skin like a balm. “Your friend…” he says, eyes holding mine bravely, “you didn’t want him to go, but he left you,” and his words don’t feel like a judgement of Francis or a condemnation. Just observation and, “I don’t think I could do that.”

THE WATER GROWS COLD again, and though I’d extended the offer to bring a warm bucket, Alexander’s fingers and toes had gone wrinkled. So, I help him stand from the water and dry off. He braces an arm against the wall and reaches for the fresh pair of breeches the Moore’s servant had left by the door. I consider offering my help when he fumbles, but he seems determined to take care of himself and kneeling down in such a position would feel too intimate.

While he dresses, Alex tells me stories about his friend, Ned. Stories about living with him after his mother’s death, how he had known Ajax before they lost the slave, played together as young boys, and how Ned’s father had helped him with some trouble he’d encountered at a boy’s home for orphans. It all seems to reveal a vulnerability in his childhood I never expected. He speaks fast, and it seems to draw enough of his strength that it would be wrong to interrupt- to ask for more. As it is, he talks himself breathless. Leaning heavily against my arms.

Despite everything that he says, I feel strangely like he’s telling me nothing at all, and I get the sense- that I’m only just beginning to understand, that he could tell anyone anything and still keep himself hidden.

I’d spent so long denying myself my own questions, this ravenous feeling is foreign to me. Given all that I’ve said, I feel entitled to ask, “If leaving is such an attractive option-” no, I don’t want to say it like that. It gives too much away when I can choose to take instead, “I mean, if I hurt you so much…” he looks at me sharp, but doesn’t deny it, “why-”

“Why would I stay?” he says. For a moment I expect him to brush it off as curiosity, dabbling into the experience of genuine affection for sport. But, the hand that holds onto me strokes a deliberate line along my forearm, “It’s not as though I’ve never wanted…attachment,” he says. “I’d see gentlemen at parties with their wives whom they claim to love madly but it was never madness I’d see, all tender kisses on hands and chaste touch. There’s no heat and hunger and,” he looks at me, eyes carrying some of the storm they had lost in his sickness, “I don’t believe anyone could be so skilled at concealing such an affliction as I feel- while I think it could burn me alive if I tried to touch it…”

I want to drop him, but I refrain- guiding his balance to lean against the wall so I can duck away from the intensity of his look and gather his fresh shirt from the floor.

He watches me, and I don’t have to look to feel it. “So, I’ve never tried,” he says, “always ran when I began noticing my thoughts were no longer my own. It could ruin me, drive me to distraction, so I dodged and delayed and bided my time to get stronger so that maybe someday I could face down that storm and weather it as all the others do- as if it were not there at all. But, look at me-” his voice is sharp, so I look, a denigrating smile and the frame of his body emaciated. It strikes me how dark his eyes are, how bruised the fever has made him. “I think it was wrong to assume I was ready.”
I don’t want to know what he means, but “…ready?”

It feels wrong of me to hold his gaze, to even acknowledge that I’m keen to the intent in his eyes, hyper-aware of our proximity. Whatever conclusions he may draw from that are probably more true than is fair for him to know.

“It’s always struck me as strange that such a thing has been made so fashionable when the reality of it is horrifying…unmanly and debilitating. I always thought poets must be the strongest to face such feelings head-on, no ducking and dodging, they lean in and let it burn. But now I’m thinking…it’s no wonder so many of them seek out their deaths, and if that’s ultimately the outcome of this strength- madness or death, what’s manly about that?”

“I think…this is all romantic and idyllic, but what you’re talking about it’s…baser passion. It sounds like- what you’re afraid of, it’s depravity or mania. Sensibility tempers all that.” I say this, hoping he’ll drop the subject and consider it on his own- perhaps humor a different idea of what love could be, a more moderate expansion of affection, built on friendship and chaste exchange of ideas. I’ve been able to divert him from this talk in the past.

But the look he gives me is blunt. “…sensibility won’t temper what I feel for you.”

I give a shaky smile, try to laugh it off.

He frowns, “I’m making you uncomfortable.”

I can’t confirm that politely.

I HELP HIM back to the bed and he falls instantly to sleep. I follow shortly after, leaning over in the chair, face pushed into the blankets and arms loose at my sides. If a servant or officer came in to check on him, that’s how they found us.

When I wake to the sound of moaning, my eyes take their time to adjust. Moonlight comes thick through the window, a familiar hue of light from reflecting off snow. It casts Alexander’s face in pale blue light, as if he’s underwater. He makes a sound as if he’s drowning.

I hadn’t been invited into the bed- he’d fallen asleep too quickly for that. Given the circumstances, I hadn’t taken the liberty, but crawling onto the mattress and wrapping my arms around his chest feels like the best thing to do when he tries to roll off the side, grabbing at the blanket and taking it with him. He struggles- I expect that, the muffled protests and keening, but thankfully it doesn’t last long until he comes round, disoriented and weak, still mumbling incoherent pleas for help.

His hands are cold, but his face is warm to the touch, slick with sweat, and I pull back the blankets. He moans again, eyes half-lidded and bleary and the fact that he cries out while presumably awake worries me more than anything, “You’re feverish,” I say, holding his face still.

He doesn’t offer his familiar wit, just rolls heavy into the pillow, “Jus’ need’t sleep.”

He’s lying, but this time I’m not sure if he knows it. “Alright...yes, get some sleep.” I whisper, shifting to sit up, ignoring his grumbled protest at being jostled, and maneuvering his head into my lap. I occupy my fingers with the waves of his hair, one hand on his chest so I can feel that he’s breathing.
AT DAYBREAK, Morris came in with a servant to check on him, the portly man tutting and tsking as he checked the color of Hamilton’s cheeks and the warmth of his hands, directing the servant to wash his face, but there wasn’t much he could do and he left Alex under my watch again.

I keep myself awake until McHenry comes back.

SLEEP ONLY SEEMS to make him worse, more disoriented while awake, more keen to return to that state, and while he’s in it, he talks. Delirious babbles that cry out for someone named James, apologizing again and again no matter how we try to soothe him. Just before mid-morning, he goes into fitful shivers that turn into convulsions. Seeing nothing I can do to help, and pained to see my friend thrashing in such a way, I leave McHenry to his practice.

Captain Gibbs arrives from headquarters with the notes of the doctors that had tended to Alex in Albany. McHenry reads through the reports to decide how best to proceed with treatment. While he writes out the regiment of produce to procure for him—when and how much he should eat and drink, I sit with Gibbs in the parlor downstairs, listen to him explain the trials they had faced.

“We always knew Hamilton had connections to merchants in New York,” he says. “We weren’t sure why a student at King’s with no family in the area had friends in such circles, but he came to General Washington’s office with a proposal, a list of names and addresses and a fervor to ride out at once and form a proper chain of informants. We’d seen his face once or twice before in the field, and I suppose His Excellency decided he’d be worth listening to.” He smiles with half his mouth, stiff— but I get the sense that the older man respects my friend in a way he’ll never admit aloud, “Of course, he wasn’t wrong. I didn’t ride with Hamilton that first time, when Washington released him to make contact with his friends— if you’re ever curious about that, Meade has stories he’d love to share, but after Albany...I think I understand him better now.”

I raise a brow, questioning, and one of the Moore house servants brings in some tea for us.

Gibbs continues, “See, I’ve never known Hamilton to risk himself the way he did on this trip. Don’t misunderstand— I’ve seen him start fights to get results, I’ve seen him take punches and insults no man should endure and step away the winner. But this was not so abrupt. I’ve known that he carries his worries on his body before he does in his mind, but he knows this too…” Gibbs picks up a cup of tea and picks at the china saucer it sits upon.

I know what he’s going to say, “He pressed on despite...the illness coming on.”

“I wasn’t even aware he’d had a fever until his friend, Troup, called on me, afraid he would succumb to it,” he says. “Meade says you’ve been talking about getting Hamilton a quartermaster post. I think...if he were to replace Mifflin, no one would question his loyalties now— with how he struggled to deliver His Excellency’s orders...and how he struggled to return to you.”

I know he means the family as a whole, but he won’t look at me, and I feel strangely ashamed. I’d pressed my thumbs into Alexander’s palm so many months ago when he’d taken on this mania— the place my own hands hurt with overuse. I know Hamilton is careful not to need taking care of. He works hard and rests efficiently, ensures he has the energy to squeeze the most productivity out of a day.

But, the fact that he neglected himself. It may be presumptuous, but after all that we had said to each other, I don’t think it’s wrong to assume he had wanted my help, fighting this fever. All his talk about poets, allowing their hearts to hurt and seeking out their deaths, makes me fear how I had hurt him. He had known how he was pushing his body— what the consequences would be. The fact that
he had come to me, upset that I hadn’t written...that he would admit to needing some comfort or just...a welcome distraction...

I should’ve seen it sooner.

WHEN GIBBS RETURNS to Headquarters, he carries a report of Hamilton’s condition and the message that I will be remaining with the Lieutenant Colonel to administer McHenry’s treatment. I’m not sure if it’s what Washington would order. There are matters at headquarters that will require my attention when I return, and with Hamilton indisposed, there are matters he had been vital to that he’ll now need me for.

I don’t remind him of this.

For the first day of his respite, he spends his time asleep, shivering under all the blankets the commissaries can muster. I join him under the covers to lend my own warmth, and though it’s too oppressively hot to sleep, the shivers are violent and draw Alex’s entire frame to writhing with aches and radiating pains, so I endure. When he seems to be snoring deeply enough for me to move about, I bring his letterbox onto the bed and read through the proposal that he had intended to edit with the congressional delegates’ ideas. I add what edits I recall from the conversations I had heard the previous morning.

Somewhere, he sleeps through it all. And, though he grumbles and moans when his body unconsciously hurts, he doesn’t form words and the elusive James doesn’t haunt him again.

The sun is going down by the time he wakes up truly. He stares, blinking before actually seeming to see me, “Laurens?” he shifts his arms under the pillow, “I’m still in bed- what time is it?” He winces when he moves and I know he’s sore, having watched how he’d curl in on himself with cramps, rubbed his back soothingly until he’d calmed.

“Time for you to eat, now that you’re awake,” I say, sliding out from the covers.

By the time the Moore house servants have brought up his bowl of broth and hot whiskey, I’ve helped him sit up and adjusted the pillows to brace him upright. He doesn’t let me feed him, taking the spoon before I can reach for it so I won’t offer. Though he’s admitted he has no appetite, he feeds himself by force, wincing on each spoonful. In one respect, it’s a comfort to see how driven he is to feel better, but it’s hard to watch how he struggles to swallow.

I talk while he’s occupied, explaining my thoughts of the additions the delegates had mentioned for his proposal. So that he won’t ask for the papers and try to write these notes himself, I don’t mention that I’ve already written them. When he’s finished eating, we discuss the merit of their ideas and which things he would refute. I commit his thoughts to memory- to write the next time he falls asleep.

I CARE FOR HIM in every way I can. Whenever Gouverneur Morris comes upstairs to assist, I’m glad that I’ve taken it upon myself, watching him fuss with Hamilton’s pillows and direct servants to spoon feed him. Alex glares at me from across the room, offended that I allow the treatment. But, once he’s free from the coddling, he just pouts at my snickering and grants me my amusement.

It’s the only humor to be found, as the pain of his fever ebbs and rises irregularly, sometimes leaving him coherent- at which times we talk about my correspondence with my father and my ideas for a
black battalion, tell stories about our childhood friends and homes, and make up tales of what we would’ve done with our lives if not for the opportunity of war; other times his body aches and cramps, leaving him writhing, and though he doesn’t complain, I see how he hurts. Sometimes he hurts badly enough to allow me to turn him over and massage the straining muscles until his body relaxes.

It had been a game of ours, reciting lines of Latin and Greek, Vergil and Homer, and changing the words to insinuate ourselves into the roles of mythical heroes. But, when he starts speaking of Ajax, in the throes of feverish babble, I wonder whether he means to make reference to the Iliad or if he’s crying out again for the ghosts in his memory. The familiar way he addresses the name, I assume it’s the latter and hush him into my chest until he stops talking and his body goes slack in my arms.

“Alex…Alexander?” I whisper. He grumbles something into my shirt and I pull him back, holding the back of his head and brushing my thumb over the base of his neck until his eyes flutter open, “You were talking about Ajax…”

He laughs and his head falls back into my hand, vertiginous.

“This isn’t funny,” I say, though he surely doesn’t understand it, I need to admonish him.

“No…” he says, “My Ajax, he’d be s’pleased-”

“What?”

He rolls his head forward again, lips moving without the breath to form words, “-Achilles.”

I can’t be sure what he means, but “I’m not…” his eyes fall closed, so heavy, bruised and reddened, I want to shake him awake, “that will only happen if you fight this fever.”

“Fight,” he grins again, too muddled to fault him if he finds it amusing to say, “I’m dying, Laurens.”

I pull his face out of my neck, push him back to the bed, and stuff the pillow under his head. “I won’t hear you talk like that,” I growl. “Not now- not if…” he’s too weak to resist it as I fix his blankets, startled enough by my anger that his eyes are alert, opened wide like I’d slapped him. At least I know that if I shake him, it might truly scare the death out of him. “I won’t hear it.”

Emotion reaches my voice that I hope he’ll overlook in this state, but a familiar expression passes over his face, even more devastating now. “You…John…” Somehow, he ends up in tears, lip trembling until he bites it. I want to wipe his face dry, but he seems too raw to touch, his voice far too tender. “Do you…love me?” he says.

“I-” sitting up on one elbow, the startled movement I make slides smoothly into the motion, “of course, you’re my dearest friend.”


I know what he meant, and it doesn’t escape my notice that, despite the more obvious choice, he assigns himself the lover that suffers and dies first. Talking of poets and death, I don’t like it. He’s attached himself to this question; I won’t escape it easily, but “I’m hardly your Alexander, Alex.”

“How Achilles loved Patro-”

“You won’t be Patroclus.” I dispel the thought of his eyes going still, limbs heavy with death, a sight that would easily send me into a rage worth killing gods. But, the words don’t seem to take the meaning I intend and by the hollow look on his face, I should correct my meaning. “I…” can’t do it
though. Love has always been easily implied and easily spoken, but the word suddenly feels overwhelmingly heavy. I cannot say it—no matter how I might feel... “Go to sleep,” I say.

I WRITE TO MY FATHER, the following afternoon while Hamilton rests. He had asked me what bounds I had set to my desire of serving my country in the military line. I answer glorious death or the triumph of the cause in which I am currently engaged.

AFTER THREE DAYS in the Moore house, Fitzgerald arrives at the door. I had sent a messenger to tell Washington that we had completed the proposal for his review, so I had expected him to send someone to retrieve it.

Anticipating this, I’d warned Alex that I’d finished the proposal and shown it to him completed. Perhaps recognizing his own inability to have done the work himself, or perhaps out of respect for my discretion in completing the task without his notice, he had accepted the revisions, and when I hand them to Fitz, he offers no protest.

Then, “He requested you too,” Fitz says, nodding at Alex where he’s tucked securely in bed.

He stares, “No.”

WE MAKE THE RIDE TO HEADQUARTERS to attend the report. All winter, camp had been spared heavy snowfall, and it feels like God was vengeful to pick this week to deliver a blizzard.

Even with the sky clear and the air comparatively warm, Alex is shivering where he’s slumped in the saddle, bundled in blankets over all but his eyes and nose. I had hoped the act of moving him from the bed would be the hardest, but traveling now feels like cruelty.

When we arrive at headquarters, he walks with more strength than he should pretend to have, carries himself into the General’s office where Washington is waiting with General Greene, and he sits up through my presentation of the changes to his proposal, stays through the Generals’ dictation of their final edits.

We don’t wait long for the Congressional Committee to arrive as Fitzgerald had described.

If it had been possible to postpone this, Hamilton could have more time to recover— I think Washington would have added his voice to our complaints with the way he casts concerned looks across the room. But, the committee had been sending reports, complaining about the conditions we had been describing. Congress demands solutions and we cannot waste the opportunity to provide them.

Washington delivers twenty-eight closely printed pages. The major solutions he gives are concerns Hamilton had been preaching for months: half pay after the war for officers to ensure their commitment before want of funds would see them abandon the cause— or worse believe they were doing the government a favor; a uniform size of men in each regiment— and fewer officers to command them; a draft of men from every state’s militia to serve a year in the Continental Army— no exceptions and no bounties; all promotions to be made from the line of fighting men with the approval of the army’s high command rather than congressional commission; for Congress to allow the clothier general to contract large quantities of shoes and stockings to be made in the United States; and most directly, for the person who fills the post of Quartermaster General to be a man of
military character and abilities- a man who boasts not only an active work ethic but expertise in business and finance, supply and demand, someone who is committed to be almost constantly with the army and near to the Commander himself.

I glance over to Hamilton as General Greene explains this piece of our proposal, but he’s left his seat, across the room, already slipping discreetly out the door. I follow with quiet haste.

Gibbs had posted security outside the office and he points me in the direction Hamilton had walked, obviously relieved that I had pursued. By the time I find Hamilton at the stairs, he’s already crumpled to the floor.

WHEN THE MEETING CONCLUDES, General Washington, Greene, and the boys of the family join us in the guest bedroom, standing at a safe distance around the walls. After them, the five delegates, Gouverneur Morris leading the way.

Throughout the presentation of our solutions, even the congressmen that had been the most stalwart opponents to our arguments had listened and nodded. As they step to the side of Hamilton’s sickbed, they each in turn give their allegiance, Francis Dana expresses his deep concern for the welfare of the army, and Joseph Reed vows his support.

They leave the family in a conflicted state of celebration and concern.

Fitzgerald breaks the silence with his particular brand of unwanted humor, “I would call that a miracle,” he says, “Reed, Dana, and Folsom all in our pocket- which devil did you bargain with this time, Hammy?”

Alex throws him a bleary look.

Tilghman leaves to fetch McHenry.

HAMILTON’S SLEEPING ARRANGEMENTS are complicated by the family’s concern for General Washington’s health and a circumstance I had not been forewarned about when I’d carried him up to this bed.

It was intended for Martha Washington.

“Her caravan was delayed,” Meade explains in a hushed voice, standing by the doorway of the bedroom while McHenry makes an attempt at blistering Alex inside. “I would’ve escorted her to camp two days ago if not for the blizzard, and when she gets here, we can’t have-”

“I won’t be here.”

Alexander’s voice lifts from inside the room and we look over, both he and McHenry looking back. The doctor nods, “It would be wise to take him out of the room as soon as possible in case he’s-”

“She’ll treat me like her son,” Alex says and he turns up his nose, lying back. “I’ll go to the hospital.”

McHenry exchanges a look with Meade that I understand at once, recalling their conversation when Hamilton had first returned to us. More men die in the hospital camps than leave them, and I know Hamilton well enough to believe he knows that. I know he spoke about putting informants on the
inside of Rush’s camps, but...

I step into the room, “No, you will not.”

CARRYING ALEXANDER to my cabin proves more perilous than I had hoped, but I have to believe it is still the best option. Travelling through camp, no one takes a second glance at the slumped form of a sick man; the only strange thing about the picture might be a horse that hasn’t starved yet.

By the time we reach the cabin, he’s unconscious in the saddle, and I scoop him up to carry him inside. I’d sent Shrewsberry ahead to procure firewood- by any means, and he’s delivered on the order so a small fire is lit in the fireplace when we arrive inside. I don’t waste time in taking Alex to the pallet, tucking him in securely and dragging the bedding- with him inside, nearer to the fire. Shrewsberry brings in a bowl of fresh water and I direct him quickly out and to shut the door before we lose what warmth the fire provides.

“Th’s so much…” Hamilton mumbles to himself, thrashes awake and spends some time trying to understand where he is- and failing. His face is pale and flushed about the eyes, wide and unfocused. I wet the cloth in the basin, wipe the cold sweat from his face while he struggles with the blankets. I tuck them back in and he cries, face twisting in agony. “Please, James, I’m sorry- sorry, sorry...so…” his voice slurs and he kicks at the bedding, “I didn’ mean...for mama…” he sobs, “I’m sorry.”

I can’t tell if he thinks I’m James or not, but this is the first time he’d brought up his mother and it surprises me. I recall he’d said he had a brother, and whatever had happened to their mother, Alexander seems to think he’d find fault for it. I’ve never heard him apologize like this- never heard him this desperate. I climb under the covers and gather him to my chest, pulling his arms into the warm space between us- his skin feels like ice. I draw his legs to tuck between mine and take my warmth. “I know,” I whisper, hushing him. “It’s alright, I know.”

He grabs my shirt with startling strength. “I tried...I’ve tried, I did...it’s so much, but it’s still not…” I shush him, fingers rubbing into his scalp like the pressure will bring him back into his head. He babbles more disjointed apologies, cries until he’s gasping between hiccups, “It’s coming, I know-you said…” he wheezes, “I’m not ready…please, I’m not-” I push his face into my throat and his voice vibrates against me, delirious babbles, begging James not to let it come for him- whatever that means. He’s had fits like this before while I’ve been taking care of him, but never so precise, like he’s living a nightmare. “So much...I’ve never done- never...I wanna stay, I’m sorry- tell her, please…”

He talks like that for several minutes that drag on like hours, and when the panic releases him, he goes heavy and slack, his mouth a wet pressure on my throat, drooling. I nudge his feet, afraid if he falls asleep now he won’t wake up again, “Hey…”

He groans to be kept awake, but I pat his cheek until he obeys, ask him to talk about all the things he wants to do, places he wants to travel- even if his words are slurred and unclear, he slowly recognizes me and his mind tries to follow what I say. That’s enough for now.

At his most lucid, he looks at me when I ask if he wants a family someday. The way he had scoffed while Lafayette talked about his wife makes me wonder. “I want...what you said,” he breathes, “to try being loved…” he drops his head back under my chin so I don’t see his eyes, “like that.”

With all this talk about James and his mother, I had thought he would speak about sons and family names, but by the way he hides and clings tighter to my shirt, I know the subject is not one so easily
described for him. He’s called the boys on staff the ‘family’ only a handful of times in the months that I’ve known him, and the word always falls heavier when it comes from his mouth.

But, what I said- what he wants…

I didn’t mean familial ties. I’d described the love I had with Francis. If it had left an impression on him…

The way he clings to me is expectant, but this doesn’t feel like what I described.

I had known Francis intrinsically, grown up with him and understood his mind- as he understood me, and yet…we never stood together. At parties, on the theater stage, in crowds of ladies, he excelled and overshadowed. In philosophy and debate, the coffee houses we frequented, he never followed me to the fight until he was sure I was winning. When the fight reached the space between us, he was unwilling to have it- even if it meant saving us. He didn’t want to debate and he didn’t want me on his stage.

For so many years I had lied to myself. I’m not sure I ever fit with him.

I belonged to him.

I see it now- the difference.

Alex gets worse as the night progresses, more petulant about being kept awake. He babbles about things that don’t make sense- struggling to escape my arms like he’s convinced the devil’s coming for him. To hush him, I talk, describing Geneva and the forests changing colors in the fall, I tell him about my classes there and my friends, about the plays we went to see and the parties we’d attended. I tell him about Francis…

In this state, I don’t know if he’ll realize the importance of the name. But, if Alexander wants what I described, he should know we’re something different.

He had called it potential when we had fallen apart, a great opportunity, that he was unprepared to fix when it seemed we’d ruined it. But it was never a matter of preparation. It’s patience. We both know how this resolves itself. From the moment we met, he’s dared me to act, invited me and encouraged me, made space for me to grow into him and I’ve seen him change with every inch I took. He offered another mile.

All this time, this dance felt like fighting, a war of tactics, parries and blows. And I was glad to have it, glad to have someone willing to hit me back- then stay and wait for me to get up. But, it was never to win, never to overcome and conquer, only draw each other closer…whether we meant to or not, we trained each other- sparring and strengthening, learning each other’s best attacks and showing each other how to defend.

He finally relaxes while I stroke his hair and tell him stories, steadies his breathing so it doesn’t sound so laborious. It grows dark outside and I get up to fetch more firewood and bring him tea. When he’s able to drink it, I let him relax and tell him to sleep. I settle to watch over him, but his face twists in frustration and he kicks and rolls over.

“What? What’s wrong?”

He doesn’t respond

“Can’t sleep?”
“Here, you have to try,” I say, but he’s wincing, eyes scrunched up, “Is it your head?”

He doesn’t move, “...hurts.”

I’m sure that it’s thirst. He’s spent days sweating and shivering, drinking rations of hot whiskey and tea. Between the heat and the cramps, a headache is to be expected. I crawl down to the pallet and wrap myself around him, rubbing the back of his neck gently.

He’s heavy and limp to hold, too tired to move, and quiet long enough that I assume he’s fallen asleep. I try to relax myself, but his fingers start moving against my back again and he whispers, “…I’m dying.” like an apology, like he expects anger- and hates himself for failing this one fundamental task- survive. There’s too much surety in his voice to question it. It unnerves me, drains me away to desolation and leaves me gutted. But, he had said he would stay- as long as I wanted him. If he fails in this task- there’s no one he fails more than me.

I don’t know how to say that- how to express that I want him too badly to lose, that he’d ruin me now. All that we had fought to come this close, to be nearly everything I had yearned for, intimate and entwined, trusting and challenging, dedicated and chaste-

My hand still holds the back of his neck. I press my forehead to his and glare.

We’re so close...to something he wouldn’t dare walk away from, something permanent. I want…

Our noses touch.

His eyes fall closed, lips already brushing mine by proximity. I’m not sure who closed that distance, but an inch isn’t enough anymore. I tilt his head and kiss him fully. Press my mouth into the touch and hold there too long for it to pass as brotherly, but I’ve already decided we have to be more than family. I draw his bottom lip between mine, pull on it. He’s slow to realization, breathes in sharp- too surprised to sound like a sigh. Then his mouth goes soft, gentle and languid, hand curling into the blankets, shifting them behind my back.

I kiss him harder.

He has to know how much I want. Everything we discussed. We made promises to keep.

I muffle a confused noise from his mouth. And, I feel the wetness on my cheeks, pulling away from his lips to press my forehead against his again.

His eyes open blearily- hard to look at from this close.

He can’t leave me now, “Please don’t…”
The Canada Expedition

King who feeds on your people, since you rule nonentities

THE ANCIENTS BELIEVED the winds were gods, that storms were monsters outside human control. But, when I was seven years old, my father purchased a property some distance from Charlestown and saw our home built on a hilltop overlooking rice fields where the wind was constant, and rather than tormenting, it lifted the sickly heat from the air. After the dust and fevers we had endured in the city, the breeze was welcome. So, howling wind has never frightened me, but it cuts through the cracks between the logs and chills the room.

I’m fortunate enough to have a small cabin to tend to Alexander and blankets afforded by our brothers. But, as the blizzard rages outside, the noise seems to growl, wet and throaty as if torn from some horrible beast...deep and dual-intonated.

It doesn’t help whatever delusions are gripping at my friend’s mind, dragging him under the surface of sanity into some reality I can’t reach. His eyes are transfixed on my lips, wet and half-lidded, wondering at what transpired between our mouths. I don’t think he understands...

That I kissed him.

I’m not sure I understand it myself. It simply happened. I’d thought that we would damn our cause, that submitting together would be punished- blood in blonde hair, but this is not like that. This desire is not lust. I’d feared this action for so long; now that it’s come to pass, I don’t regret it. I’ll be honest, provide him comfort or a welcome distraction, the encouragement of his worried friend. I’ll kiss him a thousand times for hours and hours if it gives him a reason to stay.

I lean up and press my lips to his forehead and he closes his eyes, giving up whatever confused thoughts he was scrutinizing. He’s been teetering too close to death for comfort, but his breathing is even and calm, so I allow him the rest. He sinks deeper into the pillow and within moments, his mouth falls open, snoring.

My thoughts of him didn’t change when I’d learned that he was an orphan or that he was a noble, when I learned he was like me- that he wanted me. But I’ve changed, I’ve killed- stabbed men, burned them, blown them apart with cannons and grapeshot. I’ve been shot, beaten, starved, and manipulated, twisted into a spy and an informant, a backdoor for political alliances and twisted power games. I am not...golden.

But, I’m something stronger, something that reflects his light warmly.

At present, that may just be the fever heating his skin.

For several long minutes, his snoring is steady, so I slide from his embrace, doing my best not to disturb the blankets around him. I grab my boots and my coat. There is straw and mud I can stuff into the cracks between the logs- hopefully stem the draft.

Outside, the wind bites any part of my skin that’s exposed and I wrap the tatters of my scarf up over my nose. Without horses, the men have been hauling wood and water in handmade sleds or carrying it on their backs. If the storm persists, it’ll become impossible to transport the wood needed for fires. I hunch to hold in my own warmth, stuffing the clumps of wet straw into the crevices that had caused the most draft.
When I trudge back inside, I was only out for a few minutes, but by the time I pull back the covers, Alex is awake again and shaking, repeating “down, down, down, down” in some song I almost recognize- I put an arm around his chest, thinking maybe the fever has him aching again, but he lets out a surprised sobbing noise and I sit up on one arm to look at him. “Alex?”

He laughs into another sob, and he rolls his head towards me as if it takes all his energy to accomplish. “I thought-”

“What?”

“No…” he breathes out, “you’re alright.”

“Of course I am.” I squeeze him closer. “Why would I not be?”

“See? He’s alright…” He shakes his head, closing his eyes again, and I think he’s fallen back into confusion and forgotten whom he’s talking to- whose bed he’s in, then he rolls into me, “…’m sorry,” his voice slurs, “John, I’m sorry.”

If this has to do with my kissing him or the advance he made months ago- his favorite topic for apologies. “Don’t-”

“About Lafayette…” his voice muffles into my chest. “I called you an idiot.”

It takes me a moment to recall the conversation. I hadn’t thought to be insulted.

“You’re not’n idiot…”

I’m not sure what to say.

He shifts restlessly, movements weak and uncoordinated. “…I didn’ copy th’ letter.”

This admission also takes a moment to comprehend, but he’s firm enough about it that I know it’s important to him- Conway’s letter. We all know he hadn’t been in Albany by then, “It’s alright, I know,” I say. He’s wasting energy to defend his character to an unnecessary audience.

“I did wish you’d…” he drifts off to catch his breath and I don’t like how it wheezes, struggling on so few words, “I missed you…while I-”

“Stop talking,” I say. Whatever’s gotten him so worked up is costing strength.

He laughs at my clipped response, but something in the breathy sound is grateful, and he closes his eyes and seems to relax. On a thin exhale, he says something that sounds vaguely like, “he’s alive…” and he goes heavy.

I close my eyes for a few minutes, but sleep eludes me- something eerie in his words. Why would I not be alright? Alexander is too still. He’s heavy in a way he shouldn’t be.

I sit up, jostling him, “Alex?”

He’s not waking. He’s not…

He’s not breathing.

His mouth lulls open, but when I put my hand over it, stillness, so I grab him by the shoulders and shake him, push his head back. Nothing. I wait to be sure of it- then straddle him, lift him by the shirt like some curiosity fished from the sea. His head falls back, neck opening like autumn leaves
dropping, skull and bones and cartilage. It’s an unnatural angle, one that a body should move to avoid. He doesn’t. Death is not a stranger—nor is disease; I know what it is to miss family after their loss, but if Alexander’s gone and followed his ghosts...followed James...

He doesn’t have the right to leave. He’s supposed to make death seem foolish, to stay as long as I—“I want you...” my voice is confused like it’s not mine. Like I’m listening to the sound of it downwind being blown away.

And, there’s no response. The admission wasted.

I break gracelessly, “God damn it, you can’t!” shaking him so hard his head jerks forward. “You committed, you can’t leave with a fucking apology, you hypocrite.” After everything...to come so close, “God damn you!”

I strike both fists against his chest, falling forward to sob pleas into his throat, to kiss him there like he’d kissed me once, when he’d offered spring in the heat of summer. I had felt so good, rising to his touch like he was dragging new life in his wake, but I don’t think he feels me now, buried in too much snow. I never wanted him to discard me as a lover, but it’s so much worse to be unfinished business.

I’m ready to rage for him, find whatever demons are dragging him away and tear them apart myself. I don’t care if there are claws. They can rip up my flesh. I don’t care. His skin’s burning in my mouth. The dead are supposed to go cold and stiff, but he’s hot—loose like he’s melting. I kiss his cheeks, his mouth, his throat—

There’s a pulse.

I think I imagined it, sitting up frantically and moving to press a thumb into that place. But, it’s there. So fast and faint, I would have missed it if I’d felt for it with fingers first. A doctor would’ve missed it and pronounced him dead...

Like Patsy when she had fallen ill with smallpox. The doctor had pronounced her dead, and we laid her out to be buried, but while my parents grieved, I poked at her in morbid curiosity and saw her eye twitch. Unlike her, Alexander is not breathing. We had opened the windows for Patsy, revived her with fresh air, and perhaps I was wrong to stop the draft, but even if the air was fresh, I don’t think he has the strength take it in.

There was a pamphlet from the Paris Academy of Sciences, a cure for the drowned or the apparently dead. Pinching his nose, I push his head back by the chin and seal my lips over his, push my air down his throat by force until with a hand on his chest, I feel his ribs rise. I break that seal and he deflates. I pinch his nose harder, breathe into him again.

Again.

Again until my air catches in his lungs, rattles on his exhale.

He still deflates.

So, I push air in him until he remembers how to breathe. Long, horrifying minutes.

He chokes on it. Like a drowned man sputtering up water, his body heaves forward as if to vomit. I pull him back and push blankets under him, tilt his head back. He wheezes.

“Slowly,” I touch his chin in disbelief. He’s not dead...but, he’s struggling to inhale, lungs too weak, so I open his mouth and breathe for him again, instruct, “out,” wait for his chest to fall, and repeat the
practice. Several minutes pass and we fall into a rhythm that has me growing lightheaded...until his chest falls and, without my prompting, lifts. It’s just the smallest motion. He doesn’t wake or stir, and his breathing is too fast and shallow, but it’s there and that’s enough for now.

With a hand still rested against his chest, I let my face fall into his shoulder and cry properly. Grief and anger, and overbearingly- fear, all roiling in me and simply too much.

He’s alive…

I understand it finally. He was not wrong that it’s madness.

When he had died in the Schuylkill, I had questioned it. When he’d died in Albany, I doubted. But, holding proof in my arms, I was ready to follow him, destroy myself like some cliched tragedy. The potential between us isn’t sensibility. It’s focused, so desperate it’s cruel, and that darkness will always be there, a terrifying, unalterable reality…

BY THE TIME the sun begins to show in the morning, men are already outside, boots crunching in wet snow. I’d punched out the clods that insulated our cabin, so while the breeze provides fresh air, it makes the room cold and noisy.

Alex sleeps through it.

I haven’t slept at all. Sitting with my knees curled up to my chest and chin propped on them, I’d barely been able to close my eyes even when I’d been lying down. I’ve given up on it.

McHenry visits with a knock at the door, and I stand aside as he checks the temperature of Hamilton’s face and hands and listens to him breathing. Shrewsberry walks in behind him with a lantern and our breakfast. When McHenry turns away for the light to check Hamilton’s coloring, I hastily reach over and button Alex’s collar over the splotched red mark I’d left on his throat.

Shrewsberry looks at me, and I avoid his eyes until he turns and leaves.

When McHenry finishes his practice, I give him a chair and tell him about last night...leaving out certain events. He seems unsurprised, says that if the fever reached Hamilton’s lungs, it could well have stopped the whole system, and my concern is wise. “Has he vomited yet this morning?” he says.

“He...tried to,” I recall how he had heaved from my cure this morning. Though I know the value of the treatment, “I think he’s too weak for it.”

“I’ll help him then.”

I stand back warily until the surgeon calls for me to help to hold my friend upright. Alex doesn’t wake until his body’s halfway through discharging the content of his stomach, shuddering with surprise and disgust. He spits. “Don’t ever wake me like that again,” his voice is thin and reedy, but I’m grateful to hear it.

“How are you feeling?” McHenry draws the basin away and stirs at the contents.

“Angry.”

Still holding him upright, I help him lie back again and glance at McHenry in time to catch his raised brows and smirk. “He’s got enough strength for cheek.”
“Not cheek,” Alex mumbles, “I’m angry.”

“Well, you are still running hot,” McHenry says, stepping back. “And your humor is thin, so I’m increasing your rations again.”

Alex hums unhappily but doesn’t protest. His body sinks heavy in the blankets, weighed down by some intense exhaustion. I’ll be happy if the staff can scrounge together more food for him- I’ll be happy to perhaps eat some of my own rations rather than scooping it all onto his plate.

McHenry makes a few more notes on a pad then blows out the lantern, puts his notepad in his pocket, and gives me a nod as he takes his leave. He has other patients, men who don’t have the luxury of a family of worried brothers and a friend with some medical learning, helplessly attached to their lives.

I wonder if Alex appreciates it. His eyes have pinched shut again as if in pain, and I step back onto the mattress and curl up as I was before. “How are you really feeling?”

“Sore,” he says, “…my throat hurts,” his face scrunches, and he lifts his head and looks at me, “inside and out- did you...did you bite me?”

I shrug innocently. “I might have...hard to recall.”

“What happened?”

It’s hard to tell how lucid he had been throughout the night- how much he was aware of, but it’s best to be honest, “You died…” it’s perhaps inaccurate to say, as his heart never stopped struggling, but still- “briefly.”

“Oh.” His head falls back to my pillow. “Is it too soon to say I told you so?”

“Yes.”

He laughs, breathy and small with a bewildered smile. “So you…” he drifts, brows drawing in thought, and when he turns to look at me, his expression holds too much admiration, fond and sincere, “how did you save me?”

I don’t want to think of it or talk about it. My hands had only just stopped trembling a few hours ago, and I can feel that tension creeping back into my body. I shake my head, “I hit you and made you breathe.”

He raises a brow, “Ah...heroic…” his tone seems to question my answer and beg for more, but I don’t want to give it. He stares at me and seems to give up, turns his head. “You should get some time away...sleep somewhere else.” It’s strangely dismissive coming from him, but, “You’re going to get sick from me.”

Ah. “If I haven’t caught it yet, I don’t think I will,” I say, considering how well our mouths had become acquainted.

“And…” he sighs, closes his eyes like they’re too heavy to keep open, “if I want to be alone?”

Telling him that he can’t would not receive a kind response- though it’s the truth, and especially after last night, “I don’t want you to be.”

He huffs, “But, I’m...disgusting like this.”
I pull the covers back far enough to unbutton his shirt. “Yes, you are.” I agree, but it would be foolish to think I’m deterred by his hygiene at this point. I don’t ask for permission before grabbing the washbasin and rinsing out the cloth, squeezing the excess water and dabbing his face, scrubbing it over his chest and shoulders, then lifting his arms to wash underneath. “Better now?”

“You’re relentless…” he grumbles.

“I like to think so.” I can feel the honest smile holding my mouth, the sort of barefaced fondness that had always been uncomfortable to wear feels easy.

He closes his eyes with a mollified grin of his own, and when I crawl under the covers beside him, he doesn’t protest my touch. I start at his hip, trailing fingers up his side and squeezing gently at his ribs. He sighs, the greatest extent of a reaction he seems to have the strength for, resigned.

I take it as permission.

Caring for Alex has been clinical and detached, sweet and soothing when he’d been in pain- only when he had needed it, but he doesn’t need it now. He doesn't stop it either, lets me knead at his skin and nuzzle his hair, affectionate and comforting without a reason to comfort. It’s nice not to need one.

I’ve never truly had liberty with him- not like with Meade or Lafayette, comfortable in the chastity of their friendship. With Alexander, I always questioned our affection- his intentions and my own, the dark rush of excitement I feel just by proximity. There had been something simple in knowing him without all this pretense. Before I had known how he would want me and understood why that desire was so dangerous. After- every touch implied temptation- to transgress, to commit sin or crime or do wrong…

This is not lustful, though it tips towards desirous. It’s pure- admirable and tender, the way friendship was meant to be, and when I rub my thumb over his nipple in passing, he draws a sharp breath and turns his face towards me.

It feels right like this- intimate...intoxicating.

For all that he melts under the attention, chaste affection seems depraved, every brush of lips recalling the brush of tongue, every press of skin suggesting his hips flush against me. I don’t mind it. There’s no danger in this liberty- in the freedom to skate fingertips over his collar and kiss his hair and cheek without reaction- without escalation. Besides, is freedom not a little depraved?

I trace my fingers up his throat where he bares his neck, press my thumb over the red mark I’d made, fitting retribution for the mark he’d made on me months ago, a parallel end to my uncertainty. “Sorry about this…” I say- like a half-hearted apology for touching him while he’s powerless to reciprocate.

“Don’t be.”

HIS EXCELLENCY HAS made orders against hiding men who have fevers in their cabins, but sending his best aide to a poorly-supplied hospital camp or a quarantine tent would be more hazardous to Hamilton’s health than he can risk. In this case, some lives are more vital than others. Besides tending his sickbed, McHenry’s covering his duties at headquarters so no visitors ask for him. We can’t have all of camp knowing Hamilton’s sick and being hidden, so every day we have him write a note to send out to some influential officer, so men will see his handwriting.

It exhausts him to write. I set up his desk over his lap, prop pillows behind his back, and dictate what
to say, but his writing has the same marks of weakness as the letter he had struggled to send me in December. He barely presses the paper, and his hand trembles.

I take it from him when it’s done, pack up his desk, and straighten the blankets again. He won’t meet my eyes. And the longer he doesn’t, the more it concerns me. “What’s wrong?”

He closes his eyes, “How long am I confined here?”

“The fever hasn’t broken yet,” I say; he’d tried to read this morning and spent more time staring dazedly at the page than actually reading. “McHenry will want you to be fully-rested before you go back to work, considering how rushing your recovery last time only brought you back here.”

He huffs his displeasure, and I recall how he had struggled against my assistance when he’d come back to camp, how he hates to be cared for, but still...I had thought it was different with me by now. “I can’t afford to be idle,” he says. “I’m here for a reason- the army needs me.”

“Yes, needs you healthy,” I wet his cooling cloth and dab it over his face, “So, you should rest as long as you need...you’ve surely done enough.”

“Don’t say that to me ever again.” Turning his face towards me, I move my hand from his cheek. “I can’t hear that- not from you.” My confusion must show because he explains quietly, “I might listen...and I might never get moving again.”

FROM THE CABIN, I make short walks and gather my work every few hours. I continue my correspondence with my father, helping him manipulate his influence in Congress against our ‘infamous delinquent’, Mifflin. He warns me that Congress is granting the Board of War authority to appoint superintendents to make purchases of goods in New Jersey and Pennsylvania with the power to supercede Continental commissaries and state governments to buy food for their militias.

“We’re creating competition against ourselves…” Alex mutters through his teeth, barely awake but angry enough to contribute.

“Exactly!” I say, sharpening my quill. “We should be operating through a single buyer- this will just pit our prices against each other...wily farmers will sell to the higher bidder...I cannot fathom why.”

“Power,” Alex intercepts me bluntly. “Our supply department is associated with Mifflin. He wants to keep control of it. I’m sure he thinks he knows best.”

“He doesn’t know anything.”

A small laugh, “How could he, comfortable at home in Reading.”

Even more reason the Quartermaster should be constantly with the army. I make a note of that point to my father, and another reminder that he should urge all the delegates in Congress to read the letter from the committee here in camp, Washington’s proposal for such an officer in that post. If Congress deferred to his Excellency for recommendations on that appointment, it would undermine Mifflin’s expertise as well as the influence he wants in Congress. It would hit like a slap to the cheek.

“When will we learn how vital that post is?” Alex mutters. “Every winter, another crisis, driving us to the brink of dissolution, and every year again- it’s the battleground for power games and politics...no good economy’s ever come out of personal grudges and factions.” He rolls onto his side, mouth half-buried in the blankets, “If we continue like this...how will anything become of us?”
I turn from the desk, leaning against the back of the chair to look at my friend. Still feverish and possibly half-delusional, I think he’s seeing further than half the men in Congress. If there was ever a time to ask him about the post as Quartermaster General, it might be now...

Before I can think of how to bring it up, the cabin door opens and McHenry shuffles inside with Hamilton’s breakfast rations, followed by Colonel Fleury. I’m surprised to see the Frenchman, and stand to his attention in greeting. He’s been in and out of Washington’s office since we surrendered his fort on the Delaware, and provided an enlightened ear in my dearer friends’ absence.

He nods to dismiss my formality, looking past me to Alexander’s sickbed and frowning. Before he can approach him though, McHenry gives him a look of warning that indicates they had spoken of this before coming inside- that Alexander should be left alone to rest. I’m grateful for McHenry’s unwavering discretion.

Fleury steps to my desk and announces in French, “I’m leaving for York on Monday- to meet with Congress.”

I see where this is going already.

“If I meet your father, I’d like to show him I support the proposal you discussed with me,” the black battalion. “The concept had some success in Rhode Island, and in our current state of desertion, now is the perfect time to make your case.”

I stare at him...this is a new one. “Are you asking me what to say to him?” I know he’s not. His English is still stuttering at best, and he’s far too proud to make himself sound foolish by trying to speak to someone who won’t understand him.

“I want to carry him your ideas...if you have them written down. I will have a translator who can help me express my support, but...I wanted to make that offer.”

“I’ll write you a letter of introduction,” I say. “To attach to my ideas.”

He gives a nod of thanks and a small bow, stepping away to allow McHenry to drop a pile of letters on my desk for “when you’re finished with that letter.”

And they leave us with no further preamble.

Alex watches the exchange from his bed, bleary but attentive. “How much support do you expect from him?”

“As much as he can give,” I say.

“You realize he only wanted the introduction. I mean...perhaps you can rely on him, but what else could he want from you to keep his support?”

“What are you saying?”

“Not that he shouldn't want your friendship, but when you have a certain name…”

“Alex, I’m familiar with how this works, my father was one of the most influential men in Charlestown. I can tell when people want to be my friend to meet him. It’s not about preventing anyone from using me to their own advantage...it’s about picking which ones to allow…”

“But, the fact that he thinks he’s so clever- that you don’t notice it…”
I laugh, “I think my pride can handle it.” My own exploitation is not a subject I’m particularly defensive of, but Alexander huffs. “Besides, I’ve worked with Fleury for months, we’re friends.”

“What?”

“Openly?”

“Is he your friend openly?” Alex says. “You’re writing to your father that he’s your friend, but would he remain so if your scheme fails?”

Confused what he’s asking, I stare at him, “Why would you…?” then- I know that look from my father’s face, the gentle doubt that borders on pity. “You think it’s foolish.”

He holds my eyes. “Yes.”

That strikes me harder than I’d thought it could. He’s scoffed at me, thinking Shrewsberry could see me as anything kinder than a slavemaster. I don’t know why I had just assumed I would have his support in this, but hearing that he disagrees makes the whole scheme so much heavier. Since I had told him about my old friend- my romantic attachment to him, I had developed a physical revulsion in comparing Alexander to Francis, but I recall how we had discussed this subject a dozen times over, I feel viscerally uncomfortable.

“Because I’m not convinced you can do this,” Alexander struggles urgently to push himself up on weak arms, to sit higher and meet my eyes; I recall how Francis had tried to talk me out of this- “and I want to be…”

I don’t think I could ask him what that means without my voice shaking.

He explains, “This is not a simple suggestion. Asking southern gentry to give their slaves to the cause would sacrifice the support of the south and turn them all Tory-”

“My father is a slave owner and the most stalwart patriot you’ll ever meet-”

“I’m speaking in percentages-”

“-and he knows I’ve committed my own share of his laborers to the cause.”

That stops Alexander mid-sentence. He blinks then changes course, “You’d sacrifice your own inheritance for this?”

“Yes.”

He stares for a long moment, seeming unable to allow himself to believe this. He doesn’t question my honesty, eventually settling on incredulous acceptance. “Then convince me it’s possible,” he settles back, having exhausted himself. “If you can’t convince a man who wants to believe in you, you’ll never convince men who loathe the idea...so convince me.”

THOSE WORDS STAY with me through the day, but Alexander falls asleep after making that demand. McHenry comes before noon with a warning that my work at headquarters is growing and the storm won’t be an excuse to avoid it. His Excellency has been lenient, and my brothers have helped me keep up my duties from a distance, but men will begin asking where I’ve gone- Colonel Morgan with his foraging expeditions, Captain Lee with his reconnaissance, the Chevalier de Mauduit with news of his promotion, James with a packet from my father, Boudinot with updates
from our prisoners…

As I walk into the office, the regular commotion is absent, all the boys are gathered at the head of the table. They step away as I approach, moving aside for a familiar face.

Harrison. He stands, smiles to see me, and takes a step around the bench towards me.

I hold out my hand to shake, and he grabs it but pulls me into a hug. I press down my grin, “How was sitting on the board with Mifflin?”

He must hear the understanding in my voice because he squeezes my shoulder and glances at Tilghman. We hadn’t spoken about the General’s former staff before he left for York, so he must conclude how I have been brought into the fold. “Brought back memories,” he says with a pointed distaste.

“Are you on leave?” Fitz says, “I thought the Board was still in session.”

“It dismissed for a week for Gates to negotiate Lafayette’s plans for Canada,” he turns, “which, speaking of,” he grabs his traveling bag off the table, rummaging inside to produce a letter. “The boy arrived on Thursday in time for dinner. He made quite the spectacle.”

He hands the letter to Tilghman, and something heavy settles in my chest. Tench opens it and smiles at whatever’s written there.

I look back at Harrison as he describes the Marquis’s performance in York. Lafayette had warned me he wouldn’t hide his loyalties if pressed to make them clear, and he embarrassed the Board of War thoroughly by raising a toast to General Washington and pointing out the neglect of all the other officers to do so. Harrison says that, after the dinner, he had warned Lafayette the implications of picking sides between the American commanders. Lafayette proceeded to march himself to Gates and say straightforward that, if he accepted the command, he would not correspond with the Board of War, only through General Washington himself.

That earns grins and cheers from the whole staff. The Baron de Kalb holds at the corner of the conversation and smiles with the sort of pride fathers reserve for their boys.

Congress had received Lafayette’s demands for the expedition through my father: at least two million in paper currency, two-hundred thousand in coins, and commissions for six French officers. From Mifflin he demanded ammunition, stores, and provisions— with an emphasis on carriages. He demanded Congress instate the Baron de Kalb as his second in command instead of Conway.

By his expression with this news, the Baron is all too pleased with it.

Lafayette writes that he’s confident he’ll get everything he demanded not only because he holds my father’s affection, but because he wrote, ‘I’ll resign, and the other French officers will send their resignations in two days.’

Taking his demands to Congress before ever speaking to the Board was a wise move, and I have the feeling that the Marquis was coached in these matters not only by the committee we attended and Alexander’s penmanship, but by His Excellency himself.

It’s a tactic the General employs me for regularly.

MY WORK keeps me in the office late that night. My father hasn’t yet confirmed the Chevalier de
Mauduit promotion, but I use much of the same wording in my recommendations for the Marquis de Fleury. They’re both applying for the rank of Lieutenant Colonel, and their merits are similar. But, because he invited it, I place my words for Fleury just above my suggestions for the battalion. I’ll take support from any good man willing to commit his name to my cause. But, those are just names that will look good on paper. I need approval from my father…and from my friend.

In a way, I had thought we’d become all that I wanted- intimate and entwined, trusting and challenging. I think that’s all Hamilton means to do now...challenge me so I can better face a difficult task, but...his rejection still has me shaken from this morning, and I haven’t regained my balance.

It’s still snowing as I make the walk back to my cabin, but the heaviest of the fall has passed. I keep my letter tucked in my bag until I push open the door. “Alex?” I hate how nervous I feel to face my own friend, “I have the letter...I think you were saying you wanted to hear it-”

I can see his shape in the bedding, but he doesn’t move.

“Where’s McHenry?” I step further into the cabin and sit on the side of the bed. Pulling the covers back from his face, Alexander’s skin is flushed red at the cheeks and around his eyes- which don’t open when I stir him. “Alex?” I grab his shoulder and shake him harder. “Hey,” growing more frantic when he still doesn’t respond, “Wake up!”

This- at last, draws a response, but only his face scrunching in discomfort.

I draw a deep breath and take the liberty to sweep him up by the shoulders into my arms.

At that, he grumbles and comes further into consciousness. “Mmm, John? I though-” he leans back in the embrace, making himself heavier, “I thought you’d left.”

“Only for work…”

His smile is thin like he’s unsure if he should allow it to comfort him. I push my face into his neck to regain control, on the verge of tears from another unbidden surge of that wretched fear he keeps sparking in me. I’m sure I’ll need to talk about it, but not while he’s so surprised to even see me.

“I wrote the letter for Fleury to my father,” I say, voice muffled in his collar. He hums, blearily interested, and I feel the vibration of it on my cheek. Somehow, the feeling makes me forget my own nerves. I shift to speak clearer, “I emphasized the difficulty we’ve had to hold our numbers. I told him I’m aware of the arguments and intrigues I’ll face from my opponents in this, but I’m set on it.”

He leans further back to look at me. “Is that it?”

I brace a hand behind his head and help him lie back again. “No. But, the rest can wait,” until he’s fully-rested and restored to health.

He squirms to sit up, and, as if in direct defiance of my wishes, “I want to read you something,” he says.

I push him gently back down. “You don’t need to be reading anything…” I say carefully. He’s acquiesced to being cared for as long as I don’t point out that I’m doing it…

As soon as I move my hand from his chest, he’s moving to sit up again. “It’s short, I promise. Just a few lines- here,” he tries to slide towards the side of the cot.

I press him back down again, “Alex, stop.” Looking to the desk, there’s no way he could’ve brought that new pile of books into the cabin- and no way that McHenry would have fetched them. “Where
did you get those?"

He won’t relax under my hand, but I hold it at his chest so he won’t try to sit up again, even as he explains, “McHenry said I’d be confined here a few more days at least- and with Lady Washington arriving, I didn’t think I’d be allowed in headquarters anytime soon.”

I raise a brow at him. He’s not answering my question, and I don’t like the dodge. Pressing him down to the bedding one last time in warning, I stand up and walk to the table. It’s more than books-letters and reports from all sectors of the countryside. “Why do you need these off-duty?”

“Well, there are four fields of expertise our army lacks,” he recites, “trained artillerists, engineers, cavalrymen, and men with administrative experience. As long as I’m working for Washington, he’ll keep me from the artillery, I don’t have the technical knowledge for engineering or the riding skill for the cavalry even when Pulaski has the horses for it- so while I’m not doing anything better, I can fashion myself to be an administrator.”

I should ask about the quartermaster post now, but...more importantly, “Where are you getting these reports?”

He cocks a brow, challenging the frustration in my tone like it’s amusing that I’m so concerned he’s not resting. “Don’t underestimate the ladies John, women always see more than we want them to,” he has a tone of conspiracy. Grinning like he expects my support for this ring of informants in petticoats- just as I had expected support from him; it crashes down on me like another lick of flame. He doesn’t look like a man chewed up by a merciless fever. He looks sharp and pleased with himself, despite not doing anything other than living. “Now can I read the poem or- what else is in your argument for this battalion…?”

He’s strong enough to push himself to sit against the pillows, and I give up on pushing him back down again, dropping into the desk chair. He’s alive, but I need to know he intends to stay that way. “I don’t think I can do this anymore…”

Alex stops and looks at me, tense. “Um… the battalion or-” he waves a hand vaguely between us. “How long before I have to watch you die again?”

“Oh, that.” He presses the heels of his palms into his eyes, every line of his body betraying physical and mental exhaustion. “I won’t.”

“Of course you will, Alex… this is a pattern with you. Daversers, Albany- how many times have we gotten notice of your death-”

“John,” he says, chastising, “we can talk about this, but I think it’s been firmly established, I’ll outlive everyone-”

“Don’t joke about this!”

“I’m not joking- I….” he sighs and relaxes, finally, into the blankets. “Look, I feel fine. The sooner I can get back to work, the sooner you’re all relieved of watching me-”

“I don’t mind taking care of you...none of us do.”

“Oh, spare me-” He rolls his eyes and the motion confuses me. I knew he would argue against letting us watch over him, wanting to avoid weakness, but to do so because he doesn’t believe we want to be there for him... “Is it just a chance to coddle me?” he says, “Because I don’t need to be sick for that, just find me a stiff drink and-”
“Alex!” I know he would do this for me if our positions were switched, as I know he would catch me before I fall. “What part of ‘I’m your friend’ did you not understand? This is what friends do—take care of you. Besides, you’ve surely saved my life before. Remember when you caught me in that tree—if it wasn’t for you, I’d have two broken legs—”

“So it’s a debt then?”

“Not to me.” That’s not what I meant. “But if it was, is there a reason you wouldn’t let me repay it?”

He doesn’t answer that, just purses his lips, turns his face away and goes quiet for a long moment. “I wanted to read you something, do you wanna hear or not?”

I sigh and open my arms, gesturing broadly, “Where’s the book?”

He ignores my offer to get it for him and leans over the side of the pallet to grab a small leather-bound book, unwrapping it, “We stopped in several towns along the ride, and I found this,” his hand flattens over the cover, “I thought it was a pretty little thing, but it’s all in Greek.”

I don’t see how that’s a problem, “Do you...read Greek?”

“Well, I was hoping you could—”

Whatever he was hoping is interrupted by a knock at the door, and I glance at him before getting up to answer, confused who might be calling so late after suppertime. I expect McHenry or Shrewsberry, but Tilghman stands outside, removing his hat to step in and shake off the snow that covered his cloak. He lifts his messenger bag as explanation.

I step aside for him and he comes in, kicking the ice off his boots. He walks to Hamilton’s bedside and unslings his bag to pull out Alex’s pile of letters.

I want to protest as he sets them by my friend’s arm, at easy access to read, but Tench taps the top letter. “I opened your note from the Marquis to see if he’d mentioned anything besides what he’d already said to me. He mentions your Ensign redcoat you found so agreeable.” There’s something teasing in Tilghman’s smirk, and I don’t like what it implies...or how unsettled it makes me feel.

“Ensign redcoat?” I say. Alexander picks up the letter and starts opening it, and distracted, I don’t protest. I don’t even think to be hurt that two of our brothers have gotten letters from my Gilbert and I’ve again been neglected.

Tilghman cocks his hip against our desk and explains, “Few days ago, the watch at the north gate picked up an officer defecting from the 35th British. Claimed to have shot his commander in an affair of honor over orders he couldn’t, in good conscious, carry out.”

“What order?”

“Something ‘bout a raid on Goshen.” Tilghman shrugs and leans towards Alexander’s bedside. “But, Alex thought the boy was handsome, didn’tcha?”

“I said honorable,” Alex corrects mildly, eyes moving slowly across Lafayette’s letter.

“You may well have, but...he was also quite handsome, you think.”

I have a strange urge to grab up my own coat and walk out, feeling awkward and unwelcome. I think, maybe, this is how it must have felt to watch me flirt with John White. I understand the urge to turn away for a distraction.
Alex doesn’t acknowledge the taunts, “Gilbert’s found only fifteen delegates in York…” he looks up at me.

Tilghman quickly shifts to this new topic, “Yes, he mentioned the same to me. It seems only a few of our republican Congress were willing to endure the weather and travel.”

The news sickens me enough to distract from my selfish discomfort and turn away, sitting with a huff. Gilbert would know this news is important to me. I feel Alexander’s eyes on the side of my face.

“It’s right to be worried for our Congress when the delegates show such a want of commitment, but…” he shifts to sit higher on his pillow, setting Lafayette’s letter aside, “but if it’s true that that body is so weakened, it may be easier for us to press for the things we need.”

I understand what he’s saying. “Fewer minds to convince…”

But, Tilghman says, “Remember, if a majority of those are in our true whig faction, there will be fewer moderate minds to stand in the way of the opposite…”

That is true, and I’m ready to give up the idea of wasting time, writing family friends in Congress directly. Then, “Several of the most influential members of that faction were sent here to us in camp...or expended on their Board of War,” Alex says, “Their numbers in Congress should be thin by now.”

“Samuel Adams,” Tilghman says, “Nathaniel Folsom, John Adams, James Lovell-”

“Still in Boston, Jersey, Braintree, and just an embarrassment after that ordeal with Congress’s papers.” Alex lifts Tilghman’s satchel and closes it, hand shaking where he holds it up, an obvious hint to leave, “Talk to His Excellency about it- or tell him to come ask me about it. He might agree.”

Tilghman’s jaw clenches and he stands back, huffing as if Hamilton’s used this tactic before and it’s proven effective. “All we can do is redouble our efforts in our letters.”

“Then that’s what we do,” Alex states.

I step further into the cabin, take the letter bag where Alexander hasn’t put it down, holding it out to the elder aide and glaring at him, “That’s what we do, not you.” He should know better than to offer something he doesn’t have the strength to do, “Now…” I push the letterbag into Tench’s chest, “he needs to rest.”

Alex opens his mouth to protest, and Tench acquiesces to me in defiance of him. “You are right,” he says, adjusting the strap of his bag to put it up over his shoulder then stepping for the door and sweeping his cloak up onto his back. He turns at the door. “I think I’m perfectly capable of making the case to His Excellency myself,” he says. “I’ll talk to him in the morning.”

Alexander sends him a glare, but as soon as the door swings shut, it twists into a grin.

I roll my eyes.

“He makes that too easy.”

“Yes, yes- you’re so clever,” I say, grabbing the blankets where he’d disturbed them and putting them back over his chest. “You know, he wouldn’t actually give up, even though he says those things.” I’d seen it while he was in Albany- Tilghman was rational but relentless. He would see all the ways a plan was likely to fail and then follow it anyway, complaining all the while.
Settling under my hands, Alex looks up at me, and his grin softens. “I know. But, he likes to dwell on his doubts and distrust the General.”

I laugh at that. “You’re one to talk about distrusting Washington-”

“No- I mean,” he moves to sit up but aborts the gesture when I lift a hand, “I mean...he doesn’t trust that Washington knows how to handle these games. They’re dark and political and involve so much cunning and manipulation, he...” Alex stops himself, eyes darting to the cabin door to be sure it’s secure, to be sure we’re alone. “He believes in him too much.”

I sit beside him slowly on the mattress. I’m loyal to the General- completely, consigned my fate to his and proud of that, but I also can’t deny the boundless faith I have in Alexander- in the things he sees...but, “Don’t you,” I say, “believe in him?”

“I...” he looks at me and seems to hesitate.

I expect a diversion. Something that would give me my answer without needing to trust me to speak it.

Then he says, “No. Not like that,” and I realize, if anyone else said this to me- or if he said it to anyone else, such words would be dancing on the line of insubordination. He won’t meet my eyes, but he explains, “I don’t believe he’s impartial...or noble or unshakeable. He’s petty. He’s temperamental and proud and frustrated and far too concerned about what people think of him. More than that, he’s suspicious- he doesn’t like his fellow generals any more than he trusts them. He’s paranoid of gossiping, and if he could dismiss the choices of Congress outright without making himself a tyrant, I think he would- I think his fear of being seen as one makes him hatefuly hesitant and that’s a weakness we can’t-”

I put a hand on his chest again to stop him. It’s quite enough, “I understand you,” I say, nearly laughing when he’s out of breath- though it isn’t funny that so little speaking should have him winded. “He’s human. But, a man in his position does have to be careful what people think.”

“I know that. I’m not saying he’s wrong.”

“Only that he’s temperamental and proud and vain and suspicious and paranoid-”

“Not necessarily bad things-”

“Alex,” I smile, letting my tone slip to chastising him.

He purses his lips, “You’re always quick to defend him.”

He isn’t wrong about that, and I know he’s asking for a flame of fury to match his own. I want to give him that, but criticizing General Washington is currently burning several of his subordinates alive, a fate I fear he may be capable of himself, and moreover, “Because you don’t need to dwell on your doubts.”

I push a loose strand of hair from his face, his petulant look fades to a smile, “No...but it is nice to share them.”

I lean back to pat his knee affectionately.

Getting up to tend the fire and undress to my nightshirt, his eyes don’t leave me as I change. I feel his stare on my back, shifting the weight of the air between us, making the silence heavy with something unsaid. I’ve always had enough flesh to fill out my form, but I think he must see my bones now, and
my days of pushing my rations onto his plate may be over.

But, when I turn back to him, it’s not concern for me that I see. There’s an old, familiar heat in his gaze, eyes dark and intense, but his brow is knit like his own thoughts trouble him. I want to warm myself in that heat, soothe away his troubles. I understand the tugging desire he had teetered against for weeks when I first joined the staff, the urge to launch at him in passion, curl around him, touch and taste whatever he offered up. I think he must see that on my face. His apprehension is palpable.

In some perverse reversal, it’s my turn for real restraint- the self-control he was so sure I have. He’s not in any state to want like I do…

He holds open his arms in invitation and I step towards him, put a knee on the mattress. When I lay beside him, sharing a pillow, and it brings our faces close. I think- there must be some way to resolve the tension of how much I’m straining against this pull, to recognize it openly, disarm it like he’s shown me to do.

So, I push my forehead to his.

When he startles, I grin, close my eyes and exhale against his cheek. He doesn’t retreat, but his body’s gone tense. “Are you going to ask me to kiss you?”

“I’m _ill_, John…”

“Then don’t look at me like that.”

He laughs, punched-out and breathy. “Are you admitting you’re tempted?” he says, already backing away so I’m not breathing his sickly air.

“I don’t need to answer that.”

I grab his arm to turn him over and he wriggles in assistance, pressing back, “No,” he says, “you don’t.”

He’s cheeky and smug and I allow it, grateful that the tension’s released. As I pull the cover up over myself, I don’t need prompting to press my face into his hair, the position familiar- though his skin is clammy and frail. When our roles were reversed, he’d embraced me before I trusted it, held me through the night, breath warm against my neck, fingers stroking patterns against my chest that tortured my nerves. I hope he doesn’t mistake the motion for expectation when I can’t resist the urge to do the same.

He just leans back and relaxes. After a few minutes, he shifts and takes my hand away from his chest, putting his little leather-bound book into my palm.

I take that as a hint to stop touching him like that and spend a few minutes flipping through the pages.

“Did Lafayette tell you anything more than he told me?” he says.

I bite my tongue, slow to move back and look at him. “No…” I can admit to him that this hurts me, the idea that Gilbert can’t forgive me- and that this scar may be permanent. I know that the option is there to say it, but I know he sees it without- “He didn’t write to me.”

He doesn’t ask if I want to talk about it, but the question hangs in the air. I don’t give him permission, but he speaks, starting slow. “In my experience, there are good people and there are nice people...somehow, he’s both. I don’t think he’s being cruel.”
“I know he’s not trying to be.”

He hums, “You’re hurt because you care about him and you care what he thinks. Is it hard to imagine he feels the same?”

That is a fair point, but “I didn’t mean to imply we don’t trust him. I argued to tell him the truth—that’s more then Tilghman did and he got a letter.”

“Maybe it was easier to forgive Tilghman because his pride may have cared less what the old man thought.” Alex glances back over his shoulder. “You’re only a few years older. Your lack of faith may come across less...condescending, and more well- disrespectful.”

I sit up and look at him, leaning on one elbow. “I hadn’t thought of that.”

“Well, I think...if you thought I'd be too naive and careless to know something, I’d be rather insulted.”

“I told you, that’s not why-”

“Have you told him?”

He doesn’t say it with any judgment, but I hate how he makes that solution sound so simple as if just saying it would be sufficient. I’ve already told Lafayette I trust his judgement. I need him to believe me- that I’d simply wanted to protect his honesty if that was at all possible in this war…

Alex squeezes the back of my hand and pulls me gently back down to the blankets. “I’m sure you’ll have a chance to show him.”

I don’t know how to reply when he catches my thoughts like that, so I squeeze his hand in return and pick his book up again. “You had something you wanted to read to me?”

He hums and nuzzles back so my face finds the curve of his neck, “The book is yours, it can wait…”

I chuckle into his hair, “You are actually tired, I can see it.”

“Its a gift...” he says, a distraction to dodge the subject. “I heard I’d missed your birthday.” His hand shifts over mine, our fingers spread over the cover.

I pick it up, tilt it to see the letters pressed into the leather binding. It’s a collection of poems from the early states of Greece. I hum my thanks, and it rumbles through me like a purr, embarrassing if this were anyone else. I’m flushed with the idea that Alexander had thought of me fondly on his ride-even if that fondness would sour from my silence. “Thank you,” I say, “but, you shouldn’t spend money on me.”

“I didn’t buy it. General Knox owns a bookshop…”

I laugh, “So you’re regifting the book you can’t read?”

“I can read it!” he huffs. “But, my learning is newly-acquired and basic and...and, I say that in confidence. Some of us weren’t privileged to Anglican education.” There’s an obvious pout in his tone, and he’s too lighthearted to question it now, though I’m curious of his education or why he’d lacked the privilege. It strikes me as another one of those subjects he speaks about, blasé and careless, as if his openness will dismiss suspicion.

It just makes me more curious.
He says, “And, I had hoped...if it was true you could read it well...”

“If you’d wanted to hear my voice so badly, you could just ask for a story.” I lower my timbre and tilt my chin so my breath is hot on his neck.

He shivers and kicks me- since it takes the least effort as a reprimand. “I did want to, but now you won’t stop.”

“I could be easily convinced to,” I say, grinning, “I can think of several other uses for my mou-”

He rolls back into me and I get a mouthful of his hair. When he doesn’t move from that position, I take it he’s fallen asleep.

THE FASTER I CLIMB, the further she moves from my reach and the more desperately I stretch.

In my haste, I’m growing exhausted, breath short and wheezing, hands becoming clumsy. My grip isn’t firm enough to grab for the next branch, and when my foot slips, my last thought is my head, cracking open on the ground...blood and blonde hair...

I don’t expect the rope that catches my neck-

WHEN SHREWSBERRY COMES to wake me, Alexander has extricated himself and resettled at the far side of the mattress. He’d fallen asleep first and I’d followed with him curled up against my side, shivering despite the heat his body radiated.

The fact that he’d rolled away seems promising. It means his body no longer needs to burn him alive to save itself. When I sit up to check his face, the fever has cooled considerably. As soon as Shrewsberry’s finished laying out our rations and left me with my clothes set out and cleaned, I wait for him to leave us before brushing Alex’s hair back and kissing his forehead.

The motion is chaste and affectionate, an expression of the sort of friendship I finally feel free to have. Even if I did not trust Shrewsberry with my life, it’s not obscene or suspicious, a brush of lips to a dear friend’s face is nothing to raise alarm and nothing I feel ashamed of. Still, I can’t bear for it to be seen.

McHenry will be calling soon, so I leave him to sleep and get dressed for the day. I realize, in his rolling over, he’s somehow left the gifted booklet on my side of the cot. It had been in my hand all night, so I assume I’d gripped it when he moved away.

I drop the book into the pocket of my coat before pulling it on.

When McHenry arrives, Meade is escorting him, waiting in the doorway as the doctor gets settled with his equipment. “You’re needed in headquarters again,” he says to me, frowning sympathetically, “and Mac will be wanted as well, so the General’s spared his valet for the day. We sent your boy to retrieve him.” He motions from the doorway and I follow him outside.

“Do I have a moment to make a quick run before I’ll be expected?”

“Run for what?”

“A name,” I say, pulling my cloak on over my shoulders. “Tilghman mentioned a British officer that
came to camp a few days ago. I need to write to Clark—"

“We already have.” Meade’s arm moves behind mine to steer me on the path to headquarters. “Tench told me he’d brought Cope’s story up to you, but Hammy was awake so he couldn’t say we’d sent Clark to confirm it.”

“Couldn’t say? Because Alex was there?” I don’t understand.

Meade’s arm laces through mine, “The boy doesn’t need any more reason to expect the worst of everyone. With Gates’s accusation about the letter and the faction spreading rumors, he’ll worry himself to death if we let him. He took a liking to Cope, and we’re sure our suspicions will be unfounded anyway. It may do more harm to him to raise the question than to let this pass without his notice.”

“You think he cared about Cope that much...to justify lying to him?”

Meade sighs, “It’s not lying as long as he doesn’t ask- and Clark doesn’t turn anything up.”

He doesn’t address my question. But, I understand the answer and hate it- and Cope, and the idea of not telling Alex. It sounds remarkably like the way I’d been asked to treat Lafayette, but as much as Tilghman preached about keeping the family informed of everything happening, Meade had always been more open about these things. He was not wrong about the value of sending Alex to Albany to collect troops, even if that ride had been as dangerous to his reputation as I suspected. Alex had been able to weather those accusations and avoid any physical attacks on the road, but his health has only just begun improving, and he doesn’t need a distraction from that. If Meade thinks it’s appropriate not to mention this until we have the story of Cope’s duel confirmed, I’ll leave it alone.

So, we walk to headquarters, and as we make the hike, I think Meade’s trying to hold my hand, but he puts a small pouch of coins in my palm.

“What’s this?”

“Remember that wager we made- when Hammy’d get back to camp?” it was months ago now, and I’d nearly forgotten. “It doesn’t seem so uncouth to pay it now- since he seems to be over the worst of ‘t.”

“I don’t need this,” I say, trying to push the money back into his hand.

He laughs, “I don’t need it either- keep it.” He lengthens his stride and takes a few steps backwards to face me and says, “Besides, I’m planning a surprise for His Excellency’s birthday, and we’ll probably need to pay for it. This was a good excuse to pool together the funds...the boys are far more agreeable to pay up for a wager than they’d be to contribute to the General’s happiness.” He grins and gives a shrug. “Besides, I trust you not to spend it over the others.”

“Well...I haven’t been taking pay,” I say, “and I could find a use for the money. I ran out of hair powder and could barter for some pomatum...”

Meade sends me a short look, unamused.

I laugh. “Don’t worry, I’ll keep it safe.” I tuck the money in my pocket. “What is the surprise, anyway? Seeing as how I’m paying for it, I should know what it is.”

“It’s McHenry’s plan- and an excellent jab at our little faction.” Meade smiles, genuine enough that I don’t feel the need to question it further. “Just trust me, you’ll enjoy it.”
I do trust him.

WE SPEND most of the day together, a privilege we had not enjoyed for the past several weeks as I’d been preoccupied with Hamilton’s health and Lafayette’s trust, and he’d been sent to carry messages back and forth to Congress.

While we have time to spare between organizing piles of correspondence, I recall what Gibbs had suggested. “When you said Alex was best to make the ride up to Albany, was that from experience?” I say, “I’ve heard you made a ride with him when you both arrived with His Excellency…”

Meade laughs at that, a strange response, “I thought that ride was infamous by now?”

“I haven’t heard it.”

“Well, Hammy came to the General, claiming he could win him the war,” he grins. “Fitz could probably tell you the story about those first few days better than I could, but by th’ time Fitz came to me at our old regiment, asking me to make a ride, the boy had drawn up a list of folks he’d known in New York City who could pass as tories and smuggle information to us.”

“I thought Major Tallmadge was our intelligence officer.”

Meade dumps another bag of letters onto the table. “He was- after all this. Tallmadge and his friend, Hale, were members of our first attempt at a special operations unit- ‘Knowlton’s Rangers’. It was intended to both fight and do reconnaissance without moving through Congress, but their first few informants found nothing useful, Colonel Knowlton died in battle, and when we planted Hale in the city...well, Washington disbanded the department entirely.”

I nod in understanding.

“Then Hammy comes along. Fitz remembered me as a fast rider, so when he asked me to escort the boy undercover into the city, I thought I’d only be expected to ride and deliver his letters. As soon as our companies were settled into quarters, we did that, but we did so much more. His plans weren’t just making contact with a few people he’d known in New York, it was working under the noses of Congress and the army itself, collecting that information not only by the people he’d known, but by using the people we’ve always taken as useless- street urchins, slaves, criminals, beggars. He could talk to them for a few minutes and have information no one would ever think they’d noticed- no one would ever expect they had given us.”

What Meade describes...it’s not a gentleman’s sport. It’s spying and pilfering for information like a street tramp in a wealthy man’s refuse. This war was so full of pretense, and I hate to see how much of that mask I had believed...how much I had wanted to believe.

I had wanted this war to be right and righteous...graceful and beautiful. But why should I?

“I know it frustrates him sometimes,” Meade says as we sort through the parcels. “After we made that ride, Washington had me and him both running errands between his office and our companies. He didn’t talk to me much, but I always tried to keep up with what his informants were sending. Before Trenton, Fitz and Tench started talking about a man in Jersey named Honeyman. Week later, the man showed up in camp as a prisoner, gives us a full report of the Hessians’ positions, then escapes. Wasn’t till a few months later- after both me and Hammy were officially aides, that Tench told me Honeyman was a friend of the boy’s. Hammy and Fitz had helped him escape so he could dupe the Hessians and we could surprise them overnight.”
My mouth is gaping, and I can’t quite control that. What Meade is saying…the famous victory
Washington took at Trenton, crossing the Delaware…the result of a double agent.

Meade goes on, “Course, after we made the attack, Honeyman was exposed, so Hammy had set up a
safehouse for him with a friend in New Brunswick. Before we’d even made camp after Trenton,
Tench said he brought a letter from the Brunswick man that there was a large cache of supplies and
seventy-thousand pounds from the British paymaster’s treasury. He insisted we had to press on and
take the fort in that town.”

That information sinks in slowly. If we had taken such a cache, the British army would’ve lost the
ability to pay its own ranks, Parliament would have been bankrupt and outraged, drained of all
support for the war…the king would’ve had no choice but to open negotiations before I ever even
left England-

While I had been marrying Martha, sleeping on couches to avoid her bed and wishing I could escape
to America, Alexander had been here…trying to end the war altogether.

Meade goes on, “We made the attack at Princeton, and Hammy’s artillery company held their
position longer than anyone, stubborn to push forward. By the time he joined camp, the General had
decided that it would be impossible to press to New Brunswick for the money.”

I recall a story I had heard passed around the soldiers: Washington riding to the head of the ranks to
rally our Continentals at Princeton, charging on his steed in the midst of whizzing musketballs and
cannon fire. Knowing what the General was charging towards…it certainly puts the image in my
mind in a different light.

Meade turns over a new bag of letters. “Of course, Fitz insisted that a small unit including myself and
Hammy could move into the town undercover and retrieve the treasury under their noses, but…after
what happened with Hale, the General wouldn’t hear anything about sending officers behind their
lines…”

My hands have stilled at the desk, watching Meade while he talks, and I can tell he’s frustrated as
well- that they had never had the chance to attempt their mission. I don’t think he’ll admit that if I
ask. Instead, I’m curious, “Why did he plant Clark on Long Island…I thought he stayed nine months
undercover…”

“We lost the cache,” Meade says, giving half a shrug, “Missing an opportunity like that changes
minds quickly.” He looks at me with the elusive ferocity he has, I always admire when he shows it.
“We won’t do it again.”

LEAVING HEADQUARTERS that night, the story roils in my thoughts. I have to believe now,
Hamilton had never lied or been arrogant to say Washington could’ve used him to win the war, and
when he talks about his previous battles, it’s not humility but the knowledge he could’ve done more.

Tallmadge had once told me he lacked the connections to make an effective spymaster. How
Alexander had collected such connections for himself, having watched how he performs for an
audience, seducing men and women alike, both genders attracted to him like a flame, hinging on his
words…I can imagine it all too well.

I wonder, if I had been here at the time, would Alex have told me about the mission to New
Brunswick? Would he have told me before leaving?
Carrying a letter to de Kalb from my father, discussing the Prussian officer from Frederick the Great’s staff, I start the hike down Gulf Road. I drop off the note, and I mean to leave before he can read it to avoid conversation. I expect that he’s satisfied, knowing that I know he’s aware of Conway’s letter to Washington, but I don’t expect what he says—

“Have you seen- Conway’s leaving camp without confirming his orders? I hope when my Marquis’s demands reach Gates himself, that venerable man will put an end to this scheming.”

I stare at him for several minutes after he uses the word- venerable. I’m unsure if he’s trying to use some double-meaning he expects me to understand. I can’t see any reason he would in private like this. He seems to have the same misgivings about Gates as Lafayette had held in December- even now with it having been confirmed that Conway was just a puppet of him and Mifflin. I realize…perhaps…

He hasn’t realized Gates’s involvement in the faction. Lafayette and de Kalb share all the same information. And the Marquis had mentioned that he was aware of the way Gates had been elevating himself to stand as Washington’s equal, but could it be possible they don’t know how Gates has been working to degrade Washington’s command- his attempts for supersession?

He thinks Conway is our schemer- that he’s somehow manipulating the Board, manipulating Gates…

I MAKE THE TRIP across camp at a sprint. Sure enough, an unusual sight stops me. A horse. Packed with saddle bags and a sled, waiting outside Conway’s redoubts. The Brigadier General himself steps out a moment later, and I can’t help but ask loudly, “Are you travelling somewhere, sir?”

He must recognize my voice without turning because his shoulders stiffen as I approach. He could choose to ignore me, let me stare until he leaves, but, “The storm has cleared. I’m needed in Albany.”

I’m not sure if he knows how much I’m aware of in the expedition he thinks he’s being assigned to. But, I know, given the threat Lafayette has made to destroy our French alliance if he has to work with him, Conway will arrive in Albany with no command. If he hasn’t realized I know this, I’d like to keep it that way, “You’re needed here,” I say instead. “What about your division? Your men will want you—”

The flattery certainly claims his attention, “My men will be cared for.”

He starts walking towards the west side of camp and I pursue. “What of the Inspector General post?” I say. He quickens his stride. “Sir, you see how we’re all wanting here-” I glance at the mare he’s guiding quickly away, “horses are starved and the men have gone with no meat for weeks…” I would nearly pity Conway for becoming the pawn of more scheming men like Mifflin, pushed into a post where he would be useless and shamed, but the General certainly hasn’t lost any mass or worn out his clothes with the same hard labor as the rest of us. “Half of them are practically naked in this cold—”

He turns on me, “If you are so mindful of their nakedness, why have I seen your own man more than once strutting about camp without a shirt? You can’t speak of wanting when you neglect your own charge.”

Shrewsberry. I know what he’s implying. I had denied my own valet’s request for more clothes. I
know how that looks, but among the naked throngs in this camp, no one else bothers to mention it. He sneers at me as if in disgust, and I glare at his performance of humanity. He doesn’t care about my offense, only the moral superiority he can pretend by pointing it out. It will do nothing to absolve me to explain myself to someone who wants my actions to be wrong, but- “I have given him my spare coat,” I say, “but it was shortly lost because our men are so undisciplined as to beat and rob an unarmed servant when he has something they were criminally neglected.”

It’s satisfying to use a word he had aimed at me months ago to insult his performance at a post he never deserved.

If he had spent half his time as Inspector General reporting the men’s state of ill-supply and hunger rather than General Washington’s slightest missteps of diplomacy, Congress and the Board of War might have seen to solving those problems rather than whispering about the Commander in Chief. Instead, he displays so much disdain for our men that he’s allowed his own petty grudge against Washington to see them all suffering.

Conway doesn’t reply to my jab, but he must know what he’s done. He turns his horse away and starts walking.

“Best of luck in Albany,” I call after him.

IT BOTHERS ME as nothing Conway says should ever bother me. When Shrewsberry came to wake me this morning, he was wearing a thin cotton shirt, probably passed around between the other servants of the General’s staff members. I need to know he still has it.

The servants’ quarters are east of the Potts house, and I don’t truly need to knock to announce my presence, but I do and wait. The slave who answers is familiar in that he’s waited on the General’s table a few times. I’ve spoken with several of these men on various occasions on what they think of the Rhode Island militia unit composed of slaves. They each expressed interest in becoming brother soldiers if the opportunity arose, and I had enough proof to confirm to my father that the average slave possesses enough self-love to see a route that offers a better future.

The man steps aside to invite me in.

I expect the crowded confines and the chill, the straw beds and the smell. I didn’t expect the familiar green shirt on Shrewsberry’s back. A short hunting coat with *Liberty or Death* emblazoned on the breast. I charge in and grab him, waking him roughly to ask, “Where did you get this?”

His hands fly up to defend his face as if he expects I’ll punch him, and I recall the bruises after his coat had been stolen off him- the cuts over his brow when my coat was taken.

I don’t mean to threaten him, but that shirt was left at headquarters while Alexander had been in Albany. If he’s taken my friend’s clothes to account for losing his own, I’d be a terrible master and a terrible friend to allow it, “Where did you get it?”

“The Colonel, sir,” he says, scrambling to sit up and still shielding his face. “He gave it.”

I drop my grip on him. “It’s Hamilton’s coat. You’re telling me he gave it to you?”

Shrewsberry nods.

He’s never lied to me or stolen anything. Shrewsberry’s been a wise confidant when I’ve needed one- if a little patronizing and cowardly at times, but no more than his race allows in its current state.
I’m inclined to believe him, but...with how everyone in camp suffers and complains, he’s been exposed to weaker men than him. “Did you ask for it?” The idea makes my lip curl in disgust.

He doesn’t look at me as he shakes his head, “No, sir. No. He gave it. I didn’t ask.”

But, he may have implied it. The coat is a mark of Alex’s service in the militia and a piece of his personal history. I can’t believe he would just gift it to a slave- one that’s not even his… “Why then?”

Shrewsberry glances at me then away, something in watching the old brown man turn his head away as if expecting chastisement for looking at me makes me feel I’m being interrogated. “Said I looked cold.”

I step back. It’s my impulse to say he shouldn’t have been shivering. Alex is too foolishly kind to the pitiable, and Shrewsberry making himself so was taking advantage of a kind heart. It’s beneath him, but the old man looks at me again, another fleeting, nervous glance. It’s how the planters look at the keepers, raising their whips. I realize what kind of brute I must look like to Shrewsberry...and to Alexander, seeing my man- a servant in my care and entirely dependant on me, reduced to a pitiable state.

What he must have thought.

I turn for the door, stopping only where I can leave without hearing whatever his response will be, and say, “Share the coat when others need it. I’ll see about getting you something else.”

I DON’T WANT to return to my cabin or see Alexander, knowing the judgment he must have made of me...my own servant reduced to such a pitiable state that a bedridden man feels obliged to extend him charity- and then to allow that charity, knowing that it will only endanger Shrewsberry to be robbed again, only to protect my own sense of kindness. In any action I take, I would be wrong. To keep a man and have no ability to ensure his safety- it’s not right.

It’s just another proof of my unworldly, inept virtue. I should just accept my father was right about my castles in the sky...that I’ve spent so much time looking up at the light, I’m blinding myself. I take the path behind headquarters to sit by the Schuylkill and stare at the moon reflecting on the surface of icy water. A reflection of a reflection, the light breaks and shifts like it doesn’t want to touch the water.

I pull the booklet from my pocket to see the proof of Alexander’s previous thoughts of me- of whatever idealized version he had seen, the “finest gentleman.” Absently flicking the pages, there’s not enough light to read.

In the throes of fever, he had seemed to burn so hot, so abruptly bare, making heavy declarations, pledging to stay with me as long as I want him- to follow me down this increasingly unfamiliar path. These past few days, soft and easily affectionate. They’re the aftermath of a storm, holding him close and indulging chaste touches with no intention. The air had been calm between us- at least I now understand how to calm my blustering desires, but there are trees downed in our path, and I’ve never been good at navigating.

I turn the page and find only the corners of the next one remaining, torn from the book’s binds. A page is missing.

That hadn’t been missing last night...
"There’s light for reading in your cabin, y’know…” McHenry’s voice follows the sound of his footsteps.

I turn. “I needed some time alone.”

He hums and stuffs his hands in his pockets. He lets me stare at the water again, then he shuffles forward and sits by me. “You’re welcome to my cot in the General’s sitting room…” He leans to see me clearly. “You haven’t caught Ham’s fever, have you?”

I stop his hand when he moves to check my temperature.

He doesn’t try again, takes off his wide-brimmed hat and settles his arms on his knees. “If you need to be away from him, I can assign someone to watch over him. The fever’s mostly off-”

“It’s not-”

“And, I won’t tell him either- I understand it with how paranoid and defensive he’s been.”

Meade had made a similar implication, as if Alex had been hounding our fellow aides about the cabal and Gates and the accusations about the letter. He hadn’t divulged any of those concerns with me. I guess it answers my pondering- about how much he tells me. Knowing the chasm between his capabilities and my actual usefulness...I can’t say I blame him.

“I hadn’t noticed,” I push up from the log I’d cleared off, brushing snow off my trousers. “Don’t worry about finding someone.” I had helped myself to the affection of a friend before showing him my real weaknesses, hypocrisy and idealism and self-righteous blindness...

Taking care of him is the least I can do.

ALEXANDER IS AWAKE when I step inside and kick the ice off my boots in the doorway. He sits up, writing desk open in his lap, unused. “I was wondering when you’d be back,” he says. “Business with the General?”

I shake my head. “No, today was quiet. Tilghman made the hike to Moore Hall to start working Congress with the committee again.”

He smiles, warm and pleased with himself, and I should look away from it, so I turn my attention to taking off my boots. “Come to bed,” he says across the room. The sound of him patting the mattress accompanies the order, and I know I’ve accepted responsibility to obey it, but the invitation still unsettles me.

“May I undress first?” I say.

“I would prefer you do.”

I say no more, take the book from my pocket. I set it on the desk before hanging my coat and unbuttoning my vest, untucking my shirt, and divesting trousers. When I push the blankets back, he makes space for me, and I use it to lie down on my side, curled up with my back turned to him.

“Will you tell me about the battalion letter?” his arm curls around my waist, and I shift away from that.

Without turning around, I can feel his confusion, and I think I owe it to him and his directness to
return that favor before he questions it. “Did you give Shrewsberry your coat?”

He’s quiet for a long moment, then, “I did…is- is that what’s troubling you?” his hand rests on my shoulder. “Your own clothes are so worn, and he didn’t have a shirt, so I figured…” he stops. “If there was some reason he wasn’t to have one, I didn’t mean to undermine you…”

I roll over, incredulous. “That’s not-...” I huff and shake my head in disbelief. “Undermine…I’m not concerned about my authority- I wasn’t depriving him in some punishment or…”

“That’s not what I meant,” he says quickly.

“Then what did you mean by it?” I push up onto my elbow, already sliding further away. “He said he was cold and you gave it to him, but you knew I’d recognize that coat- what it means to you-”

His brow knits. “...What it means to me?”

“Sentimental value- the Hearts of Oak. You knew I’d see it was yours, so what were you trying to say?” He sits up now as well, and I should be happy to see he has the strength for it, but right now it only sets me to flight, getting out of the blankets and stumbling back to my feet. “Did you want me to feel bad for neglecting him?”

“John-”

“For ever bringing up the battalion?” I’m aware that I must sound hysterical, but what should I think that I’ve barely returned for the night and he brings up the battalion he’d been so keen to talk me out of. “For troubling you with the idea of it?”

“What are you talking about?”

“You think me a hypocrite!”

“Stop telling me what I think of you!”

He’s pushed back the blankets far enough for me to see he’s wearing nothing to bed, but that’s hardly a distraction at present. I need to know what he’s playing at- why he’d awaken all these doubts in me. “You said the plan is foolish, I can’t understand what else you-”

“The plan is not foolish- I didn’t say that.” He pulls the blankets to his waist in a rare moment of decency and fumbles to the edge of the bed, dragging them with him to stand. I want to protest that exertion, but he grabs my jaw and picks up my chin. “Hey, look at me. It’s not.”

I huff and throw off his hand.

He gives a sigh of his own and drops back to sit. “What’s foolish is rushing into an idea this great too quickly to actualize it. What you’re suggesting is to incorporate slaves into the Continental rank and file, yes? Not just the militia?”

I glance at him. Give a nod and look away again.

“Well, then I point out that many men in Congress already oppose the Continentals or any additions that would increase the influence of a standing army over independent state militias.”

Slowly, I raise my eyes and find his expression open, meeting my gaze.

“They’re beholden to their state legislatures before any unified government or any unified military effort. And- most of the support we have for the Continentals comes from southern states that are
dependant on slavery. It will be difficult to play to the interests of both sides and convince them to overlook the parts of this plan that they will surely not like…”

“I…” giving a huff, I reach up and scratch at my scalp, feeling my queue is tied too tight. “I know that it will be difficult, I have no misgivings about that.” I’ve been so focused on whether slaves would be willing and able to fill the role, I hadn’t considered the perspective he’s raising, but I can’t consider that just now. I can’t accept another foolish oversight among so many. I put a knee back on the mattress beside him and sit. “But, this is important to me- this idea… I need it. I’ve been thinking it through for years, and it’s the most beautiful thought I’ve ever had, and I just…when you were so eager to blow holes in it and tell me I’m foolish-” I can’t finish that thought, fighting the strange urge to cry. “I don’t know why I just assumed you would support it-

His hand finds my face again in a more affectionate caress. “John… it’s because I support it that I need to be sure you’re thinking of these things.” He shifts forward, dragging the sheets with him, and I back away and remove his hand. His expression closes off with realization. “I’ve embarrassed you.”

“Yes!” I snap. “As if I need another reason to doubt my own competency- I shouldn’t even be out here… this post is so… beyond me.”

He stares at me blankly, then, “John… I’ve told you-”

“No.” I don’t want to hear whatever words of kindness and pity he would use to indulge his fantasy of my goodness. “You were right- I’m all inept virtue, lofty goals with no possible outcome, high hopes and blustery promises I can’t keep. I misdirected troops at Cliveden and cost dozens of lives and the battle itself, I promised love I couldn’t give, I failed to syphon time and resources to the Delaware long enough to keep the river, I hurt my kindest friend by hiding things from him, now I can’t take care of a man in my own charge. You said I was the best of us because I was above the lying and politics, but I’m not even above that. Again and again, I know what’s right and I fail…”

Alex is quiet until the moment I lag in my search for confessions, “Germantown was disappointing but not a devastating loss and certainly not cost by Cliveden. The battle earned us Louis’s attention just by making another attack after Brandywine- European generals would’ve delayed to recover morale. Lafayette’s been sure to emphasize that, and by joining me to confirm the intelligence at Pennypacker’s, you helped me ensure the council of war would approve the attack at all.” He raises the blankets to curl them around his chest. “If you want to point blame, we lost because of our Generals’ misconduct not yours. Stephen heard artillery and put his men into quick-time, then fired into Wayne’s column in the fog. Greene didn’t even make it to the field.

“Then, even if we lost our forts, the Delaware was costly for Howe- high casualties, two ships, food and supplies, munitions, and two more months of delaying. Meanwhile, we attracted the skills of French engineers- which we’ll better employ in the future, and we kept Howe from being able to reinforce Burgoyne. If Gates was victorious, it’s because we gave him every opportunity.

“And, as to your friendship with Major White, I think I’ve made my own stance clear about expecting affection from people who aren’t equipped to give it. If your friend was half as wise, I’m sure he’d agree and forgive whatever slight you’re so incapable of forgiving yourself for. With Lafayette, I know that his sense of betrayal arises from the high esteem he holds you in and the comfort he took in your confidence. Just show him that confidence is unbroken and I’m sure all will be fine.

“I said you were the best of us and I meant that. I haven’t altered my opinion, whether or not you’re engaged in the lying and politics. It’s ugly, but it’s necessary, and if anything, I admire you more for enduring tactics that must rankle your pride for the good of a cause you believe in…”
He stops and I can’t think of anything to say. I feel like I’ve opened myself on my own sword and the wounds are dressed and itching. But he’s pinned down my hands so I can’t tear at it again. I need to respond in some way. So, I curl into his side and put my face into his shoulder. “You’re saying you don’t think I’m so foolish.”

He laughs and leans his head against mine. “No, I think you’re foolish in the loveliest ways…”

“Will you let me be upset with myself in peace?”

“If you deserve to be,” he says, and I pull back to look at him.

Somehow my trust in his judgment is seeping into belief- that he would truly tell me if I merit so much guilt, that I can rely on him to check me honestly.

We untangle ourselves and lie back, resituating under the covers- and I’m abruptly reminded that he’s naked when my thigh brushes too high up his leg. Instead of feeling flighty and unnerved, I find myself laughing at the accidental intimacy. He flushes and rolls over.

I take the invitation to put my arm around his chest and curl up behind him instead. After we’ve relaxed and our breathing evens out, I explain, “Meade told me about your ride to New York City, and Honeyman and Trenton and New Brunswick…”

He tenses. I had anticipated he’d be eager to brag of it, but he just huffs, “Ahhh...is that where this insecurity is coming from? Because Meade likes to exaggerate-”

I squeeze his chest. “Don’t be modest.”

“I’m not, we-” he grabs my arm and lifts it to roll over and look at me. “We never even made the ride.”

“You were ordered against it. That’s not your fault.”

He purses his lips, and I trail my fingers over his chest in the old, familiar caress, but softer than those teasing brushes- as if intending to arouse, though I’m not sure I mean to. His grip goes slack and distracted. There’s a tremble in his voice that makes my breath quicken. “If I had just gotten the General’s trust before…” he drifts as I slide my touch up to his face and cover his lips with my fingertips. It’s a weak excuse to blame himself for something he can’t claim responsibility for.

He must know that- as much as he’d rather not believe it.

Something lurches in my chest as he forms his lips to kiss my fingers, slow and deliberate. Then he fixes me with a searching look I can’t quite place before he grabs my hand and leads my arm to the bed beside him, pulling me up. I find myself braced over him, barely able to breathe. It’s a mockery of a position, reserved for a couple’s marriage bed. It’s an obvious invitation.

He wants me to kiss him.

I don’t hesitate for long, but his brow is knit again with that same troubled look, and I don’t know its cause, much less how to soothe it. I don’t want any regrets between us. I lean my forehead against his again- a warning to retreat now if he has any doubts, before cupping his jaw and lifting his mouth to mine.

I expect soft lips, gentle and languid, more responsive than before. But he turns and lifts his chest to mine so my mouth falls on his throat instead. His hand is on the back of my head, encouraging, so I let the kiss grow where it’s planted, and he sighs in response. Gentling my lips over his pulse, he lifts
his hips into me and plants his feet by my knees to grind up on me. I’d nearly forgotten his state of undress, but bucking back into him is a mortifying reminder. He’s heating up too quickly, the fire spreading.

It drags a gasp from me and a small panic.

It’s not what I intended and feels frantic from him, like he’s rushing me to act while I’m bold enough to do it. I hate the insinuation.

Pushing his hips back down to the mattress, I sit back enough for him to turn his face and look at me. When he does, I intend to kiss his mouth gently, try to salvage whatever chastity we could have in this affection, slow him down and calm whatever storm he’s stirring, but he steals the chance for it by pulling me down to him and nipping at my jaw.

“Alex-” I mean to protest this, but my voice betrays me by shaking in confused arousal. “Please…”

His breath is hot in my ear, hips still surging against my hold, “Yes?”

“…Please don’t…”

He freezes. All heat and looseness in his body goes tense. He drops the resistance against my hand on his waist and lets me lean back. I find my arms are shaking finely, barely worry about the reflex, but my glance draws his eyes there and expands the growing horror in him.

It seems necessary to say, “I’m sorry… I didn’t mean for you to think I was…”

He shakes his head. “No, I just assumed.”

“But, rightfully so…” I only wanted to kiss him. I’d still like to, but he won’t meet my eyes now. He’s quiet for several minutes, and I think it’s best to get off him and give some space. I fix the blankets and sit awkwardly with the thought that I’d teased such a response from him- how many times I must have stirred that same storm and left it growling in him. This is probably the worst of a long line of cruelties, and I’m afraid he’ll apologize to me for it.

By the time he speaks, his tone is gathered and detached, “You don’t want me… like that.”

I have to answer that honestly. I’m sure he knows the truth already. “No, I do, but…” It’s not right- but why not? “that was just-” Heat and hunger and madness.

“Too much.”

And also nothing at all, but I don’t know how to say that, so I nod.

He must think I was overwhelmed in his lust, and for letting him believe that, I feel like a liar. But, I don’t know how to say I’d have more- that it would feel right… if I felt he was actually giving himself. It’s strange that I should feel so ashamed after putting a stop to something so depraved, to have protected us both from disgrace and defilement and deviance. The sin of desire can hardly be punishable if it serves as a test- to prove righteousness in those who show restraint from acting on it, but…

I have no reason to be proud of it. That’s not why I stopped.

WHEN MY FOOT SLIPS, I grab frantically for a branch, a hand- anything before the noose or the
flames beckoning me below. I expect the snap of a rope going taught on my neck or the ground breaking my head and flame engulfing my flesh, not-

Cold, dark water...thick and inky black...

WHEN I WAKE to restless stirring, I’m not surprised to find Alexander wrapped around me, and as he shifts to extricate himself from the embrace, I recognize the unwitting arousal that has him in retreat.

He must think I’m asleep until I grab his arm. “Where are you going?”

With little light in the room, I can see the panic in his eyes. He doesn’t try to explain himself, just eases back under the covers at a distance from me and turns his back, forbidding approach. He doesn’t often have the opportunity to take care of those natural reactions, but since our numbers have dwindled to allow just a few men in each cabin, there’s enough privacy that most soldiers take the liberty to rub themselves off rather than ignoring a problem when it arises.

“Don’t deprive yourself for my sake…” I say. “I think we’re past that by now.”

“Ah- excuse me, I don’t-”

I put a hand on his hip. “We should take it as a sign of your improving health.”

He pushes up and away, uncharacteristically nervous.

“It’s alright,” I say, sitting up and frowning. “I’m not...uncomfortable to know you have urges. It’s too cold to take care of it outside.” That only earns an incredulous look, and when several minutes pass without a draw in our stalemate, I give in. “Would you rather I had pretended I was asleep?”

“I’d rather you not speak of something that doesn’t concern you.”

His tone forbids me to pursue that any further.

IN THE MORNING, I regret telling Alex my insecurities. He’s asleep when I’m woken for work, but when I gather my uniform clothes off the chair, there’s a letter sitting on my coat in his handwriting. I can recognize the invitation to edit his work and the small offer that exists in that exchange, but there’s some discomfort that he’d offered a trade to make it. I prefer when he had demanded my ideas, that he had felt entitled to them with no promise of return. But, at the time he was too tired to share my ideas, last night I had been too afraid to hand over my work...I’m running out of time before Friday when Fleury will be setting out.

I open my bag and find my draft, write a small note at the top for him to be kind in his edits, and put the page on his letterbox, bringing it to the bed for him so he won’t trouble himself to get up.

I feel strange throughout the day as I work. Harrison’s visit has reduced the amount of paperwork the rest of us are obliged to, but Conway’s desertion of camp has the General in such a rage that none of us dare to look unoccupied. I feel especially strange when I open Hamilton’s letter. It’s a note to Governor Clinton of New York, urging him to get delegations to send more representatives to Congress. It’s a small part of his scheme to press those men still present in the body into the army’s favor, and it has all the marks of his usual eloquence for our plight here. A few lines down, I realize how much Alex must have told Clinton about the faction, and it seems he’s employed Clinton to
combat that horrid beast, Rumor, on his behalf- about the Conway letter again.

I make a note to tell him about Conway’s departure from camp and his expectations of command…that man’s involvement in the faction can only entrust Alex further to Clinton. I realize…urging members from the northern states to return to Congress might help my case for the black battalion. I can tell him about Conway to bolster him to Clinton, and he can help me shape Congress in favor of my plan.

I realize- that’s what’s unsettled me, and when I return to my cabin that night and he sits with me as we go over our edits together, it unsettles me more. This collaboration seems so much like an exchange, as if we’re back to making and returning favors now, without a need for it…

OVER THE NEXT FEW DAYS, I try to dismiss my discomfort between work and my letters to my father. It becomes clearer what the boys had meant. Alex has been succumbing to paranoia about Conway's letter and Gates’s accusation that he copied it. He’s growing restless about whether he should have mentioned it to Clinton; begging for constant updates about every correspondence each of us has open; writing letters at his normal speed- far more exertion than he should risk in his current state.

I start to worry that his return to work last month had been to expose the plot so he could clear his own name, and I don’t like that he would allow his paranoia to threaten his health like this.

Then there’s the reciprocation he’s attempting with me, churning out ideas for my battalion, political arguments, sources for funding, possible allies in Congress. I trace my nagging concern back to a simple phrase Alex had uttered in his suspicions. So this is repaying a debt then? The phrase returns to me with startling strength, and I’m not sure what torments me more: the idea that Alexander treats his life like a token to be traded…or the idea that he’d think I would see it that way…especially after I had…well…

I step inside the warmth and close the door quickly. Meade had joined McHenry’s vigil at some point after leaving work, and he’s sitting by the fire while the surgeon wrings out the cooling cloth, and Alex… it’s a relief to look at him like this- present in his expression, eyes sharp as ever- a book spread open in his lap.

Whatever fear I had felt to confront him dissolves when he grins at me. “Ah, John- I was just enjoying your present.”

I glance around, confused about what he means present, until my eyes fall on the opened parcel, spilling out over Meade’s traveling bag. Stepping to the desk, I drop Tilghman’s notes by the satchel and find the requested clothes for Shrewsberry, as well as my law books from school. A blatant hint from my father that I should be continuing my studies while we’re encamped.

“I told him not to open it,” Meade’s casting Alexander a glare, but I’m already sorting my books into piles, unperturbed. “I told him he should be focusing on resting rather than reading.”

“And I told him I’m fine,” Alex says smartly.

“But he persisted.”

“-and that, even if I do fall ill again, my Laurens will surely nurse me back to health.” I glance up to see if the smirk in Alexander’s voice is mirrored on his face. It is. “How could my life be in danger while Laurens is here?”
“-and said he’s been sliding work under our noses for days with your blessing,” Meade speaks over him.

“Not blessing per se-”

McHenry laughs, “Yes, your Laurens who’d be so dedicated to doting on you with how you’re rifling through his personal packages."

Ignoring their banter, I pick up the larger stack of textbooks and drop them heavily onto the blankets. “You can have those if you’d like…” I say.

His face pales, and our company goes quiet.

“I was joking…” he says.

“I’m not.” From the shocked expressions I’m receiving, it’s clear I should explain, “I won’t have a use for them now.”

Alex spends a moment, staring at me, “I…” he hesitates, glances over the titles I’ve offered, then up at the ones I’ve selected to keep- war theory books. “There’s no way I can travel with these…” he says, voice thin as if I’ve overwhelmed him, but his fingers twitch over the covers as if he wants to touch the gift.

“Then read what you can here, and I’ll send them home for you-”

Meade and McHenry are glaring at me with a sudden tension, and I falter- I’ve breached some social boundary that’s obvious to them. Then I realize, Alex is from the Caribbean, and while he’d gone to school in New York… I’m not actually sure he has anywhere I could send the books.

“Or I…can hold onto them until…” you have a home. I stop myself, unsure if it would be appropriate to say something like that aloud.

Alexander’s stare is piercing. “…Until after the war?” he prompts.

It startles me.

When he steals my words away, he never gets them wrong…but I have the feeling he meant to. I hadn’t thought about after. “Right…”

His fingers reach the spine of one of the thicker books, and he gives a wry smile. “Well…thank you.”

A moment passes in tense silence, then McHenry slaps both his thighs and pushes to his feet. He drops the cooling cloth into the washbasin unceremoniously, “Well,” he says, “now that you’re back, I do have other patients to tend to…” He looks at me- then turns to Meade. With unexplainable haste, Meade joins him at his feet, and he steps to gather up his traveling bag and letters. Together, they make their exit, leaving me with my friend and the strange, fidgety tension that had overcome him.

I pick up Tilghman’s notes that I’d brought for him, as if holding them might stave off whatever anger I should expect. Alex had wanted to work again, to be involved, and if he’s in a bad mood, I’m sure the notes are my best weapon. Alone together, he’s free to speak his mind, and I feel I need one.

“The poetry was a gift for your birthday,” he says slowly, dejected. “You weren’t supposed to repay me.”
Ah, with all I’ve worried about debts between friends, I understand why the idea would cut. But, “It’s not…my father sent them so I could finish my studies, but I don’t have a need for them anymore,” I say, “so, I would be pleased if you can use them…”

His thumb rubs slowly over the spine of a book I’d used for a lecture on the structure of Parliamentary procedure. He doesn’t seem pleased with my response. “I’ll use them,” he decides. “But, I won’t finish them here, so you’ll have to hold onto them for me until the fighting’s over.”

He says it like an order, as if he’s demanding it, and I nod without questioning why.

FOR THE FIRST TIME IN MONTHS, we’re able to sit up and share our quarters, able to work separately on proper tasks, and for a long while, the only sound is the rustle of turning pages. I had nearly forgotten a particular habit of his...

“Regional farm and forge surplus generates annual profit of forty million dollars, assuming each man requires two cups of flour a week, that’s…carry the three…two hundred forty thousand…with Greene’s report—” he fumbles for a page, “three hundred pounds in the last cache, assuming two each month…fifteen million approximately…”

“Is that the budget proposal?” I say, leaning back and tipping my chair onto two legs.

“Yes.” Alex’s eyes dart up or a moment as if he hadn’t realized he was talking aloud. “Was I disturbing you?”

“No at all.” I drop the chair back onto all four legs and gesture at my work. “Transcriptions.”

He hums and takes this as permission to continue, “...the region is dependant on Philadelphia turning farm and forge surplus into money. If we could scrounge fifteen million, we could afford to purchase a sustainable supply of rations, but with inflated prices- and I should account for when they withhold it to destruction.”

He’s marking through a line in his notes, and probably doesn’t mean for me to reply, but, “They’re not burning it anymore,” I say. He glances at me, and I explain, “The scarcity’s been general, so citizens can’t afford to destroy their crops. They’re just willfully detaining it from us. Hiding it.”

He nods in sympathy, “understandable.”

“Understandable?” I scoff, “They’d rather we starve than sacrifice a portion of their profits? You believe that’s right and good?”

Alex laughs, “Why should people support independence from Britain if they won't have the means to live comfortably in…whatever comes after.”

“They should cheerfully afford their goods to support a patriot army.”

The grin drops from his face, but I can’t help the pretension in my chest. He’s defending the starvation of our army...treats it like an equation on one of his pages. “You’re referring to my acquisitions in Philadelphia...”

“You said the words yourself—”

He closes his writing desk sharply. “I never gave them the pretense they’d be paid for it,” he says. “You can’t be doggedly opposed to theft and fail to sympathize with our countrymen…” His tone
displays this without bias— as if he’s truly demanding that I decide my values now. Sympathy or morality.

“We’re not stealing from patriots,” I say. “When Boston was put under blockade, didn’t we trundle foodstuffs on nearly nonexistent roads to feed them? The Yankees wanted an army to fight their war, and now they have one—they should damn well pay for it. If they would accept the price we can give.”

“We have never paid what we offered,” Alex stops me cold then pushes up from the pallet and grabs one of his books, opening it and flipping through a few pages. “The army is a risky investment for farmers. Every time we’ve encamped and ‘bought’ local produce, it’s been on a loan— and every time we’ve repudiated those debts…”

I stare at him.

“We’ve never paid them, John,” he explains. “We can’t. It’s our only survival, but it’s theft all the same— just a kinder way of saying it.”

His tone doesn’t berate me like a fool, but I believe him.

When he opens his notes again and lays them out over the blankets, a motion of his hand invites me to sit by him while he explains. “I’ve been observing the effect that their expectations have on the prices they charge for goods…” He points as he speaks, explaining how the spread of the local population’s political loyalties have affected the financial needs of our prospective suppliers, how those are adjusted frequently depending on our successes and failures in battle and the treatment of our foraging parties.

He’s drawn correlations between the prices we’re charged and the failures of our army— a logical conclusion. But, he’s also showing how the locals are treating our army— its survival, as an investment to their purses. Every purchase our commissaries make is adjusted to those expectations, how the interest they’ve charged escalates with each measurable increment of risk we pose.

“When investors buy a share, or make loans to a business, they’re confident that they’ll be repaid,” Alex explains. “In a sinking company— or in this case, untrained army, it’s possible that political upheaval or major battle losses will lead to defaults on those loans. So, borrowers with that risk have to pay higher interest rates to compensate lenders. When we haven’t even repaid the interest on those past loans we took, why would any rational supplier ‘cheerfully afford’ their goods and their livelihood. Especially thinking the army that might not even win the war…”

“Understandable…” I say softly, mollified. I had assumed all his writing was working against the rumors about him, but this… I could take these notes to Washington and have him suggested as the Quartermaster General today.

Alex doesn’t seem pleased to prove himself right. “It doesn’t help that we have no unified currency,” he says. “But, suggesting we peg our exchange rates to the established British value at a time like this… and when we have no means of enforcing monetary policies and no coalesced treasury of funds between the states…”

“Isn’t this project a little outside the scope of…our jobs here…?” I raise a brow at him, but I can’t help a touch of fondness for what he’s doing.

He looks at me and presses down a smile. “After the war, we will have a massive debt to France for all the supplies she’s sent us. And Holland and Spain and…well, the vast majority of Europe who’s so itching to see England whipped on her rear.”
I see where he’s going with this and could laugh at him if it wasn’t such a pretty thought, “The man who figures out how to manage that debt will be the most highly-regarded in America,” I say, teasing him with a grin.

He returns it undeterred, “Perhaps the world.”

I laugh, “Alright, that’s unrealistic.”

He smiles and our conversation continues, moving through what information we know about about regional crops and trade values; about the profitability of goods in different cities; his reports from sources in Philadelphia about places they could sell their crops to be more profitable; about places where we could find cheap transportation for goods and reasonably safe routes to travel by; about the problem of corrupt hustlers waiting on the outskirts of camp to trade whiskey for clothing, blankets and muskets, leading to an outflow of our necessities.

He’s been wise to my elicitation before, apprehended my attempts of manipulating words into his mouth, so I assume he must realize how I’m encouraging him to pursue this. How I’d love to see him take over our Quartermaster department…

I take the fact that he’s allowing it as permission…

Shrewsberry’s come in with our suppers and a sack of kindling to start up a fire. He’s crouched by the wall and scratching at flint when our cabin door opens without warning.

Alex startles and dumps his bread into his own lap.

It’s Major Clark, wearing a long coat with his hood up against the snow outside. He steps in without greeting and glances at me.

I meet Shrewsberry’s eyes and give him a nod, knowing whatever’s said here is safe with him. Then meet Clark’s eyes and motion him inside. Last I’d seen him, he was taking evening rides as a side task to his auditing in York, collecting reports from informants around the area of Germantown.

His posture relaxes as he steps inside and pushes back his hood, dropping his coat by the door. It drops snowflakes off the wool and dripping onto our straw floor. “You boys were right,” he says. “Lower-level lobsters are commanding their troops to attack our supply lines without confirmation from higher to do so.”

I raise my brows and glance over at Hamilton where he’s staring at my spy in consideration. I mirror his apprehension with the report, “Are you sure?”

“Course I’m sure,” he says, smirking at me in that pretty, infuriating way he does. He pulls up the chair I had vacated and straddles it. “But, it’s good right, like you said?”

“Like you said…” Alex says beside me.

I swallow and glance between them.

I’d had my suspicions after hearing Captain Lee’s reports of the foraging parties, and after spending enough time with Lafayette’s officers to hear their stories of the expeditions they’d made in Greene’s division. It made sense for the British- as desperate for supplies in Philadelphia as we’ve become- to turn to similar methods of theft. Expecting that from the enemy, I’d explained my best plan for exploiting it to our advantage…it had been easy to explain it to Clark, but the thought of saying it to Alex is unnerving.
Shrewsberry gets up from the fireplace, and for some reason, watching him stand and walk towards the door, leaving me alone in the cabin with my informant and my friend, I’m even more unnerved.

“Right, because we’re the insurgents in a pitched battle- like Carthage to Rome or Sparta against Persia,” I say.

Alex winces at these comparisons.

“I mean…we know the terrain better than the Regulars do, and we’re not expected to fight by conventional means- at Freeman’s Farm, Morgan was having his riflemen target officers, we can use whatever means are most effective without dishonoring any King. If we find which routes they’re using, we can bypass those and draw them out to the roads that we choose.”

A small nod of understanding is all the reassurance I need from Alex.

“And, as a tool of our public image, we should exploit the fact that the British army is attacking it’s own people. Even moreso if those lower officers commit any violence on citizens indiscriminate of whether they’re civilian or soldier.”

“So guide their foraging parties into loyalist towns…” Clark says.

I nod. “Hope they do the damage to themselves.”

“Clever…” Alex says by my side.

I feel his eyes on me and fight down the urge to smile with an unreasonable surge of pride for the smallest of compliments. Training my attention on Clark, I say, “Can you do it? I mean- do we have the resources?”

“Can I do it,” he scoffs. “I’ll pass on the idea, mention who it’s coming from, and it’ll get done,” but he stretches back in the chair with a groan of exhaustion.

I raise a brow at him, “After a nap, or…?”

“No, no,” he waves a hand at me dismissively, “I’ll ride out tonight,” then sits up with the cocky grin that warns he’s about to say something cheeky, “just so you know how much you ask of me.”

“I’m sure you’ll figure it out,” I say.

He pushes to his feet with a long-suffering sigh and stretches out his back as if riding’s left him with aches. I’m familiar with the feeling, and also familiar with the act he’s putting on. “Anything for you,” he says. “And I best do it now before I get comfortable here in good company. Might not be able to get back up again…”

I laugh at his teasing, returning the favor on impulse, “Well…I mean, I could give you a massage if it’s that bad-”

“He is quite skilled with his hands.” I glance to see if the smirk in Alexander’s voice is mirrored on his face. It’s not…

I shift my seat uncomfortably, unsure why I’d thought it was wit.

“I…believe that,” Clark says, but his voice had a small edge of restraint in it. He stretches once more and steps to the door, collecting his coat and leaving.

The fireplace is only just starting to crackle to life, but the room is quiet and feels abruptly colder than
before. Alex flips through pages in his book, lips pressed thin, and I try not to look at him directly, feeling strangely ashamed.

After a long, tense moment, “We already knew they were attacking supply routes…” he says.

I look at him then, and he keeps his eyes trained on his book as if he can read it while he talks- so petty I can’t stand it.

“Ensign Cope…” he says. The name still gives me a prick of jealousy, anger that Alex probably knows that and uses it on purpose, and the dark curl of satisfaction that the other boys of the family don’t trust Cope either- that we’re keeping that from him. “His duel was over orders he’d refused- to raid a loyalist farm after they’d been denied access to their stores.”

He flips a page in his book and I glare at the motion.

“You could’ve just asked me…” he says.

I huff in exasperation and push up from his pallet.

If Clark hasn’t gone far, I can catch up to him. Stomping into my boots, I push open the door and leave Alex alone. The Major’s figure is just visible in the distance. I chase him, grabbing his shoulder, “I meant to ask,” I say. “About the Ensign you were tracing for Tilghman and Meade…”

He turns to me, “I can only do so much, John…”

“I know, I just-”

“So, I told Captain Lee to see what stones he could turn over- hasn’t found anything all week.” He claps an arm at my shoulder and gives a sympathetic look, “Are you sure this duel happened?”

When I realize he’s actually expecting an answer, I only have one I can give, “No…”

He hums, “Well, an Ensign shooting his commander isn’t a small story… it’s hard to believe Lee wouldn’t have turned up something by now- if there was anything to find.”

I nod my understanding and he squeezes my arm before dropping it.

“I’ll tell you as soon as I get his report, but you should go,” he says and winks, “before Ham’s mind gets too creative ‘bout why you chased me.”

I agree with that assessment, but find myself unhappy to go back to the cabin and sit with Alexander again. As I come inside and kick off my boots, he’s still in bed, unmoved from where I’d briefly left him, but has a book open and is reading. He doesn’t look up to acknowledge my entrance. I plant myself at the desk, back turned to the bed. My papers are spread out over the surface, disorderly, but I’ve had no time or inclination to sort them.

He flips another page of the book, letting the sound carry.

Then, when I’ve finally been able to restore my attention to my letters, he starts reading aloud, “‘We may form some idea of its importance by observing the effects it produces; the voice, the countenance, and even the features change; the beard grows, and the whole body often assumes another appearance’…”

I freeze, immediately recognizing the words… and the book he’s found.

“‘Can we not after this of its action on the whole body, perceive the many bad consequences with
which the emission of so precious a fluid must be attended?’” He flips a few pages, “’It is by it’s exquisite virtue it thus communicates its influence to all parts of the body.’”

I turn on him sharply, lips curled on a wordless snarl.

Alex’s grin is wolfish and naring, “’Is it then surprising that the testicles supply a fluid capable of imparting new strength to the body?’”

“’What are you doing?’”

“’Bit of light reading,’” he says. “’I was surprised to find a book on the dangers of onanism in your parcel.’”

I stare at him, failing to think of any other explanation for that book existing in the package from my father than his effort to chastise me for my transgression with Martha and warn me against such errs in camp. Father had a copy at home, but he had never expected it to apply to me, his sweetest, most chaste son. Now that he perceives those lessons apply to me, he must think that if it’s already too late to prevent lechery, he can at least prevent adultery.

But, I’ve already read it. Not for any self-improvement my father would condone.

I loved Francis, and when our friendship devolved into groping hands and heated kisses, the carnal pleasures men always spoke of, bodies singing with their most instinctive need fulfilled in a way I had never understood- it finally made sense. I died by his hand and felt that love complete. It was holy, and God had smiled on us to share the same pleasures with a trusted friend, but Francis only saw the darkness. He said our affection was lust, just another drunken whim- no better or worse than slating his needs with a whore- more profane.

Having felt myself so complete, there was no way I could do without this now, so my lover's suggestions cast a shade over my heart- the part of it that needed this. I’d demanded his rationality. Among medical studies of the dangers in traumas to the rectum by sodomy, legal cases that justified the criminality of men debasing one another in such a way, religious texts interpreting the unholy practice of rejecting God’s natural charge of marriage and procreation, he had pointed to this book and the immorality and damage of needless discharge.

I want to tear it from Alex’s hands and rip it to shreds.

“I heard of this treatise once as a boy,” he says, “but now that I’ve found a copy, seems a bit puritanical- don’t you think?”

“Put it down-”

“’see, a friend of mine, familiar with the sins of Onan and my own habits, was concerned that my frequent... satisfaction may halt my development,’” Alex sits up and tries to look at me. “’But, I think I’ve displayed enough virtue to discard that idea,’” he tilts his head, instigating, “’Instead, I’m just curious why your father would be sending you this? As a reminder?’”

That I’m no better than a whore...more sinful. I push up from the chair and my tone is heavy with warning. “Alexander.”

“’why he would think his son- always such a good boy, would even need reminding to keep his thoughts pure? But then... it was clear just now where you’ve actually been spending your semen-’”

Something so profane... “Put it down.”
He just smiles at that, but it’s the last warning I’ll give to a sick man. I don’t want to hurt him, but it’s clear he expects me to- that I’m such a terrible man I’m capable of it.

“Make me.”

I jump at him on command, grab for the book and hit back when his arms try to block me. He squirms under my weight, like wrestling a dog, scratching and wriggling. He frees his arms long enough to stuff the book into his pants, and I grab him, throw him back down to the mattress, and pin his hands. His head falls back and he wheezes like he can’t breathe.

The last time I was sitting over him like this, I recall I was performing the task for him…pushing my air into his lungs so he might stay with me- give me the proof I was promised. That we can be something better than needless lust...I tighten my grip, leaning over him. “Give me the book.”

He squirms again, threatening to reassume his punching. “Come on, Alex- this isn’t funny!” my voice cracks. “I’m not,” I glare down between Alexander’s legs and he raises his knees as if defending his modesty. “I’m not reaching down there…”

“Oh believe me, I know- exactly why I put it there,” Alex laughs, but when I glare down at him for it, planning to shove him again, there’s a heat in his expression I didn’t expect, and I realize he’s shifting his legs up like so to hide the hardness between them. With all this grappling, it’s a natural response and one I’d rather not draw attention to, but-

“If you get off of me, it’ll go down in a few minutes,” he says. “Then it might not be so scary to put your hand ‘down there’.”

I sit back, staring at the amusement on his face, unsure. As usual, he bares no shame for his body’s response to me. It doesn’t seem he was actually trying to injure me or make an accusation of perverted desires- though that had been the effect. He was mocking my clumsy flirtations. “You truly are awful sometimes.” I drop his wrists and sit back between his legs.

He sits up on his elbows, “Would you hesitate with Clark?” he says with a sudden vulnerability.

“Wait a minute.” I curl my hand over his thigh where he’s bent his knees at my elbow, understanding the way his thighs are spread open as if in invitation despite his bitterness, “Are you jealous?”

“Jealous?” he laughs, “Of something I already have?”

Dodging the question was a confirmation in itself, and I don’t need to deny his claim on me. It makes his insecurity all the more silly, and I’m sure he knows that. I pat his knee, “You know the cockiness is not as attractive as you seem to think it is.”

“I like to think of it as optimism, actually.”

He reaches down to unbutton the flap of his breeches and I laugh at how forward he makes the motion seem, “Very optimistic.”

“Don’t flirt with me, Laurens,” he warns, taking out the book and offering it up.

I roll off him and take the book back, opening it briefly as if to punish myself, just to glance over old, familiar words.

I hated the implication when Francis suggested it. Even though I learned how to charm people through watching him, and though I knew he would follow through on empty words with anyone in ways that I couldn’t, I was foolish enough to pity them. He’d never bothered with the pretense of
flirting with me- and I always prided myself that he didn’t see the need to waste air on an attraction that didn’t need to be said. I took that to mean what we were doing together was different from what he did with anyone else.

And then I read this book. I hated what he was implying about us- among so many other things. Our pleasure was so needless to him that he’d lump the act in with self-pollution and wasting semen.

Now, I hate that I submitted to it...

Alex shuffles back on the mattress, sitting up and looking at me with brows knit in concern, “I…I’m sorry, I didn’t mean anything with your father...”

“No, I…” I shake my head. This wasn’t his fault, “Francis gave me this book.”

“...I see.” His concerned expression slackens in slow understanding, and that unnerves me even more, but when he reaches for my arm, I let him take it and drag me down to lay beside him.

I reach up to pull the covers over us.

“You said you’d tell me a story...” he says. “If I asked,” and I recognize the invitation he’s making, but I don’t want to talk about Francis, so I pull my arm away from his hand. This makes him hesitate, then he slides his foot up my calf, tangling our legs together, “You mentioned an expedition with Daniel Solander… the famous naturalist?”

I hum in response, and I appreciate the redirection, but it doesn’t seem like there’s much to a story of an opportunity I was offered and never took.

“I’ve fantasized about expeditions like that,” he goes on. “I grew up watching dogfights between ships and listening to stories from explorers of exotic places, but I could never manage the physics to sail and I haven’t actually traveled much by sea.” When I give him a questioning look, he explains, “I’ve got bad luck with ships. The first one I took out in open ocean caught fire offshore.”

I don’t know why, but that drags a laugh out of me- how he can be so entirely predictable in his absurd histories. He frowns like he thinks I don’t believe him or find the situation humorous, so I say, “You’re a phoenix then.”

“Hmm?”

“Risen from the flames.”

He throws his head back and laughs, cheeks dimpled and the corners of his eyes crinkled. It seems he has nothing immediately witty to say and it leaves just enough time for the rush of awed affection to have my hand reaching to touch his face, fingertips brushing over his temple. He’s beautiful like this. He takes my hand and sets it down in front of his nose, playing with the fingers, “If I had found myself as a pirate, I think I would’ve rather you be an explorer,” he says. “So we could meet without you wanting me hanged.”

I laugh at this twist on the story. We’d made it up as a game for our own entertainment and to keep him lucid through the worst of his fever. What we would’ve done if not for the war; I had mentioned my childhood fantasies of captaining a ship and fighting pirates, and he took a personal affront, saying he’d be happy as a pirate.

“I shall never understand your fascination with vagabonds and criminals…”

“There’re honorable men among them…” he says defensively. “Just because they don’t fit into the
definition of honor created by England, doesn’t mean we should discount their honesty, democracy, fairness, credence to their code- if a man can sail, he's valued. It's pure meritocracy, and they've no qualms with stealing slaves and employing them freely. The ones who had stories from the famous crews were always the best conversation to be had if you knew how to watch them at every angle and not be thieved on.”

“I can’t say I ever had the honor.”

He must hear the teasing in my voice, “Truly, John,” he huffs. “There’s a shameless freedom among them, but it’s not altogether reckless. I’ve seen affairs of honor between them- one man even died for the dignity of his...partner, entirely selfless, and his partner was welcomed back onto their crew after a trial.”

When he says partner, I have to wonder- “I think your sensibility makes your heart too quick to forgive people going about their misfortunes the wrong way- anger and violence…”

His grin tilts, “Is that not what we’re doing here? The Sons of Liberty? The riots and pillaging…”

“Which you,” I kiss the back of his hand, “have been avidly opposing since the day I met you.”

He pouts at that, “Not for lack of heat in my blood, my dear…I cheered with all the rest when we tore down old George’s statue on Broadway. But, if we lose control of our masses, we lose sight of the political angle- winning Parliament to negotiate with us as a legitimate nation. If we blustered through this whole war as a riot of insurgents, what allies would we ever have in the civilized world when all’s said and done?”

I understand his meaning and agree with his logic, nodding to show that, but, “It’s quite a mask to put on,” I say, “Just to be counted as a member of the civilized world…”

“Exactly why it's nice to imagine a way we wouldn't have to be.”

I laugh, raising a brow, “So pirates? Men who act on their darker selves?”

“And what’s wrong with the darkness?”

“It’s human instinct to fear the dark, what monsters may be lurking.”

“Or what wonders?”

“Well, by this metaphor, the dark being...illicit behaviors, violence, anger- such things breed instability.”

“This, from a man willing to sacrifice his inherited fortune on a blind chance to better the fortunes of slaves? I don’t believe you fear instability...”

“Well, who said I’m afraid of the dark either?” I lean close enough to touch our foreheads, grinning in a way I know he’ll see as flirting.

He backs away to move to a new subject. “In a way, we’re vagabonds ourselves,” he says, “travelling between the countries on this continent without attachment to any of them…”

I can think of several members of our army with strong attachments to their home states- and he’s made the argument against representatives bettering the fortunes of their own states over that of the nation as a whole, so I’m sure he understands when I laugh, “Speak for yourself.”
He hums, “Yes, your Carolina…”

And his New York. I take his hand and turn it over to cease his toying with my fingers and retaliate the treatment, “Not me,” I say, “I’ll be home wherever there’s liberty.” I’m not sure why I want to tell him this- most gentlemen of the family would take this as disloyalty to my country, but, “I’ve never felt much attachment to my state. If I can give my inheritance to my battalion, the land has always been my father’s- that’s his state…”

“Ubi libertas, ibi patria.”

I grin at that, lacing my fingers through his.

“What if…” his smile wanes, “What will you do if-” he stops himself again. “I believe our cause is right, and I believe Providence protects us because of it- or at least that everyone else believes that, and because of their belief, by luck and wit and moving the hearts and minds of our few men, we’ll endure whatever tests are to come, we’ll outlast this war and prevail inevitably, but...what if we fail our cause…”

I frown, “You mean...what if-”

“We trade one tyranny for another- of our own making…”

It’s a proper fear, and I realize how heavy this must weigh on his mind lately, among the whispering and power-pulling. I can understand the concern that, if the wrong man gains control, he could abuse the power he’ll become vested with once we’ve separated from Britain. But, like Providence protects our army in this fight, God protects the good-hearted and wise leadership we have in General Washington.

“I think…this isn’t that sort of war.” I bring our hands between our chests so I can see all of his face. “When I was studying the histories of war in Europe and Asia, I was receiving reports from my family and friends about the unrest here in America. We expected outcry to come from disenfranchised settlers and the poor, but...the largest outcry against British rule has been about taxes…”

Alex’s expression is warily interested, as if he’s starting to see where I’m going with this and wonders what connection I see.

I shift up onto one elbow, “Looking at imperial taxation, we were only really charged to pay about a tenth of the empire’s debts for the part of the war that was fought on our lands, and those taxes mostly affecting people who were already wealthy enough to assume them,” when the riots had begun in Charlestown, my father had condemned the overreaction, but I remember revelling at the idea that men were so angry with a law that barely harmed them- simply for the injustice of it. “We’ve had plenty of reason to be angry- confined to trade only with England, forced to work through corrupt customs offices, abused by royal courts and governors, confined from the lands many of us fought to take...but people rallied about taxes.”

Alex raises his brows impatiently. I’ve heard about his pamphlets while he’d been in school. “So what are you saying, the masses are easily moved to fight for the cause of the wealthy and educated?”

“Every other uprising like this- in the modern history of civilization has been for better treatment from a monarch. Somewhere in the hostilities, we moved beyond that- we’ve decided we don’t want a King. We want representation.”
“So, it’s a war of ideas…” he says, “from powerful, influential merchants and wealthy, educated philosophers.” He shrugs, “taxation just rhymed well.”

I see his fear that such hierarchies of power will be too invincible to crumble, but I think he underestimates the desires of the poor and uneducated- to fight for something better from their government. His doubts about my battalion make more sense, knowing he sees in such a cynical light. “It’s a war of character, and character is destiny…”

“Heraclitis…” he says, smiling fondly like he understands my ideas, but rolling his eyes with it. “You are far more optimistic than I am…”

“Am I?” I say, grinning with teeth because he makes it so easy to flirt like this, “I only know, so long as we have clever, good men protecting those liberties- and challenging anyone who threatens them, we won’t lose our cause.” I lift my free hand to his thigh and drag my nails lightly over the fabric of his long shirt to hold his waist and pull him nearer. “Washington benefits from his loyal boys, but I think he really needs the clear-sighted ones. We all benefit from someone to challenge us,” I tip forward in obvious invitation to-

“A-are you giving your letter to Fleury tomorrow? I thought of something to add,” he extricates himself and tosses back the blankets to get up.

I push up onto my elbows to offer to write it for him, but he makes his retreat so hasty I don’t think he’d accept it...

I’M NOT SURE what I did, but I don’t reach for Alex again as we settle down to sleep, and when I wake with him curled around me and familiar, it’s a loose embrace- the sort he rolls into unconsciously.

I try not to worry about it. There are greater concerns- especially when I come into headquarters to find de Kalb and Tilghman in a shouting match, Major Clark standing aside and fidgeting restlessly. I’ve barely caught a few words of the fight when Clark steps to me to explain, “Lee found the duel in the 35th regiment. Cope wasn’t involved at all, an officer was killed, but not by him. He wasn’t a deserter…”

“If you boys had suspicions of that man, you should have told me before you allowed Gilbert to bring him with his party, I cannot believe you thought-”

“We should write to him now,” Meade says, cutting the Baron off, and I’m not sure if Meade’s aware of the ignorance we’ve kept de Kalb in about other matters- namely Gates.

I don’t question Meade, but Tilghman says, “It’s too late for him to do anything now, he would’ve reached York already. We can only advise His Excellency to send someone to detain Cope on suspicion of being a spy. Fitz was going into York later this week already. There’s no reason to worry and distract the Marquis when he should be focusing on his expedition.”

Knowing Lafayette, he’ll still fear that he was responsible for escorting the spy. He should know that Washington’s staff had held our suspicions from him again- that the matter is being resolved and he won’t be blamed for it. I look to Meade, “We’re going to tell him anyway, aren’t we?”

Casting a glance at Tilghman, Meade straightens his shoulders, and it’s decided, “Yes.”
AFTER DUTY that night, Tilghman and Meade visit our cabin, and I tell Alex that I sent the letter for my father with Fleury as he’d encouraged. We spend some time, the four of us, talking about that officer and about my plans. It takes me awhile to think of how to bring Cope up, but I’m sure I’d like to do it myself. I put it off for as long as possible, but Tilghman begins packing his satchel where he’d brought Alexander his letters, so before he can leave, I say, “We sent Clark to check Cope’s story…”

Alex was reclined on our cot, reading a note. He looks at me.

I feel Tilghman and Meade wearing similar stares, and I explain, knowing that they won’t, “None of us trusted him, but it was decided that you had enough to worry about and we weren’t to tell you—unless something came up.”

His jaw is clenched and he draws a loud breath through his nose. Meade’s face is slack, wearing marks of panic and already reeling with whatever defense he’s made. Tilghman only seems frustrated.

But, it needs to be said. “We have reason to believe he’s a spy.”

Alexander’s eyes narrow at me, and predictably, Meade launches into the explanation of what Clark had found about the duel that he and Hamilton had been so interested in, then explaining their concern about Hamilton’s health and his ability to process new worries among everything else. He makes their hiding the investigation sound so chivalrous and discretionary, if he’d said such things to me, I would be moved by the family’s concern.

But, this is Alex. He masks his face of any emotion and waits for the excuses to stop, gives a courteous dismissal and waits for Tilghman and Meade to leave before he allows the anger that had been boiling under the surface to curl his lip into a snarl. “Were you planning on telling me about this- or sweep it under the rug because Tench told you to?”

“I know what this looks like—”

“Do you?” he laughs, high and thin and his breath is wheezing, “I did have enough to worry about without having to worry that there was more I wasn’t told I needed to worry about! I remember specifically telling you I would be insulted to have you patronize me like you treated Gilbert—”

“I’m not the one patronizing you,” I say. All week, among my own uneasy feelings, I’d allowed him to take up his work with greater effort than anyone suggested— including McHenry, “If I said nothing, they’d probably not tell you about it at all!”

“Oh, that makes you so much better than them, I do apologize for taking insult!”

I want to roll my eyes or scream at him for being so righteous with me. “I’m not telling you not to— but, you should recognize that you do not make it easy to tell you that you might be wrong when you talk about the man like he’s so honorable and handsome—”

“So you were just jealous.”

I was, I know that I was, and if we’re trying to be fair, I had every right to be and to take out that jealousy with pettiness— as he had done to me, but I won’t give him the satisfaction of it. I even my tone, “You do not take it well when you’re wrong.”

He looks away and, for several long moments says nothing and glares at the wall. I stare at him to be sure he won’t come up with some grand retaliation, and when I think it’s safe to drop it, I turn away to sit. Then, a wad of paper hits the back of my head and skitters onto the desk in front of me. Alex’s
voice comes sanctimonious and bitter, “Your friend, the Marquis de Fleury, plans to lobby for the rank of Major General.”

I un-ball the paper and take one glance at it to understand that my recommendations are being taken advantage of- like he’d predicted. I curse under my breath and glance at him just enough to recognize his smug expression. It drives me up from the chair, throwing the intelligence note to the ground with a growling scream.

I find McHenry and ask to take his bunk like he’d offered.

MY ANGER DISSIPATES after a few hours, and I realized I had only assumed Hamilton trusted Cope because everyone else implied it. I had never actually...asked him. With how he brags of his ability to judge a character, I see how we’ve laid an insult against him, but I don’t have the urge to apologize. McHenry was right that I may need a break from caring for him so much…

I take up residence in the Potts house. It’s easier to come in to work, and after a few quiet mornings, I grow complacent in the calmness and the absence of Alexander. That’s when the office door slams open one morning and Lafayette clamors inside with Hamilton at his heels, bundled in long cloaks. The Marquis demands to see General Washington, saying “I cannot stay long.”

I watch Tilghman receive him and shuffle him upstairs while Meade rushes to Hamilton’s side and ushers him to the office and down into a chair. He rolls his eyes at the treatment, and it places him across the table from me, unnerving. He glances at me then looks down and away, hesitant and avoidant.

...almost guilty.

Whatever frustration I’m still holding onto, it slips from my fingers like sand. I’m helplessly forgiving him, and some selfish part of me wants to hide that away and protect my pride before I spew apologies like smoke, like visible air I could try to catch and return to my chest...I would inevitably fail. So, when I speak, it’s only to say, “He’s come back quickly.”

Alex turns to me and draws the cloak tighter about his shoulders, “I said the same thing,” it’s enough of an inch, he doesn’t hesitate to take a mile, smiling. “He got promises for everything he demanded- the money, men, and officers. And, Baron de Kalb’s taking place as his second, so it’s like you said about Conway- he’ll be in Albany with nothing to do.”

“That’s good news,” I say. He’s grinning with enough pride for our friend that I start to forget my own over our pettiness with each other, and I hope it’s not belligerent to say, “I was worried when Harrison described his approach to the negotiations with the Board that he might have come in too strong with his demands for Gates, but maybe innocence worked to his advantage.”

“What?” Meade looks at me from the doorway and Alex shares his confused expression. “The boy prepared for weeks for that meeting, what innocence?”

“I…” falter slightly, glancing between my fellow aides’ shocked expressions, “When I spoke to de Kalb about Conway’s departure from camp, he called Gates ‘that venerable man’, and he meant it…” I had just assumed- since they both seemed to know so much of what the Marquis was informed about they were aware of what he wasn’t. “I took it to mean they weren't aware of his attempts at the Commander in Chief post.”

Meade just shifts on his feet, “That only means the Baron didn’t know about it, not necessarily that
the Marquis—"

Before I can open my mouth to voice my logic, Alex explains, “Gilbert receives most of his information from the Baron—any he finds elsewhere he shares with him. If Lafayette knew that Gates is trying to unseat Washington— or the accusations he made against me, he would never say a kind word about him to anyone he didn’t have to, if the Baron didn’t know about Gates, there’s no way Gilbert did…” His brows are still drawn in thought and I can see the wheels turning in his mind, but I can’t quite tell where they’re taking him.

So, I go on, “And, if Lafayette had gone, knowing that Gates wants to unseat General Washington’s command— not just thinking he’d been carelessly disrespectful, his suspicions might have come through in some way at the negotiating table. As it was, they must have believed they could turn him to their faction by appeasing him…”

But, Alex’s head is shaking slowly, still thinking something I can’t see. “Gil would’ve been able to effect that belief even if he had known. If there’s a reason he wasn’t warned, that's not—” he stops abruptly and lurches to his feet, “I cannot believe—”

He starts to run up the stairs and Meade startles back to avoid being trampled. I jolt to chase him, catching up in the hallway and following when he runs into Washington’s personal office without invitation. The room lacks a door, so the action is less intrusive than it could be, but it still pauses the ongoing conversation between our superiors.

Washington opens his mouth to dismiss him, but Lafayette reaches for my arm saying, “Laurens! He has written to you also. You must agree—”

“What?” I catch my step before I trip into him.

“Your father, he spoke with me— how this expedition is so bad an idea, and I agreed! He said he has told you.”

“Well...yes,” I say— because it’s the truth, but Washington looks at me with cold eyes, unimpressed. “And you agree!”

“I do…” I say, glancing at Hamilton to support me in my supporting Gilbert, but he’s silent, so I explain myself, “We don’t have the men or the supplies to raise another army much less pay one—enlistment contracts have expired and recruitment’s down unless we’re willing to give up the land we’ve taken in New York. Then— it’s too late in the season to retreat if the Great Lakes melt before the campaign’s over. If the enemy doesn’t capitulate without a fight, we could easily leave the men we send stranded to be captured...”

Washington’s lips purse before he replies evenly, “The fact remains that Congress has ordered the expedition and we are beholden to the pleasure of our representatives. That is the contract we have created with the American people.”

Alex winces.

I realize this is not an argument we will win with the General. My only question is why Alex had wanted to make it...

Washington goes on, effecting his sympathy for Lafayette’s hesitation, “If I refuse the expedition, I will seem like a Tyrant attempting to overrule the voices of the Board which holds great esteem and many highly-qualified men.” I could scoff at those words, but Alex’s face is masked cold. “The plan will be approved no matter how I protest it, my choice will be overruled and threaten your
negotiations, Conway will be given the command you’ve already done so much to secure for more-suited men.”

Tears are flooding the Marquis’s eyes, utter helplessness and confusion. There’s no direction to attack the General’s logic without forsaking our own beliefs, so he cries. “I do not want this.”

The cracking in his voice makes my own eyes feel wet and my heart breaks for him, having come to America at such a great expense, risking so much to achieve a command without the lust for power that mar other Generals’ envy for one. He has only ever wanted to place his name in the fight for liberty. No one deserves glory more than him...only to be forced into the responsibility of such a doomed expedition.

Washington steps to him and grasps both his shoulders, “Whatever losses you endure on this mission, blame them on me and I will assume the fault however I can to the public.” I recognize the offer to hide in his robust reputation, and I’m more troubled than ever, unsure why it unnerves me. “Whatever victories you gain, I'll be glad for you to have them.”

Gilbert crumples forward and pushes his face into the General’s chest so the man has no choice but complete the embrace and pat his back.

I glance at Hamilton with the faint impression that we should leave them alone, but he’s standing firm and glaring. His conversation with our commander is not over...and with my uneasiness, I trust him to know what's troubling me so I can also see it. So we wait, stand aside awkwardly while Gilbert receives comforting words- then a reminder that he must collect the officers he came for and begin packing to set out in the morning.

The Marquis leaves the office and we listen to his footsteps carrying him downstairs- his short conversation with Meade. I glance at Hamilton, but he still glares forward pointedly as the General moves about, collecting his papers and taking a seat like he doesn’t notice it.

The door closes downstairs.

Immediately- “The expedition will not be ready for him,” Alex says, “Congress can’t support this army, how is Gates suppose to secure him the supplies he needs? The wagons, the men, the winter clothes- are we to trust Mifflin will get them? All of it before Lake Champlain melts and leaves them without a means of retreat, it won’t happen. Your generals can’t do it.”

“My generals are experienced, intelligent, and competent officers-”

Alex scoffs, “Sure- experienced, perhaps intelligent, questionably competent.”

“-and Lafayette’s a worthy officer.”

“They can hardly work together! You can’t expect him to succe-”

“I have approved his assignment, and it will be my fault if he does fail.”

Alex steps forward, and Washington stands to halt him in his spot. He takes a second to regather his courage. “It's not so easy as you want it to be,” he says, voice cutting. “He's written about this expedition to everyone in Paris. Congress urged it, publicized it in this country- he’ll become the laughingstock of both if this goes sideways.”

“He’ll be acting upon my orders, he's declared himself an extension of my army.”

“And no one will read past the first line to know that!” Alex is throwing around his hands in
frustration and I’m concerned that he’s making the debate more physical than he should. Everything Washington has said is rational, and it’s strange that Alex should cast himself against that.

“He’ll be ruined whether or not he’s acting under orders,” I say, keeping my voice level- if that’s possible now. I understand Alex’s frustration, but his anger...

“It would be delusionally self-important to think you can take the blame for him! Believe it or not, there are men with larger reputations than yourself!”

Oh no...

Somehow, Washington holds his anger, but I can see the strain in his jaw, the effort it takes to suppress that, “We are not assured he will fail-”

“More sure than we’ve been of winning any campaign we’ve entered!” Alex’s voice is raising, “But, you want it to fail so I can understand allowing it to go on-”

Washington slams the desk, “Alexander!”

I jolt, honestly frightened by the boom of his voice, the anger between them, tangible and growing violent. I want to leave, but doing so now feels even more dangerous.

Alex laughs loudly, fury and satisfaction, “No! If you were truly opposed to this, you would find a way to stop it! You would ride to Congress yourself and tear them apart, throw every bit of evidence we’ve found of Mifflin’s treachery and his hold on Gates and you’d have politicians groveling to explain themselves to you.” He’s stepped forward to lean over the desk, point fingers directly into the Commander in Chief’s face. “I know you, you cannot pretend to be less than you are!”

“Oh...”

The satisfaction Alex had taken in evoking that rage is wiped from his face. He baulks like he’s been slapped, steps back as Washington moves around his desk to face him. This is not what I had meant when I’d said it was good to challenge him, and I’m terrified that this is it- that Hamilton has pushed the line too far, that this insubordination is treason.

I’ve never been so aware of His Excellency’s height until he’s looming over Hamilton, my friend standing as straight as he can to appear dauntless even as tears brim over his eyes and he glares so hard he probably can’t see. “What would happen if I did that?” the General growls, “How would we look as an army? How could we ever recover if we split in such a way, we are barely holding together as it is and these men care only about their ranks- which they could find just as easily in red coats as blue- would you have me turn our only experienced American generals into the arms of the British? Who would be left to lead us? The French are itching for such a chance- and have us become a colony of his most Catholic majesty, and for what? To prove myself right? So I can have the pleasure of satisfying my own hurt feelings?”

Alex opens his mouth to speak, eyes streaming in fury. “Then you should’ve let Conwa-”

“And ensure the expedition fails? Sacrifice five-thousand men and embarrass us all?” His Excellency plucks the words out of Alex’s mouth so he’s reduced to trembling in rage. “No please, you know me, so tell me how this doesn’t hurt me! Tell me why I’m sending my own boy to fail!”

“So he’ll pick you over Gates without having to give him the choice!” Alex’s words seem to cut and hit their mark. The General doesn't step back or retreat from looming over him, but he seems to shrink and Alex's trembling anger steadies him with righteousness. “He already has if you’d just look for once.”
He steps back smoothly, removing himself from His Excellency’s clout, and he looks at me, clenches his jaw and turns away to run down the stairs. When the door slams a floor below, I jump with the force of the noise, still frozen in my spot.

Like he’d been holding his breath, Washington’s shoulders slump and he pushes his hand up and through his hair, turning back to his desk and taking a seat slowly.

I don’t know how to move.

“Go after him,” the General says softly.

I want to say it- as possibly my last chance to support my friend as I had wanted to, but it catches in my throat-

“Laurens.”

“Is he right?” I say, fast and jumbled, but the tone was right. I’d demanded it.

And, when Washington doesn’t answer, turns his eyes down and resumes collecting his papers, it’s an answer. I’m sure he knows that by the time he meets my eyes, “Make sure he’s alright.”

WHEN I CATCH UP to Alex, he’s leaned against the side of the Pott’s house, still crying and clutching his cloaks tightly for warmth. I wouldn’t have been able to find him if a new layer of snow hadn’t covered the tracks in and out of headquarters- letting the path of his feet make a new and strange trail to follow.

“He doesn’t know…” he mumbles as I take the liberty to wrap my arms around him. “He can’t know- there’s no way.”

I hum and don’t question it while he’s still hysterical like this. I just rub his arms to provide friction, “Let’s go inside, it's too cold for this, you’ve only just-”

“No,” I agree, “No, let’s go home.”

WE TRUDGE together at the pace he chooses, and it only takes a few minutes for him to start talking again, “I should’ve known,” he says. “If Gil knew how Gates injured me to hide his scheming, all his filth about Wilkinson and that letter- he’d hate him at once. He would’ve said something…”

I rub his arm, holding his shoulder to help him balance upright. He’s torturing himself with this, and these ravings are going to see him throw himself back into a fever, “You recall how I said you don’t take it well when you’re wrong?”

He huffs a bitter laugh and steps on my foot.

“Well, in any case, you’re right now,” I say. “I asked him when you left, and he couldn’t deny it. He's sending Gil to experience Gates’s failure, to learn to hate the name without prompting that would be traced back to him.” There isn’t much choice but to send him on this expedition, but it's cruel to let him think Conway is the pivot in this conspiracy.
Alex hisses and shivers, curling in on himself as if the confirmation is physically painful.

“And, it makes sense,” I say. “Gilbert could make the demands that he did because he has the power to follow through- to write to his friends and see the entire French corps abandon us entirely. Or, throwing his support behind our commander, you were right that he’s an asset- he’s the best chance we have for an open alliance.”

He shudders again as if he plans to vomit out here in the snow, slumping forward. His voice is thin and reedy as if he’s realizing, “We have to allow it.”

“What?”

“We can’t tell him.”

“The hell do you mean we can’t?” I pull him upright, “Is that not...Alex- that’s the essence of what we’ve been arguing all month- that we have to trust each other.”

He closes his eyes tight and shakes his head, “No- no, no it’s not...it’s not trust,” he takes a long breath. “Tilghman believes in Washington because he can see the good, because he thinks Washington knows how to fight the darkness with light- but that’s not possible, all we have to fight with is darkness. Tilghman is loyal because he believes Washington trusts him completely. But, he can’t- by nature, that man can’t trust anyone. It’s not an insult, but if Tench or Gil or...well, most of his officers knew that he can’t trust them no matter how they prove they merit it, they’d have no incentive to try...they’d resent him. They’d feel slighted or estranged. They’d call him cold and unfeeling- and that’s not the case, he’s just...honest.”

I stare at him, entirely lost. But, I believe he knows what he’s saying and he hates it. For now, that’s enough to listen. He would only say this if he meant it- and if the consequences could be catastrophic.

“We can’t tell them what he can’t lie about…”

THE STAFF DRINKS THAT NIGHT to see Lafayette and his French officers off before they depart for Canada. There’s not much liquor in our stores, but the Marquis has the money to pay a rider to visit one of the tippling houses outside camp. We can’t be seen promoting such an enterprise, but a silver coin seals loose lips as well as anything.

His Excellency visits the party for a few hours, but seems to sense that we are all restraining ourselves in his presence and he retires ‘to rest’ with a warning that we will be expected to work in the morning. I’m glad when he leaves, and his warning hardly slows us down. On hungry-stomachs, the drinks take us all fast and I’m eager to use the honesty that comes with drunkenness to approach the Marquis and grab his shoulders, “Did you get my letter? About the redcoat- we were all worried.”

He smiles at me warmly and grabs my arms in return, “Oui, en effet!” his voice is slurring already, “I was much distress...distressed to hear he was a spyer, and that I had taken him with me!” he huffs, “Oh, but I was glad that you did tell me no one would be angry.” He leans over to my ear like it’s some deep secret, “I always worry about that.”

Someone grabs his arm and drags him away and I don’t look to see who.

I wasn’t aware that Alex had joined the party until I hear the name “Troup” and realize he’s giving Lafayette a list of his friends to contact for help getting what he was promised from Gates. I was in
the middle of a conversation with the Baron de Kalb, but I turn to hear the conversation, wary of what Alex might say if he’s as drunk as I certainly am.

We talk about how the expedition will negotiate with the Six Nations on its way north- appeal to the natives as Frenchmen...and rich ones.

Lafayette recounts the story of raising a toast to Washington at the Board of War’s dinner...at least three times, but there may have been more I forgot.

The Baron de Kalb tells us exactly how he and the Marquis had been disguised when they’d made their daring escape from France. I don’t recall that story either.

I think that Alexander invited me back to the cabin to sleep with him, but I think I misconstrued his meaning among his complaints of being coddled-

Sure enough, McHenry comes in at one point to yell at Hamilton for escaping from his bed and Meade rises to his defense, insisting that Alex is entirely sober- though McHenry seems unconvinced. I’m not sure why Mac left, but somehow Alexander was allowed to stay. I remember that for sure because at that point, he was sitting beside me, and at a later point, he had risen into my lap- not sure whose choice that was, but it pleased me greatly.

Jokes are had at the expense of Doctor Franklin, but all I can think to add to this is a critique of the man’s clothes- or the lack thereof. Alex falls over in laughter at that.

Tench begins the taunts against French officers in earnest, and in good humor, the company of those countrymen give testimony to fuel the lighthearted-ribbings. In remembering the hilarity, I have a warm glow of satisfaction all night, so that by the time Meade is dragging me to bed, I’m sure I said something marvelously funny.
\textbf{The Post of Quartermaster General}

\emph{Nobody knows you. You don't know yourself.}

\ldots

WHEN SHREWSBERRY WAKES me in the Potts house parlor, I regret ignoring the General’s warnings. I regret drinking so far beyond my limits and still feel strangely satisfied with the night despite the pounding in my head.

“Colonel Hamilton wasn’t here, sir,” Shrewsberry says when I turn to look at the empty mattress. “I went to his cabin t’wake him, but I’m thinkin’ he went to see off General Marquis de Lafayet-”

“Have they already left?”

“I…” Shrewsberry frowns at my frantic expression, anticipating my dismay. “Yes, sir, m’sorry.”

I didn’t give him orders to wake me early so I could see them off. I’ve only myself to be angry at. I still regret it, and I can only hope that, in my drunken, honest state, I had said whatever I needed to last night. When Shrewsberry holds up my coat in offering, I take it and dismiss him, toss it onto my blanket, and drop heavily at my desk to shave, dress my hair, clean, and prim myself as if that might ease the hangover.

WHEN I REPORT to work, the office is as sluggish as I feel. General Washington’s joined the effort himself, bringing frenzy with him as he sorts through paperwork. When I ask Tilghman why he’s here, he explains that we’re to be expecting the General’s wife to arrive sometime tomorrow morning, and Washington’s trying to give the appearance of a man with the world held in both hands. He dodges my eyes strangely when we talk.

I drop my satchel and sit at the bench, taking my time to set out my things.

“Laurens,” the General lifts the pile of letters he’d been gathering. I jolt to my feet, knowing it was rude of me not to render attention to him this morning, but his tone isn’t reprimanding. “Will you join me upstairs?” he says.

I give a hasty nod.

He carries the letters up the stairs as we walk, sorting through them when we reach the hall so that, by the time we’re in his office, he’s pulled out a note. He drops the rest of them to the desk and says, “I received a note from your father this morning and desired your advice.” I center myself on his desk while he sits and flattens out the letter. I should apologize for failing to review the note before it got to him, but he seems too pleased with it to point that out. “There’s been an Act of Congress, asking for my recommendations for Quartermaster General, and I’d be pleased to believe you had something to do with that?”

It’s thinly-veiled praise and I plume with it, “I mentioned it to my father.” This is the best opportunity I’ve had to make my own suggestion for the Quartermaster General post, but I had planned to have Alex’s notes on hand when I did so. I feel too unprepared to make the argument and afraid he will immediately dismiss it and refuse to hear it again if I don’t come armed properly, so for now I make it a point to establish the value of my counsel. “He didn’t show the pamphlet to Congress, did he?”
Washington looks at me and smiles—just the thinnest turn of his mouth. “No, he didn’t. And he has
given leave to the committee in camp to consult with me and make a report of the officers we suggest
for filling several departments in the quartermaster and commissary corps.”

But they asked for Washington’s advice about the Quartermaster General— not the committee's. It is a
sharp stab at Mifflin, and I’m glad for it. But, “Have you decided who to suggest?”

His eyes drop to the desk in thought. “No, I had a rather more delicate matter to discuss. But, there is
always time to recognize when a man is successful in a way you’d like to employ him.”

It’s a ‘good job’ in the General’s way of saying it, the kind of flattery he’d give only to have me ask,
“What do you need me for?”

“You understand how to approach those you care about and keep them in your favor…” he says,
uncharacteristically obvious with his delicacy. “How do I apologize to Alexander?”

I balk at him—surprised at myself for it, but with how I stood by my friends against him yesterday, I
should have suspected Washington’s flattery was an attempt to soothe my conflicted loyalties. “It’s not
Hamilton you should apologize to.”

He lifts his eyes, frowning as if the tension of yesterday is still reverberating in the room. “I know
what he was saying...that I am wrong to send the boy to Canada and not to tell him of Gates. But, I
can’t…I honestly don’t know what he thinks of Gates.” With how close the Marquis is to His
Excellency, how often they talked, it surprises me. To think it’s never come up, Washington would
have had to be actively avoiding the subject. “And, I’m not so sure that the expedition will fail—
that he’ll find Gates at fault if it does. Gates has more incentive than ever to prevail— put Lafayette in
his pocket and make himself the conqueror of Canada as well as the Hero of Saratoga…” There’s a
fear in his tone, tucked under layers of stoic acceptance. “I think Gates will do all he can to
succeed to spite me, and I think Lafayette will see that effort…”

It still would’ve been best if the effort wasn't made at all. But, I’m not sure if it’s worse to believe that
Washington is purposefully allowing the sacrifice of twenty-five hundred men in a failed expedition
or that he’s sacrificing his post as Commander in Chief if this succeeds. It all sounds like the product
of some untouchable insecurity I don’t know how to access or want to at all, but it makes one truth
clear. The General needs a man who sees him as he is and can drag him forward when he hesitates.
With General Greene away from camp, that man will be Hamilton.

“If you want to apologize, you can’t—not you,” I say because it’s true. If the General approached
Alexander to make an apology, he would transgress the boundary of professionalism, and such
oversteps are reserved for heated conflict with my friend, not for heartfelt expressions or softer
emotions like regret. I’m familiar with Alex’s sweeter sympathy...but I’m also aware of the lengths
we have gone to reach it, and how much of those lengths had been bridged by unwitting intimacy
forged in temptation and mutual attraction. If Washington wants any connection with Hamilton as a
man, it will be rational. That’s all he can have, and if he wants it, “You’ll have to show that you
understand his perspective and apologize in actions.”

The General leans back in his chair and steeples his hands in thought. “He thinks it hateful that I’m
blaming Conway for the conspiracy, allowing Gates and Mifflin to hide their fault.”

It surprises me that the argument could be interpreted as anger over letting Gates get away free rather
than betraying Lafayette. I’m sure Alex was arguing both, but...it makes me wonder what he had
discussed with the General when he’d returned to camp— how Washington must view his priorities.
“So, call Gates out,” I say. “He insulted Hamilton’s honor when he implicated him of copying the
letter, so question the honor of how he handled Conway's remarks.”
“Washington nods. “Will you help me write?”

“MOREOVER, IF THE EXTRACT was false, why did Conway not have Gates return the letter at once to prove his innocence?” Washington says. “He’s been parading it around York to show delegates and prove that the quotation was wrong, but it must contain something close enough to Stirling’s report that Gates decided not to share it with me when he heard it had been copied.”

I lift the quill from the ink and tap it off. “True,” I say. “In his first letter about the extract, he didn’t challenge its authenticity- he was just offended about having his papers rifled with. By not dismissing the quote, he basically conceded it was true. How many weeks did it take for him to deny the quote as a ‘wicked forgery’?”

“No, but I will be sure he knows of it once everything’s resolved. If you truly want to soothe his feelings, I’d suggest giving him work.” That earns an uneasy look, so I explain, “He’s been studying and exerting himself on his own- it will flatter him if you show support for his improvement- maybe a project that’s easy now but which will require commitment to it.”

“Like a prisoner exchange?” he says. “I received a note from Howe that he will arrange for a meeting to exchange general officers in early March...I was hoping we could secure the collection of General Lee.”
“That would work.”

I ASK MCHENRY if Alex has returned to his cabin before I look for him there. He seems surprised and amused with the question but tells me he has, so I send Shrewsberry to gather my things from the study- perhaps a presumption that I’ll be welcome in his bed, but I figure it’s a safe bet while coming armed with work for him and...after Alex’s affection during last night’s merriment.

When I come inside, he’s awake and at work with his studies, obviously not expecting me. He closes his book hastily and sweeps it under the sheets like a secret. I have no space to complain if he chooses to keep a few of those- not after I’d growled and screamed in anger over Cope.

I lift the letter from Howe. “Washington has work for you.”

When he sits up, he’s shaky, and I think it has nothing to do with illness, but nervousness with me doesn’t suit him.

“What’s wrong?”

“Nothing. What’s the work?”

I had wanted to approach the bed, but I don’t now, stepping to the side at the desk. “Arrangements for a prisoner exchange next month,” I say, and he hums. “We’re hoping to secure the transport of General Lee.”

His interested rumbling takes a sour tone.

“We have been waiting on his arrival for months,” I point out. “And, embarrassments aside, he is still the hero of Charlestown and a man that the soldiers would be happy to see returned to us…”

“I know.”

He doesn’t need to say any more, and I don’t need to ask if he wants the work, so I set it on the bed. But the room falls abruptly silent without the need to speak about either of these things. I wait to see if he’ll begin. There are a myriad of other subjects, stifling between us, and I want a reason to stay…

All day the boys had been strange with me, quiet. I had dismissed it as innocent hangovers, but Alex hadn’t had enough liquor to be feeling it now.

“I talked to Gilbert before he left,” he says slowly, filling the silence. I breathe out in relief. “Fleury will follow him to Canada if Washington permits him to command a battalion.”

It’s a unit to be led by a Lieutenant Colonel, and I know Alexander made this suggestion to Gilbert on my behalf- so that Fleury will not make a presumption with my unwitting recommendations. “Have you been working on your notes about the Quartermaster department?” I say in return, “Congress will be deferring to His Excellency for recommendations…”

“And Washington asked for my notes?”

“Not exactly.”

His expression shifts, and he seems to understand my intention to bring them to Washington myself. “Oh…”

More silence follows, and I shift on my feet awkwardly.
Until he pats the mattress in invitation for me to sit, opening the letter curiously. “So, am I working through Boudinot?”

“I would imagine, yes.” I draw one knee up onto the sheets.

“That will be interesting,” Alex says. “Washington usually assigns Tench to work with Elias.”

He speaks with suspicion, and I can see this will become a game of admissions. It’s all in the open already- our subtle apologies and muddled code of actions speaking for us. It’s too much pretense to pretend we still need. “I suggested he give you work because he wants to apologize for yesterday,” I say. “So, he’s tasking you with the prisoner exchange.”

He tosses the letter aside. “Tell him I don’t want it.”

I pick it up. “See, I figured you’d be like that if you knew, and this is why I was going to avoid telling you about it.”

He huffs.

It’s an underhanded jab at a long line of arguments, but it leaves him little space to maneuver. “But, as I trust you not to undermine my counsel with the General by making me wrong on purpose, I had hoped you would let this begin to soothe the ill-feelings-”

“I don’t want his apology.”

His voice is clipped and final, and I feel like he’s inches away from turning his anger on me as well. I sigh, “Then keep being angry, but accept the work. For me.”

He takes the letter from my fingers slowly, but he won’t look at me, staring down at the blankets pulled up over his knees. I still want to stay, have Shrewsberry gathering my things to sleep here since I had hoped for a sweeter interaction with my friend, but I’m giving up on the idea of it, considering getting up to leave.

Then, “I should’ve just left it,” he says.

“What?”

“I don’t regret saying anything that I did, but if I’m to endure another week of the General’s pitiful attempts at apology, just tell him I wish I’d left it alone.”

It sounds like he’s familiar with the circumstances. An explosive argument followed by hurt feelings and bad apologies. It almost makes me glad that I’m here to counsel the General on how to handle my friend, but more than that, I’m glad I understand Alexander well enough that, even when he doesn’t want them, he trusts my apologies without all this resistance. “Are fights like that common?”

“Like that? No…” he looks at me then, shifting his knees up protectively as if the violence of their arguing is visceral in the room even now. “But Washington hates the idea of someone important hating him, and so he loves to take out his rage on me when I give him the chance.” I want to protest the insinuation that the General doesn’t consider him important in his own right, but Alex goes on, “So, as I’ve been working for him, I’ve taken tasks that make him the most vulnerable to me, tied his fate to mine so that, if I can’t be important to the world, I can be important to him…”

I lift my other leg onto the bed and turn to him, intrigued. It’s a remarkably defensive tactic for him, but characteristically aggressive, and I have to wonder what kind of person has to learn to protect himself like this from the people he should trust the most.
“It hasn’t really worked,” he admits. “He still rages at me, but now he’s just...infuriatingly polite afterwards.”

“I’ll warn him against it if you like,” I offer.

But he frowns, “That isn’t your problem,” and goes on before I can protest. “If I didn’t want to deal with the General’s groveling, I shouldn’t have started the fight.”

“No!” I say. He’s done this before- taken such a hard stance that, rather than allowing resolution, he tries to fight his way through where there’s no need for it, but more than that- he’s dismissing my offers to help him in the ways that friends should, and I don’t like it. “You were right to demand he own up to the effect of his actions- to show what he’s gaining from hurting our friend,” I say. “He has no space to be questioning our loyalties just because he can’t trust anymore. He believes in Lafayette, and that should be enough; acting on his own insecurities is inexcusable in a commander.”

He looks at me warily, but he had complained that I’m so quick to defend General Washington’s actions, and he will sit and listen while I condemn them.

“I couldn’t even place why it unsettled me, but you were so right. He knows he’s being manipulative to avoid alienating Gates’s supporters, and there is a grave lack of men with the heart to say it to his face.”

I cover his hand where it’s sitting on the bed, and with the fire lit, I can see he’s blushing. “I was worried about Lafayette- that no one would speak for him…”

He’s being modest. “You were Achilles, dashing the scepter of Agamemnon on the ground at assembly.”

He slides his hand away from mine, trying- and failing- to press down his smile. Between that and the blushing, I’m drawing a great deal of pleasure from this. His voice is tempered and accusing when he says, “You’re planning to stay here tonight, aren’t you?”

I’m not sure if I like that he’s dismissing my flirting. “Well, yes- but I mean that,” I say. “You are one of maybe two or three people who sees the General as he is and has the strength to move him.” I scoot closer on the sheets and his hair is untied, loose around his shoulders. I brush it from his face, off to one side so I can find the mark I’d made on him. It’s fading. “There’s no question that you were right to challenge him. But, let me help him make it up to you.”

He laughs and throws off my hand. “Go get your bags, Laurens.”

I grin, leaning into him, “Is that an invitation to sleep here or to make it up to you?”

His face scrunches, “Don’t say it like that.”

I laugh and kiss his cheek, “Sorry, you’re right- I shouldn’t imply I’d do it on his behalf.”

He turns and pushes at me, trying to force me up from the bed, “Go!” so I find the shape of his leg and squeeze the muscle under the sheets, and he squeals, kicking me back. He starts snickering at his own noises.

I kiss his face again before dashing out to get my bags.

IT’S UNUSUAL FOR Alexander to be awake before me, but he’s dressing himself when I sit up.
from the blankets. “What are you doing?” I say.

“You said Lady Washington is arriving today.”

He gives this like an answer, but “That doesn’t mean you should be going to greet her…”

“Of course it does,” he says. His hands are clumsy at his cravat and his balance is still poor, but he grins at me, toothy, and it dissolves my protests. “She may be the queen of America someday after all. I have to pay honors.” He’s teasing, and I press my lips thin, mockingly annoyed.

“You should’ve tied your hair up first,” I point at his neck where it’s caught under his collar.

He reaches up as if in surprise, “Ah,” then grins at me. He definitely knew he hadn’t tied it. “Do it for me.”

I’m glad that he demands my help, but I probably shouldn’t be so welcoming to rudeness, so I raise a brow until he pouts.

“Will you?” he says, not quite apologetic. “You seem to like messing with my hair…”

I sigh, a production of suffering, then open a space between my legs for him to sit. “Come here.”

I HAVEN’T SEEN Valley Forge look so populated in weeks. Cabin doors are turned out, and all the men are gathered with their regiments, straining to see past one another as the lady’s carriage rolls past.

It's not unusual to see women in camp, followers, families, and mothers, moving in and out, trundling carts of laundry and food for those to whom such luxuries are afforded. But, from the talk among the men, it seems Lady Washington has a reputation for bringing comforts in her wake- warm clothes, sweets, and most importantly- leave for the other officers to invite their wives.

When we arrive at the front step of headquarters, McHenry is sure to remind me that Hamilton was to be on bedrest. The boy in question has already stepped to the ground at the foot of the stairs, ready to be the first man to greet the distinguished lady as Meade escorts her from her carriage. Dressed in a wide skirt with bright and fashionable prints, she could be described as regal if we had time for the idea of royalty.

Hamilton scoops up her hand and kisses it in the fashion I've seen him perform for every pretty missus he set his eye on. I've decided the motion was meaningless from him, but this just confirms it. McHenry is quick to chase him away, huffing, “I thought we’d agreed not to get her your fever if you'd just...c’mon, man! You don't want us to have to boil her hand now come-”

He leaves her laughing, tipping his hat with compliments to the lady's constitution for allowing him a greeting. I can't wait for him to be cleared to return to work. I'm sure his relationship with the General’s wife is an entertaining one.

She smiles at all the staff warmly- then her eyes fall on me. I glance back to be sure of it, that she's not looking past me at another man, but it's me. When she steps close and holds out her hand, I have a strange urge to shake it, but I catch myself and take it to kiss. “So, you're our new boy I've heard such kind things about,” she says. “Our Carolina gentleman.”

“Yes, ma’am,” I say. “I must be, but I wasn't aware you'd been hearing of me.”
“Of course my husband's mentioned you!” she laughs but not unkindly. “You don't think the General lets you read all his letters to me,” and her smile twists into something dirty and amused. “I'd be worried if he did.”

I laugh, shocked at the gall on her. I can see why she's so warm with Alexander already.

I don't have a response before General Washington steps past us all to embrace his wife. Such a brazen display of affection looks strange on the stoic man...especially given how much he has to stoop over to reach her. It’s funny to watch him awkwardly trying to decide whether he should bend at the waist or the knees.

I don’t notice McHenry beside me until he speaks in a hushed tone. “I hope to have a wife like that someday...to stand beside me as she does.”

The General is walking away to take his wife on a short tour of the camp, trailing several steps behind him. It’s Alex who replies, “She’s hardly standing beside him…”

I laugh, “And even if she was- I think it would only make her seem small.”

McHenry huffs, “She can’t help that her husband is so tall-”

“Oh that he’s General Washington himself…” I say.

“You’re thinking of the honors and salutes we pay him, but you’ll see she commands in her own way,” Meade says knowingly, and I’m sure his favorable opinion of the lady is colored by the company he paid her in acting as her escort to camp.

McHenry claps a hand on Meade’s back. “Thank you, Meade! And exactly my point. How am I to love someone who can’t stand beside me, share my ideas, and command her own?”

“That’s not what wives are for.” It’s Tench who speaks reason, and it’s the sort of blunt rationality we’ve all grown used to from him. The sort that doesn’t sit well in sentimentality.

I can feel Meade and McHenry readying for a debate, and I don’t want to hear it between them. This subject is one I’d avoid if possible, so I contribute to his logic decisively and say, “If you find a woman who wants to command ideas for herself, she’d just be miserable if you make her a wife… believe me.”

When this earns confused stares, several glances at Alex as if he might be able to answer arising questions about me- about what I know of wives, I can tell they all suspect me of hiding my histories. Before I’m made to say something I’d rather not speak about, I explain, “My sister,” like the answer to their unasked question. “After my mother’s last birth, she raged against the idea of it. Marriage.”

Meade’s face scrunches, “I’d imagine watching a birth could do that t’you.”

“It’s not just that,” I say, rolling my eyes, “She’s not scared, she’s proud- likes credit for everything she does and won’t listen to anyone telling her she can’t have her way.” Mother died when she was too young to break those behaviors, and while I’d done my best to tell her the disappointment she’ll face if she can’t let go of these childish notions, I could never be cruel enough to help her. As I could never be cruel enough to turn Miss Manning away when she deserved it. “The only women fit to be pleasing wives are the spineless, frivolous ones who only want children, land, or love. You can’t have a girl wanting to stand beside you in a role where such a privilege doesn’t exist.” McHenry opens his mouth to protest, “And if you find one who actually deserves that privilege,” I say, “she’ll resent you when the world doesn’t let her have it.”
I’ve left little room for them to argue, but Meade is frowning at my sudden cynicism, surprised with this tone coming from me. “You’re saying a lady can’t have a mind of her own as well as love in this world?” he says.

I consider if I mean that. “Yes.”

“And the ones who do have it—”

“Fooling themselves, and it’s pitiable…”

Meade turns from me. “Hammy, you’ll hear this from your Laurens?”

Alex seems just as surprised with me as the rest, but, “No, I agree,” he says. “If you find a girl who’s too independant, she’ll never subordinate herself as she ought. It would be hateful to her- and she’d lose all the spark of what you love.”

Tench nods, brows raised at us both, but he claps a hand on McHenry’s shoulder. “Keeping a house, raising kids…that’s no life for the kind of partner you’re imagining. If you take a wife, take a girl who wants to be a wife, or she’ll just spend all her time making you miserable.”

“You- all of you do a disservice to the entire female sex,” Meade says, voice darkening, “to blur the lines between ambition and intelligence.”

“It’s not an insult to Elizabeth,” Alex says.

I glance at him for some explanation.

Meade’s gritting his teeth at us, uncharacteristically open in his anger, “No. She’s just frivolous for wanting to be my wife.”

No one answers. I don’t feel it would be right to.

But no answer is still the wrong one, and Meade turns from us, stomping away in the snow.

WHILE GENERAL WASHINGTON is occupied with providing his wife a tour, Hamilton returns to the cabin, and the rest of us move inside to our stations. I could ask Tilghman who Elizabeth is. Now would be the time for it, but I don’t. I’d never known Meade had a wife.

The day is slow at work, and I spend most of it working on receipts, writing letters to congressional delegates, and making edits on the General’s letters. The boys are uncharacteristically quiet, and I assume it’s for lack of Meade’s usual chatter. It helps that General Washington spends most of his time in council with his wife, sending messengers up and down the stairs to collect his papers.

I’m glad when we’re dismissed for the night.

As I’m gathering my pile of personal letters to take home and read, Tilghman steps to my side and holds out a thick packet of papers. “We’ve gotten notices of court martials to be dealt with, pass them on to Alex.

I stare at him, thinking of the convincing it had taken to get Washington to give Hamilton any work at all. “Are you sure…that he should…?”

He presses the packet to my chest. “He’ll be interested in these.”
ALEXANDER IS AT the desk when I come inside, burning the oil lamp to read a copy of Plutarch that had come in my father’s package several days ago. He gets up as I kick off my boots and shake my coat dry, standing awkwardly as if he’d been snooping in something personal of mine. I smile at him, raising a brow, nearly ask what he’s doing before I decide it doesn’t matter. He’d already discovered the treatise on onanism, what more could he find?

“Tench had work for you today,” I say.

He relaxes at that.

I hold up the packets of legal cases- five of them. “Court-martials if you’ve got time with the prisoner exchanges.”

“Of course,” he says, already holding his hands out to grab at it.

I lift the packet out of his reach. “On the bed. You should be relaxing.”

He makes a petulant jump for the pack, and I lean back to prevent his snatching it. “Now, or I’m not joining you until you’re asleep.”

He glares at that, and before he can jump on me, I throw the packet onto the bed and take the chair at the desk while he turns for the papers. By the time he turns back to me, I’m holding out the lamp for him to take to the bedside. He gives me a wary look, and if the light was any further from his face, I’d miss the brief flit of his eyes to Plutarch at the desk.

As soon as he has the lamp, he jumps for it, but I’m faster, sweeping it out of reach with a laugh. In doing so, I lose his page and decide there’s no more damage in closing the book entirely. “To bed!” I say, making my voice stern.

He frowns but obeys, pulling the covers back to crawl underneath. Sitting back against the wall, he glares at me. I roll my eyes and lift my satchel for my pile of personal letters, and as I take them out and spread them over the desk, Alex starts reading the content of the legal cases aloud. An instance of fraud, two cases of desertion by officers, then he stops on a case of perjury and sits up, going quiet.

“What?” I say.

“Colonel Malcolm’s regiment...I know that name…” He squints into the air, grasping for memory, and I sit back and watch, waiting for him to find it, then, “That’s Burr’s commander.”

“Burr?” The name is unfamiliar to me. I lean my arm on the back of the chair. “What, is the case for someone you know? Tench said you should see these.”

He looks back at the packet, and his hand starts trembling.

“What’s wrong?”

He looks at his hand like he hadn’t noticed the shaking. “Ah,” he presses a hand to his face, “nothing, I must be tired.”

I don’t believe that. But, dismissing him now would only give him more reason to hide his exhaustion in the future, so I let it drop and pick up my letters, bringing the pile to the bed and sitting with my legs curled up by him. I set the letters in my lap and look at him then down at the case
descriptions. He must know that I don’t believe he’s just tired because he reaches up to distract me with unbuttoning my vest. I give him a short look. He’s so sure I’ll allow that cheap distraction as well.

I scoot closer so he can reach.

He grins and completes the task, tosses the vest at the desk. He uses his hold on my shirt to pull me forward and kiss along my cheek.

I let the soft brush of his lips distract me for their fleeting moment of application, but coming back to, it’s much easier to speak my concern, “You know you can tell me...if something is wrong.” I brace my hands by his hips so he can tap our foreheads together. It’s unusual for him to be so affectionate in this particular way. It seems softer than his usual invitations, easier to accept and that much more tempting.

I don’t know if he was aware of our kiss- if he remembers it now, but I could remind him...

“I know,” he says, touching my wrist to guide me down into the sheets and our familiar embrace.

I want to ask again, but I won't press him to say something he's obviously not prepared to. So, I don't.

I HAD PLANNED to ask Tilghman the contents of the court-martials he had given me yesterday and why it was so important that Alex read them, but General Greene's making a visit to headquarters, talking with Tilghman about a short visit Lafayette made to his camp on his way north. I pretend I’m not listening to their conversation, keeping my eyes on my father’s most recent letter.

As General Washington stands to greet Greene, he welcomes him into the office, and we stand to his attention. It’s rare to see Greene in camp, and I’m not surprised when His Excellency sends his extra volunteers out to have his counsel privately.

As soon as the room has cleared of all but appointed aides, “I have a regiment on the brink of revolt,” Greene says, attaching no anger or blame to the statement, but, “I’ve been told it’s the uniform state of this army, so it’s painfully clear that something drastic must be done or we must start thinking of a good explanation for why the army’s dissolved…”

There’s an ugly silence. A question we’ve all been anticipating for months with no easy answer.

Then Greene says, “I have been so distant to curb those rumors you were so concerned about, but losing your army to desertion will be far worse than a few ideologues complaining that I have more of your ear than they do.” He steps closer to His Excellency and puts a friendly hand on his shoulder- a motion I’ve only seen Gilbert get away with. “Keep your mind to the rumors, but if you have me distant from you, give me leave to do what needs to be done…”

He says this like it’s meaningful to some prior conversation they’d had, and slowly, Washington nods. He motions to Tilghman, who opens his letterbox and fetches paper and a pen. The General says, “By my orders, any civilian withholding their crops or livestock from sale to us or attempting to hide said goods has marked themselves an enemy to America. General Greene, and all other officers under his command or my own direct orders have leave to seize these properties as spoils of war.”

Silence.

Then, it’s Meade who speaks up. “Sir…” he shifts warily on his feet, looking at me across the room-
the first time he’s met my eyes since our debate yesterday morning, I can see he expects me to help him object to it. It’s a strange sort of honor to be trusted for that. But I don’t. “Innocent people will be harmed in this,” he says. “If we unleash the men to pillage...the pent-up anger...people will die- it can only turn the people against us.”

He looks around for someone to budge, anyone to waver in our resolve. But we can’t. The British have been stealing from the countryside for weeks. Nobly refusing to do so is only seeing our army dwindle in size and strength. Darkly, I think it may do some good for Congress to start hearing complaints from citizens of the abuses of our desperation. It’s theft without all the pretense Alexander had described. It’s strange that I’m glad for it- the honesty.

Meade hasn’t swallowed his shock, “We can’t,” he says. “As a God-fearing man, I have to warn what this may do for our favor in His eyes...”

If Congress saw what we need, we’d obviously have God on our side, but all our cries ignored- Congress’s own delegates snubbed by power-games, Tilghman lifts the letter and blows on it before holding it out for the General’s signature. He sends a small sympathetic look to Meade. “God doesn’t care what we do.”

TILGHMAN LEAVES CAMP into New Jersey shortly after Washington’s council with Greene, and I never had the chance to ask about the court-martials. When I come home to an empty cabin that night and see the packet tucked under a stack of books below the desk, my concern for Alexander’s whereabouts takes a brief pause in favor of that curiosity.

I memorize the order of the books before moving them. The copy of Plutarch I’d given him is just beneath the packet, bookmarked now- by a small page with a poem on it by the Athenian tyrant, Solon...in Greek, from the book he’d given me.

All about the beauty of boys’ thighs and mouths. It's...lewd.

Is that why Alex took it back?

I open Plutarch, find the crease of the mark and peel the pages back…

Alex has bookmarked the commentary on the Spartan lawgiver Lycurgus, and made notes in the margins, scribbles of references to other books, Cicero’s *Tusculan Disputations*, a Roman name ‘Ennius', Plato and Socrates; then on the other side of the page, a list of discussions by modern contemporaries, some of which I recognize, newspaper reports, essays, satires, and epitaphs...all raging against one crime on nature.

Sodomy.

The door opens. I startle, knocking over the books I’d set aside.

Alexander is breathing heavily, face flushed as he steps inside and untucks his shirt carelessly, stretching out his legs like he hasn't noticed me yet. Then he stops, finds at me on the floor, surrounded by his books, and his placated expression drops.

I grab the packet of court-martials as if in way of explanation.

He frowns, still panting for breath. Then says, “Just went for a run,” pointedly watching me while I replace his books into their pile. There's a tense silence until he says with forced levity, “Don't worry, I made sure Mac was in the house, so he won't give you any trouble about it.”
I get up and watch while he grabs the washbasin and replaces the water.

He points at the charcloth tin. “Your boy came by with some firewood, would you mind?”

I get up, bringing the packet with me, and move to the fireplace. I hear his shirt hit the ground behind me, then water splashing while he washes his face and chest. It takes several strikes to get the flint to spark, but I’m glad for the task so I’m not sitting in silence unoccupied. If he’s angry that I was looking in his things, I wish he’d just say it.

Instead, “It’s a case of fraternization,” he says, and I turn to look at him. “A lieutenant, accused for having relations with a private under his command.”

I stare, then narrow my eyes, “And you’ve been acting so strange because I couldn’t know about this?”

He drops the washrag on the side of the basin. “I don’t see why you needed to.”

“Because you’ve been acting so strange-”

He looks up at me then, sharp and incredulous, “You don’t think it’s strange?” he says and I’m confused. “Tench giving you this to bring to me?” he points at the packet. “A case from the regiment of a man I know concerning sodomy in our camp.”

“No, because you know the man,” I say. “Burr, right? Why is it strange to think you’d want to hear of the events in a friend’s regiment?”

He scoffs at that.

I stop. “Right. Because you don’t keep friends.”

He steps back from the basin and walks to me, picking up the packet and opening it to hand me the case in question. “This is not exactly a topic that you navigate with ease, John. Excuse me for assuming you’d be uncomfortable to know-”

“What? That men are buggering each other in the shadows around here? You think I don’t know that?”

He stares, baulking, then closes his mouth and admits, “Well, you aren’t usually so blunt about it.”

I give him a short look.

He steps away and looks at his own feet in retreat, “I...figured I never gave you much room to be.”

“What is that suppose to mean?”

“Well, knowing that I still want you, it’s not like you’d just say how vile you find it all-”

“Don’t.” I push up from the ground and don’t have to look at him to see him glance back. I restrain the uneasy urge to tug at my sleeves awkwardly, force my eyes up. “Don’t tell me what I think of it.”

He bites at his lip before deciding to say it, “Right...or how tempting.”

I glare.

“Well, you could tell me what you think of it for yourself.”
The suggestion is impulsive, followed by a heavy silence, and seeing his discomfort, so unfamiliar and ill-fitting on him, I consider it. In every instance that we’ve stumbled into the subject of his desires for me, I’ve made a hasty retreat. I shouldn’t be surprised he’s started seeing that path as a perceived attack, but I know he doesn’t mean it to be. I’ve always known.

I open my mouth to respond—

Then he shakes his head, “No, nevermind. I’m not drunk enough to have that talk.”

I frown and give him a moment to relax from that apprehension before I step towards him and reach out my hands for the case packet. I take it gently. “You’re reading so much on the subject because you think it’s one that bothers me?”

He doesn’t answer, but I could laugh at the confirmation in that.

“You won’t have to debate me the morality of desires between men…” I say carefully.

I think, if he were anyone else...if he were himself several months ago, I’d be offended— with the implication that I might need convincing or reassurance, that he’d arm himself for the actuality that I’d do something I’d regret, expect me to and not prevent it. But, I know he’s not that kind of man. I know his faith in my self-control, and I think these reassurances aren't meant to be reactionary. I think he's arming himself to actively fend off my shame...just because he knows it bothers me, and I'm strangely delighted...emboldened.

“I mean...” I can't quite meet his eyes, too tight-chested to chance it, but glancing away feels coy, and I let that put a small grin on my mouth that must give me away completely, stupidly fond. “I know what civilized society thinks of it, and...well, if that was going to change my mind about you, I would’ve left you alone when I had the chance.”

I don’t think I could do that.

He stares at me, reading every meaning in my words before stepping closer and reaching for my hands. I let him take me to the bed, slow. Then when I’m seated, he puts himself on my lap, legs sprawled to either side, and I can’t protest that either, leaning his chest into mine so his head falls comfortably on my shoulder. It’s the kind of closeness a man doesn’t know he craves until he’s pinned under that comfortable weight and abruptly aware of all the time he spent untethered by it.

I take the opportunity to untie his hair and run my fingers through it, trailing down over his bare back.

“I’m not sure what I would’ve done with them,” he says, and I feel his fingers scratching lightly between my shoulders through layers of my uniform. He explains, “All the arguments. I don’t know how I’d even use them to fight for you. I just needed them. Don’t think too much of it.”

I know he says that, but I turn my face into him, brushing his hair aside so my lips touch his ear. “Fight for me?”

He shivers and laughs like he expected the flirtation. “I am definitely not drunk enough...”

I lean back so he lifts his head, and I keep my hands in his hair, sliding to his cheeks so he faces me, noses brushing. This close, sharing air, it’s a familiar impulse, feeling close enough to be drunk. “Tell me anyway.”

The corner of his mouth quirks up, appealing like impossible promises, so I press my thumb there just to touch it. His lips are lovely, soft as peachskin and so encouraging to sensation, his skin
sticking ever so slightly to mine. I can imagine how that would feel...I remember it...

He kisses me.

He falls into it, pressing me back so I’ve nothing to do but lean in or be swept over. I let my fingers fall to the crease of his jaw, hold him back. He breathes hard, and before I’ve gathered what’s happening, his lips break from mine, cold.

“It was you,” he says tapping his forehead to mine.

“What?” I feel dazed.

“I wasn’t thinking about Washington or about Mifflin or Gates and Conway. It was you.” His eyes are still closed when I manage to look at him, voice low on a whisper and gentle against me like he’s never been. “When I got sick, I thought that it was the end, and I thought about you,” he says. “It would’ve been easy to close my eyes and give up, but I promised myself- if I could pull through, if I could fight myself to the end of it, then I would come back to this. I’d find your offer of friendship, and this time, I’d say yes...”

I have enough time to think he’s talking too much before he pushes his nose into my cheek then tilts to take a draw on my bottom lip. The sound of it is obscene when he breaks off, and it draws a stumbling noise from my throat.

“If I could make it through, back to you, I can trust myself to fight for this.”

I drop a hand to his back to steady myself. I have no idea what he's talking about, going on as if we’re not in the center of this storm. “What's...what is there to fight?” I say. I’m certainly not resisting him now...

He pulls back enough to consider me, tracing his fingers over my temple and into my hair. “Your nature. My own...” he laughs at himself, soft and breathy, “I promised myself I wouldn't push you away.”

Push me away? “I'd hardly let you.”

“Let me feel I did this,” he grins, pushes his mouth back to mine.

For a moment, it’s slow, a soft touch of lips, all breath and sighs, and it's perfect, tender, sweet. It's all that I imagined- what it must feel like to be loved. I can catch up- keep up with this. Just repeated presses, patient and kind, no threat of presumption or licentious intent. As if from now on, always, this could be all I’d ever want.

But it expands.

The more I allow, the more he takes, draws on my mouth, devours. His kiss is a spark and I’m parched, quick to burn, feel it catch, spread through me, feverish, smothering. This isn’t right. I return his effort, falling behind, gasping at the touch of his tongue, letting him pass my lips with no resistance. It's some small proof to suck on the intruding muscle, and it earns an approving hum in his throat. But, it redoubles his frenzy and I’m lost, his fingers pushing off my coat, there’s nothing to grab at on him, my hands easily turn to assisting his efforts at divesting me.

When his hands pull up my shirt, he rises to his knees, and I know I should stop this, but it’s all too fast, spiraling. My mouth’s gone slack, but in this fog, he doesn’t see that it's a retreat. He has everything to take. I had promised myself I would kiss him a thousand times and give him every reason to stay, and it’d be an insult to imagine he doesn’t know what he’s doing- the effect he’s had,
but this-

His hand moves down, he pushes his palm to my crotch, massaging.

I grab his wrist, shuddering and sliding back between his legs to put some distance. I shake my head. We’re supposed to be different, not like- “Not that…”

He’s confused, breathing ragged. “John…that’s part of it.”

His voice is gentle, but I can’t hear that. I can’t start to believe this is the only thing he wants. We’ve always been so much more- so much better, I had assured myself that we fit together, we hadn’t degraded our friendship, that he didn’t want any more than I could give. I shake away the fear before the trembling can begin- it’s not yet too late… “No, I’m sorry.”

His face is paling, stricken. I can see the disappointment and horror creeping over his eyes.

“Does it need to be part of it?” I’m wary to ask, to hope that I wasn’t wrong- this was a mistake, an over-eager slip.

“I just…” his brows draw, “I don’t understand…” He stops himself, carefully picks up my coat and folds it, sets it aside, and pulls his legs up to the bed to sit properly. He wipes his mouth on the back of his hand. It gives him time to collect himself, and I take it to calm my breath, to let my heart slow down. “I know that you want me,” he says slowly, “and you know that I want you. We have privacy, opportunity…our health. We’re friends- and we’re both committed to this. Despite what the world may think of it, you know what you feel is right-”

“We just can’t.”

“What?”

“I shouldn’t have kissed you…”

“Well, it was more of me-”

“Not tonight.” I shouldn’t have promised it…a thousand times.

“Well then…was there some other time you’ve kissed me?” he says this like a challenge.

And oh, he knows. That much is immediately clear. But he just wants me to- “Don’t make me say it.”

“Why not?”

He’s challenging again as if he wants to hear me say what I don’t want to say, and I can’t slow my mind to grasp the answer he wants- the truth. So, I shake my head helplessly.

“I need you to tell me yourself…” he says, curling his legs up in front of his chest, “Whatever you’ve got your mind set on about me, however you’re excusing me from your hatred of this desire, I need you to be honest about it…”

I stare at him, “…I’m confused.”

“Well, you obviously hate the idea of doing anything with me, even now. So, if you don’t hate me, and you don’t hate the sin, what’s left to hate but yourself?” It’s hard to look at him when he’s like this, eyes piercing and frustrated enough to cut without intention. “I’m wondering why- with all that I’ve tied myself to you, with all that we are together, you still think you can hate yourself without
insulting my opinion of you? How can you hate this desire without faulting me for it- how can I possibly be excluded of blame if you’ve found such a strong reason to loathe your own desires? By extension, it must mean you loathe mine, and if you impugn my judgment, I just want you to explain why-”

“Don’t do that,” I say.

“When you hate yourself, it’s easy to accept the first good reason someone gives you- religion, biology, politics, it’s easy to agree with their rules when those rules make your hatred make sense. But don’t mistake the relief of an easy explanation for feeling better about a difficult truth...don’t mistake self-restraint for self-love. If any truth tells you to hate yourself as you are, it's a lie…”

They’re the words of a man who had fought such loathing and come out stronger, convinced it's the entire world that's wrong- not him, the sort of words that would make me wonder about him, but, “That’s not why…” Maybe it was why I’d accepted Francis’s dismissal, why I’d let him tell me we were nothing, but with Alexander, I can’t allow it- “It would degrade our friendship…”

He takes pause at that. More confused than ever, “How so?”

“It just would...believe me.”

That was the wrong thing to say, and it obviously raises his suspicions, so far I can nearly feel the name on his tongue, then, “I don’t see why it can’t be an expansion...for us,” he says. “I mean, if we both are unalterably bound to remain together, we could only be adding to the pleasures we take in each other-”

I wince and he stops himself cold, turning his face down.

“You really can’t tell me why?”

I know what he wants me to say and why. He’s always entrusted me to know him in ways no one else does- that faith in me has expanded over these last few vulnerable weeks. But, there’s still ways he hides himself, and he knows just enough about Francis to suspect it all on his own…

It’s too shameful to say aloud. How I had defiled Francis’s friendship. How I’d allowed him to twist mine. Alexander is always so aware. Whatever self-hatred he thinks he understands, he wouldn’t understand my blindness. Worse...he might think I’m still capable of it- he might think I’m blind with him, and introducing that doubt to his perception of my judgment may be crueler than saying nothing at all. I want him to know what I see in him.

I shake my head.

It hurts him. I see it does when he turns his eyes away and blinks. He lifts his arm to wipe his mouth again, and I catch his wrist, crawling over his lap to kiss the corner of his lips, soft. He doesn’t move.

“This is enough for me...”

I don’t have to ask it for him to see the question there- can this be enough for him? Though he’s obviously not happy with it, he gives a soft smile and nods.

"It’s all I want,” I say.

His hands, reaching up to finish unbuttoning my vest, are slow and subdued, hesitant like he needs to touch just to be sure that he's still allowed, and it feels like I’m robbing him with righteousness. Like returning the apples my playmates stole for me from the crude man at the market. I’d always liked
apples, and I’d always hated that man.

When he’s successfully pushed off my coat and helped me untie the cravat, he grabs my arm and pulls me to lie down beside him. “If it's all you can give, I promise you...I can be content.”

WHEN I WAKE in the morning, it’s not to Shrewsberry’s nudging but a cold burst of wind. I roll over, seeking my friend’s warmth, but the blankets are pushed back, and the sound of grunting at the door has me sitting up and moving for my sword at the bedside desk, expecting an ambush.

Alexander is dangling in the doorway, lifting himself by the protruding log over the frame. He strains in the effort.

“What are you doing?”

In way of answer, he lifts himself again and counts “five,” then drops and starts pulling up again. I climb up from the bed and walk to him, scooping up his swinging knees as he gets to “seven”.

“Whatever ends you’re trying to accomplish here, couldn’t it be done with the door closed?” I say, letting most of his weight fall so he’d be satisfied with his exercise and end it soon. “May I suggest push-ups?”

“I thought you were asleep,” he grunts.

“I was,” I say. “That was eleven.”

His arms are shaking too violently to continue, and I have enough sense to let go of his knees before he drops, panting for breath. He shuts the door and walks past me to the washbasin.

“Is eleven good?” I watch while he wipes the sweat off his face. “I mean by your usual standards.”

“It’s better than eight,” he says, a dismissal and an admission in one. It’s obvious he’s been doing this for days. I want to be relieved for his improvement, but the feeling is dulled by the secrecy in which he’s been finding it. Our physical improvement had been one of my favorite pleasures to share with him in the first golden weeks we’d met.

I know he doesn’t want me to say anything about it, but I imagine he’d been capable of much more before his fever, recalling how easily he had climbed the tree at Pennypacker’s Mill. If this coldness in him is shame that he’s become so weak, he should know that I’m aware of how strong he should be. “It’s amazing how quickly strength wanes when unpracticed.”

He looks at me and drops the washrag. “That’s part of it,” he says. “...It’s also how quickly we become unaccustomed to enduring pain when it’s self-induced. There’s weakness in excessive comfort.”

Something in his tone is strange and accusing, and I know he’s layered his meaning, so it’s not something so obvious, but, “Are you accusing me of getting fat?”

His brows draw in momentary incredulity, then he can’t help but break and laugh at me, “Frail perhaps- too much time spent as my nurse.”

Oh, I see, it’s alright to point out that I’ve been taking care of him so long as it’s a joke at my expense. I roll my eyes and deflect with the usual flirting return, “Laugh your heart out- caring for you as I do makes me weak, har har.”
He stops and falters, still smiling but letting hands fall to his hips and turning away. “Yes, well. You don’t have so much loss to make up,” he says, sober again. “I am the picture of atrophy.”

I walk to the basin and grab his arm, leading him back to bed to sit down while I dress for the day. “You’re a reflection of our army,” I say. “And once we’re all fed and restored, we’ll get on with our exercises and be back in fighting shape.”

He narrows his eyes. “You sound strangely optimistic about that-”

“Well, we should have more to eat soon. The General’s ordered Greene to seize properties that the farmers are withholding.”

His face pales.

I know that he agrees out of necessity, but it’s strange. I have the feeling he’s afraid, and I did not expect that response. “Before you ask, yes it is necessary and yes it is going to be controlled. General Greene is forming a codified system of rules that our suppliers must abide by and only by violations do their properties become object to seizure.”

“You called this a war of character,” he says, voice quiet but hands gripping tight at the mattress. “What character do we become to the civilized world if we have to steal to survive?”

He’s too caught on the rules of propriety to see the principle- that survival is a natural right and one we should never suffer to be refused. “A hero if it wins us the war,” I say in answer. “Aren’t you the one who sees so much honor in honesty, fairness- I’m quite sure it was you lecturing me on the finer qualities of thieves and vagabonds. This controlled theft could save us from dissolution. It’s not always bad. Just consider what glory you could’ve earned if Washington had the nerve to send you into New Brunswick to steal their treasury.”

Even though I’ve tried to speak smilingly, he flinches at that. I don’t know how I’m making this worse. “Maybe- if I was a pirate or some rogue king…” he considers his next words, like some heavy admission, “but there’s no glory in stealing. If we can never rise above survival, how can we spare the focus to generate the grand ideas of liberty and freedom that we claim to pursue? Survival pits us to our worst, and wouldn’t it be some kind of hell to be remembered only for your worst deeds?”

WHEN LADY WASHINGTON is in headquarters that day, talking with McHenry about some treatment she wanted to help him administer to the sick men in camp, I realize the opportunity to address Alex’s fears.

It’s strange that he should be so adamant to protect our image to the civilized world, that he would protest an act of necessity in favor of suffering. With all that Alexander talks of the allure in the turning away from English society and the value in our own judgments of morality, he is remarkably like Francis...so quick to defy the rules of society and yet so afraid to renounce their value.

I have to wonder if he shares Francis’s delusion that embodying their rules will give him a place with them.

In this war, a war to change ideas- about the rights of the governed and human dignity, how can we encourage the farce that manners equal merit? The means should be as good as the ends...but when that’s not possible, the best we can do is be better than the British, and to that end, our best course is to put effective people in the posts where their skills are most needed.
I dig Alex’s study of the quartermaster department out of my satchel and approach the Lady politely. I flatter her efforts in camp and express interest in her work with the sick and frostbitten. I guide her concerns to the poor supply of clothes and meat to our men, and when the right moment arises and her sympathies have peaked, I introduce Alexander’s ideas and my proposal of solution.

“We’ve done our own investigations into the sources of neglect in our ranks,” I say. “I’m sure you’ve heard of our conspiracy in Mifflin, and I’m sure the General has told you how that man and his faction have worked to defile the reputations of his closest advisors…”

She raises her brows knowingly. “I’m sure I know all about that,” she says.

“I think it would be satisfying retribution if one of those advisors took the reins of his department.”

She laughs, wickedly pleased with the suggestion. But when she looks at me, I don’t think it’s the first time she’s considered it. “Oh you sound so much like him,” she says.

When she puts her hand into the crease of my elbow, I get the hint to offer my arm, and we walk to the front of the house. I open the door for her.

As we walk down the Gulph Road path, she’s small at my side and gathers stares from all around, but no one dares to come close enough to hear her as she talks so openly. “I’ve heard our little Alexander’s made a fine friend out of you,” she says.

I don’t know what to say, but it’s obvious she expects an answer, so, “I like to think so.”

“I’m glad to hear it,” she says. “Everyone needs someone they can confide in. I’ve heard he tells you everything...like when he’s working on his sickbed to produce a report of our expenses that I can use to lobby Congress for funds.”

She’s smiling, but I’m terrified by it. “He’s eager to be back to work,” I say, glad when my voice is steady.

“Oh, I understand, but what work he’s eager for is my question. It is rare for us- to find a partner who is loyal but also competent and clever enough in his own right to bring that report to my hands precisely as my husband’s seeking counsel about your father’s request for recommendations of Quartermaster General.”

I wonder if her hand on my wrist can feel how my heartbeat gallops away.

“When my husband received such a subdued letter from General Gates, I had to wonder what drove him to confront the man so directly, if perhaps you knew how dearly my husband regrets this whole business with the Marquis and your friend’s protective feelings. It makes me think our Alexander’s found a good match for himself in you.” She smiles at me again, and her pride makes me uncomfortable. “Not that he’s ever had any trouble moving my husband's hand for himself.”

I realize with chilling clarity that she’s valuing the connections that my friendship can offer Alexander, the ways I can help him mold himself into a proper gentleman- the sort that never needs to defend himself when he can have others do it for him. I don’t know if I’m glad that she cares about his upward mobility or if I’m insulted that it’s the first feature of our relationship that stands out to her. The implication that Alex would use my affection for personal gain...

But, it makes me wonder how involved she might be in helping his prospects.
ALEXANDER IS ALREADY asleep when I come home to our cabin that night, so I don’t have the chance to ask him.

IN THE MORNING, I wake Alex when Shrewsberry comes to rouse me, offer to go running if he’s up for it. Knowing that he’s been going out alone, I would rather keep his company and have him keep mine if he’s going to be straining himself. I’m sure he knows that’s why I offer, and I shouldn’t be surprised when he grumbles and rolls back over in response.

Shrewsberry walks with me to the Potts house. In the morning dark, I hadn’t noticed his lack of shoes until we reach the front step and I wipe my boots off. It’s not unusual in this camp, especially for a servant, to have worn out his shoes to an unserviceable state, but it makes the coins I’d stashed in the cabin for Meade—meant for ‘Washington’s happiness’, feel like a wretched waste.

“Take a few minutes to warm your feet,” I say, stepping in as he holds the door. “The other boys won’t be up for a few minutes. Can’t have you losing toes.”

He nods, and we walk into the office. I hand off my cloak, and he hangs it on a chair while I poke at the fire. Billy must already be awake to have built it. I glance over at my valet.

“All the years you’ve been with our family, you must know my father as well as I do,” I say. It’s my impulse to check if I can ask him a question, but I won’t ask him to make the show of giving permission he couldn’t refuse. “What do you think it means that he hasn’t replied to my letter about the battalion? I feel like he’s ignoring it…”

Shrewsberry raises a brow, then he steps around the armchair, coming to center near the fire. “You mean t’ask why he’d avoid a subject?”

Oh. It’s one he doesn’t want me to mention.

Shrewsberry seems to see how easily I realize this and softens his tone. "He thinks you’ll be ‘mbarrassed,” he says, “when your world fights you back.” He drops to carefully sit on the floor and put his feet near the hearth, and I’m glad for the trust he shows to come so close and relax near me. “He thinks…” I can see the man hesitate, and I drop to a knee beside him, he looks over at me, not quite meeting my eyes, holding his feet. “Your father loves you. And, he’s sad for you ‘bout this. He thinks the way you think about people like me’s his fault.”

I drop my eyes at that. So much of what I think was formed in the efforts my father placed in raising me, but this was my own. This was his fear and my unworldly virtue, a constant source of concern for him, my castle in the sky. “And how do I think of people like you?” I say, careful not to imply he’s insulted.

Slowly, he looks at me direct and imploring, like he can see the blustering fury in me and he knows it. Like he’s never trusted me to unleash it but he’s envious of the potential. “That it’s the world that’s got us broke,” he says. “That it's that, that's gotta be fixed.”

WHEN THE MAIL COMES, I push aside notes from influential family friends and important military personnel, but nothing’s come from my father. There is a note from Lafayette, and it consumes my attention for several minutes while the volunteer aides mill from their posts and return to their respective camps. He mostly complains of the weather along his ride, but I’m glad to hear from him nonetheless—glad for what it might mean about our friendship.
Across the table, McHenry pulls up a chair. “Did he mention the rumor about the challenge?”
“What?” I look up from the note.
“Tench’s letter had a word of it, here,” he fishes in his bag and holds out another letter to me in
Lafayette’s curling hand.
I read it and nearly laugh, “Is this true?”
McHenry nods, with a grin. “I was going to bring it to Meade, but maybe it’s best you do. I'm off for
some business in Carolina and he’s always so interested in duels. I think he’ll be pleased with
whoever shows'm this.”
I ignore the hint that I have some offense to correct with my brother on staff. Meade has never been
one to hold grudges for differing opinions. “Do you think Gates will accept it?”
“Oh, I hope so,” McHenry says.

I BRING THE LETTER to my cabin, deciding that it’s late and Meade will appreciate the comedy
in the morning, but I find him sitting in my desk chair and talking with Alex as I come inside.
Their conversation stops.
I think maybe McHenry was right that I owe Meade an apology, but before I can muster one that
doesn’t use my innocence about his wife as an excuse, he speaks up. “Hamilton will be allowed back
to work at headquarters,” he says. “At the desk all day for now, but Lady Washington wanted him to
return to the General’s side.”
There’s nothing in his expression that hints he’s aware of my role in her summons, but I don’t mind it
right now. “That’s great.”
“A room’s been arranged in the upstairs wing of the house,” Meade says. “You two will share, of
course.”
“Meade’s going to help me move my bags in the morning,” Alex adds. “And we’ll repurpose the
cabin into storage for whatever forage Greene takes.”
I’m not sure why Alexander would solicit Meade’s help with his bags when we can take them
ourselves or use Shrewsberry’s assistance...or why he mentions Greene’s foraging with such an
approving tone now. But, I’m not sure either of those topics are ones I’d like to argue in Meade’s
company- or at all, so I bring out the letter from Lafayette. “I have some news for both of you as
well,” I say.
Once I’ve read the letter and our laughter about its content has died down, Meade explains that,
during his employment in the British military before this war began, General Gates was promoted
from the rank of captain to major for carrying the news of victory in the Caribbean to London. It
explains the man’s blasé attitude towards promoting Wilkinson from an aide to a Brigadier General
back in October- and compounds the self-importance he displayed to consider carrying the news of
his victory such a grave honor.
“So of course the line of forty-seven colonels above Wilksy in succession were in uproar,” Meade
says. Though we’ve all known about this drama for months, it is fun to reminisce each act of Gates’s
steady decline. “Of course Gates didn’t want to give him up as his fink with Conway's letter debacle,


imagine the mobs he’ll have on his doorway when those colonels find out he’s turned on the same man he promoted over them…”

Alex throws his head back and laughs.

My own grin is nearly splitting my face to see him finally able to laugh about the ordeal that had impugned his character all winter. “Now that Wilks admitted it, the hesitation just makes it look so much worse,” I laugh. “I hope he does take it to the field.”

As the man who did tell of Conway’s perjurious letter, throwing Washington and his entire staff into a paranoia of treason in our ranks, Wilkinson deserved the accusation, and the challenge he made to Gates- an aging war hero and his former patron, makes the affair even more hilarious. Two liars marching into a field to shoot at each other and protect their reputations against each other’s lies.

“Gates would have to be an idiot to do it,” Alex says. “It’d be like if I challenged Washington and he accepted, it's so far beneath him to even respond-”

And, still laughing, Meade replies, “That’s why we’re hoping!”

I grin, sure now that whatever uneasiness had existed between us is gone. Thank God and McHenry for humor in bad taste.

Alex has calmed himself, but his amused smile still lingers. “Well, what does it even matter now? He already won.”

I lean back on my arm where I’d sat myself on the bed in our amusement. “What do you mean?”

“He’ll keep his titles,” Alex says, and his smile wanes and falls. “He’ll keep his rank and his prestige, and he’ll be allowed the opportunity to gain more. He won’t pay for this at all since Washington’s given him leave to throw the blame of this whole affair on Conway. I mean, I know why we must allow it, I know the army can’t afford to be divided, but Gates must take some comfort that posterity will remember it all as the Conway conspiracy…”

Considering the florid attack I had encouraged Washington to make against the Brigadier General in his letter to Gates, I’m glad Gates might at least have that to spark some guilt in his breast. I’m glad when Meade defends the tactic, “I think all of us who took part in dismantling his support will be wise enough not to allow him another chance at embarrassing us.”

“Besides,” I say, “it's best that a foreign officer takes the fall if it means our children remember we stayed unified.”

Alex frowns, brows knit with a faraway expression. “I’d rather posterity remembers us as we are.”

WHEN MEADE LEAVES, I undress for bed, glancing at Alexander, expecting that he’s picked up a book he's so quiet. He hasn't. I pull the covers back and sit with him, still working at my cravat. “You're bothered about the duel,” I say. Then reconsider, “No...you’re still bothered about Gates.”

He looks at me. “I'm bothered that you're not bothered.”

“Ah.” I finally catch the knot and get the fabric loose from my neck. “I'm not pleased that no one’s come out before all of Congress, America, and France and decried Gates and Mifflin as the fiends they are,” I say. “In fact, I've got my father in a similar outrage. He hates Washington’s allowance as well...”
He hums and seems to accept this as the olive branch that it is, but he's still unhappy. Before I can point that out, he says, “It will be nice to go back to work.”

I grin. “Ah- yes, I was glad to hear that. I put in a word for you with Lady Washington.”

He glances at me and indulges a smile, teasing, “Oh, I see. Trying to distract me at a desk so I won’t wake you with my exercises?”

I push his hair back just to touch the softness. “Or I figure, if you have the strength to be so...lively each morning, you have the strength to write some letters.”

I grin and see the moment he understands my crude meaning when his face blushes a deep scarlet and has nothing to say. It makes his jaw clench until I laugh off my own flirtation.

He glares at the blanket and picks at the strings of it, so while he’s distracted, I tuck his hair behind his ear and say, “You’re still upset.” He looks up and gives a small eyeroll that punctuates my understatement. “But, is it the principle of injustice or is it personal resentment for Gates?”

“I barely have a name in this country and he threatened to ruin it with insinuations about my character-”

I take his defensive tone as confirmation, his grudge is personal. “He didn’t mention you by name and we...”

Alex glares and warns me, “Words matter. Do not defend him.”

“Oh, I won’t,” I say. “But, it may reassure you that you have friends here, eager to defend you against the slightest insinuation.” I grab his knee and drag him closer so he’ll let go of the blanket and stop tearing it. “Your name was never even mentioned, and Colonel Morgan warned the General about the possibility that Gates had meant you. Washington wrote to Gates himself to be sure the idea of anyone from his own staff copying the letter was dropped immediately.”

Alex snorts, “Because that’d be a disgrace to him.”

“Maybe.” I allow him that, scooting my back to sit against the wall and pull him to rest his head in my lap. He resists until I drop my hand and he decides it for himself, laying on me and tucking a hand under my thigh. “Maybe it’s time to accept that your family here cares about you- beyond how effective you are to the cause…”

He snorts and I refrain from pinching his nose in admonition. I’m sure that would be a fast way to earn his fist in my side. While my flirtations have recently been met with frustration and discomfort from him, kissing the bridge of his nose is an impulse I don’t resist.

He allows it with a frown, then rolls onto his side, facing me, and curls up his knees. I’m not sure he intends it, but it prevents any further kisses I might impart from finding his face. We sit like that in silence for several long, fond minutes, and I stroke his hair and let my head rest against the wall. He’s quiet enough that I think he’s fallen asleep, and I consider nudging him to move before my legs fall asleep.

Then, “So, family?” he says. “Is that what we are?”

The question shouldn’t surprise me, but it does. I can’t immediately confirm it. How we kiss...the way that I want him- whether or not I can act on it, it’s certainly not brotherly. It’s something I can’t- don’t want to name, as if defining it makes it elicit...properly inescapable.
He must know what my silence means, pushing up on one arm, braced over my lap and so close our noses nearly touch. “What are we?”

“Why does it matter?”

He presses his lips thin, “Because I think it matters to you…”

I’m not sure it does. It matters what we can’t be. “We…we’ve both already said we’re frien-”

“Don’t answer now.” Before I can respond, he turns and maneuvers himself back to my side, pulling the blanket up over himself and holding it out until I realize it’s an invitation to scoot down beside him. He turns and picks up my arm to put it around his chest. “I just think you’re the sort of person that it should matter to…that you might find some resolution in it,” he settles and slides his leg over mine, “and I wasn’t sure if you’d thought about it.”

ANOTHER LETTER ARRIVES from my father the next day, with a mention of the Chevalier de Mauduit’s appointment and Fleury’s assignment to Lafayette’s command, an update about the sparsity of delegates in Congress, but again no mention of my battalion.

Down the hall, Meade is helping Alex move our bags into the upstairs bedroom. With Tilghman in Trenton on business, Harrison waiting for the Board to disband, Walker all but disappeared after his fever, and Fitz on the road back from York, I don’t think Lady Washington urged her husband to bring Alexander back to work as an act of sympathy for his personal wishes. There's much work to be done.

Alex must see me watching him, carrying his uniform to the stairs because he turns in the doorway and his eyes drop to the table and the letter at my hands. “From your father?” he says.

I nod, and before he can ask, “There’s nothing about the battalion.”

He purses his lips and turns back to settling in.

WHEN FITZ RETURNS to headquarters, I suspect I might have conjured him with a thought. Buried under reports of desertions and pleas for larger rations allotments, Alex and I spent the morning in near-complete silence, copying the same polite message from His Excellency’s response sheet- marked “if the officers are complaining”. Besides an extra pair of hands while Meade makes runs around camp and McHenry packs up his medical practice, Fitz might offer me the opportunity for conversation and humor. Alexander has been morose and unnervingly silent all day. I’ve convinced myself he wants to focus and I shouldn’t take offense with it.

But, as Fitz comes inside, he doesn't have the mood about him for joking. “Laurens,” he says in way of greeting. “Boys, is the General upstairs?”

“He is,” Alex says.

Fitz immediately gathers himself, tossing his hat to a peg on the wall and fixing the lay of his collar. “Laurens, you may want to come with me for this.”

I glance at Alexander, shrug in reply to his raised brow, and set down my quill.

Following Fitz upstairs, he stops in the hall before the General’s office and hands me a letter from
Patrick Henry, addressed to Washington. It's not the note that's of interest; attached is a copy, marked with a congressional seal, of an unsigned blast at General Washington’s command. Patrick Henry writes that a copy was made before he was given leave by my father to send the original to Washington’s hands.

“You recognize any of the words?” Fitz says.

I read over the first few lines before I find familiar phrases against Washington’s counsel in General Greene and alluding to Hamilton. “Thoughts of a Free Man ...do you think this was influenced by the pamphlet?”

“Oh, I agree,” he says, then knocks on the wall by the opening to the office. Before I can ask why Fitz didn’t invite Alex upstairs to join us, Washington’s voice invites us inside, and the elder aide steps in and gives him a formal greeting. The General expresses his pleasure to see Fitzgerald returned safely to camp, then pleasantries aside, Fitz sets the letter on Washington’s desk. “We suspect Benjamin Rush, sir- by the handwriting that was on the original document,” he says. As always, the name sends a rush of anger and fear through my bones. “It was submitted to the assembly a few weeks ago, before the committee in camp made it...less fashionable to produce such insults against you.”

Washington says nothing, picking up the note and reading in silence.

Fitz goes on, “I brought it to Harrison and we noted the same phrases, repeated from that pamphlet last September. If Mister Henry is right that Rush wrote this, then Rush also wrote that pamphlet.” He turns and looks at me, and I give a nod. “We shouldn’t be surprised of it either with how we,” he motions between me and himself, “saw him speaking with Mifflin- with the things he said about our performance at Germantown.”

“And his friendliness with Conway,” I add for good measure.

“Which, speaking of,” Fitz turns and digs in his shoulder bag for another letter. I immediately recognize my father’s handwriting as he passes it off to His Excellency. “I spoke to President Laurens to ask about his seeing the letter when Conway was passing through York.”

He says that shortly after my father met Conway, the Brigadier General dashed off to show it to other delegates, but my father copied down the phrase “what a pity there is but one Gates”. He says that the whole letter was couched in terms of the most bitter invectives, but I know the importance of words- of what they can mean. If Conway’s rhetoric could be explained away, if he’d been able to defend what he’d said in person, it would've made Washington’s hatred for the man seem unprofessional, and pressing the issue all the more dangerous.

I have to trust that my father’s acuity for politics were enough to carry us.

AS WE RETURN to the downstairs office, Meade’s back from his run for the post, pouring letters over the table while Hamilton keeps his nose down and pretends he doesn’t see the mountain of
papers growing in front of him.

Fitz shows him the letter from Henry, and we set to work, mostly sorting but occasionally plucking a letter and sharing the contents of interest. Harrison believes he’ll be able to return to us within a week as he’s secured a replacement to fill his post. General Greene has found wheat and forage on his raids, but has no wagons to carry them back to camp - we all thank Mifflin with colorful language and gestures amongst ourselves.

Alexander stops me in the middle of a rant against the quartermasters, “If I schedule the hearing against Maxwell in early March do you think it’ll conflict with the prisoner exchanges?” he leans towards me, pushing his notes forward. He’s been ignoring most of our conversation while he works on the court-martial cases Tilghman had given him. I turn to read what he’s showing me. “I was going to see if I’d be allowed in audience on Washington’s behalf,” he explains.

I glance at him, “On Washington’s or your own?”

He shrugs and takes his note back.

"If the time conflicts, we’ll take up your exchange duties,” I say.

He grunts his recognition without giving thanks, turns directly back to work.

I'm not insulted, but his focus is so pointed sometimes, it’s too tempting not to brush at it with something soft and see if he’ll bristle, so I turn my quill on him and tease the tip of the feather along the back of his hand.

That catches him. He looks down at his hand then glares up at me like he recognizes the flirting gesture. He swats at the quill.

At his side, Fitz is doing a dramatic reading of a letter from Wayne’s camp about that general’s foraging expedition. He declares that our favorite field commander’s bested four-thousand of Howe’s men.

Meade plucks the letter and corrects him - he repelled and outran the attack with Pulaski’s meager cavalry.

Fitz protests the dullness of that description until his dramatics reduce him to coughing.

Alexander scoots his chair away.

I stand and bring Fitzgerald’s attention to a map at the far end of the table from Alex’s seat, bringing a letter from Tilghman. On his ride to Trenton, our brother’s found cattle and grain within easy reach, and he’s written to request troops to take the cache. I consume Fitz’s attention with helping me plan the proposal for an audience with His Excellency.

AFTER THE VOLUNTEERS have packed up their things and vacated the house, and Fitz has retired to the parlor guest room for the night, Meade and I keep Alexander company while he adds final touches to his letter to General Howe about the exchanges. He’s long-since set aside his notes about the court-martials, but I think the subject has left my friend in an even more sour mood, and by the glances Meade is giving me, I can tell he expects me to do something about it.

I can’t think of a good way to comfort him with Meade as our audience...
Alex breaks the tension himself, “Stop staring!” he snaps.

Meade raises his hands in surrender.

At his side, I give my friend a gentle smile before he makes another bite at Meade, "We're only wondering what's got you angry like this..."

“I’m not..." he huffs, "if there is ever a sick man in any given room, there must be some divine mandate he'll plant himself right next to me!"

Meade’s brows jump and I can see he wants to laugh.

But, Alex is serious, “I've only just been invited back to work and His Excellency’s trying to put me back to bed with a cough—"

Then Meade does laugh, “How could His Excellency possibly—"

“By sending him to sit right next to me!”

I could say that I’d stood beside Fitz the entire time he’d had the General’s audience and sabotaging his health was not mentioned once. Still, this disquiet in Alex’s mood has been constantly looming, I think since I’d refused his affections yet again. I know the strain that unmet arousal places on the body. I’m not a stranger to the effects. And knowing the underlying cause of his anger, I have to sympathize. “I hate that he coughs only once,” I say.

Meade looks at me.

“I just mean- he draws all this breath then...” I draw in air and mimic one of Fitz’s vociferous, echoing hacks. Then stop. “Like that- only one! If someone’s going to bother coughing, it should be vigorous and effective- to clear whatever obstructions are causing discomfort, coughing only once cannot possibly be accomplishing anything but disturbing everyone around him. What’s the point? Getting attention? Ensuring everyone knows he's suffering- and shares that pain?” I glance at Alex, “I mean, without any other purpose to it, it is just spreading sick air.”

They both stare at me for a long moment.

Then Alex gestures to me like proof of the validity of his complaint.

“I've always been in favor of purposeful throat clearing,” I say.

Meade looks back and forth between us then throws up his hands. “You two are incorrigible. No one does anything as intentionally as you boys seem to think they do.”

AS WE READY to retire to bed, I feel we’re both strangely quiet, not just in conversation but in posture. Even in our silence together there’s always been warmth and ease, no need for words to convey meanings already mutually-understood, but there’s simply a lack...of anything.

Alex shucks his coat efficiently and hangs it, openly exhausted as though he’s alone in the room with no one to judge it. I might be glad for that casual vulnerability if it felt intentional. It feels more like there’s a dressing wall between us and he's not minding me at all. With more space than we were afforded in the cabin, two beds and two closets, a desk and a hearth, it’s understandable that we shouldn’t be confined, constantly so close, but I don’t like his distance.
“I could give you a massage,” I say—mostly just to break the silence and tease at the knots coiling between us, a way to ease his frustrations.

He refuses curtly.

I drop my clothes in a heap on my bed, glaring down at the mattress. “Well, do you want to share anyway?” I say, motioning vaguely to our cots. He’d taken the one by the window and I’m glad for it—if there’s a draft, he’ll have an excuse to crawl into my bed, though...he’s so touchy, I’m not sure he will if I don’t offer it so, “I’d actually prefer to share,” I say, grinning, “and I think we’ve been given an allowance with this room. This door has a lock.”

He’d been unbuckling his boots and managed to get one off before I’d spoken. He drops it with a loud thunk. I meet his eyes, but there’s too much rawness to look there without being swallowed in guilt. “You can’t say things like that,” he says, both firm and pleading at once.

“I’m sorry—”

“No,” he sits heavy on his cot, looking away to busy himself with the other boot. “We’ve been at this dance for months, John, just...fumbling and tripping over ourselves every time we start to get comfortable with each other. I don’t think either of us is half so bad at this as he’s making himself seem just by being so...damn unsure what we’re even doing. It’s humiliating and I’m done humiliating myself to you.”

“I…” whatever has him feeling like that, “I don’t think you’ve done anything to be embarrassed about…” depraved maybe, lecherous in intent, but I have no room to judge him for those things, so I’m the last person he should be embarrassed with. Just because I’ve said no to those advances doesn’t mean I haven’t wanted them.

He doesn’t seem comforted by that. “I know what I want to be with you,” he says. “I’ve survived so that we can be that.”

It goes without saying...the word lovers hanging in the air uncomfortably, and I think words matter more to him then they ever did to me.

I'm afraid of his impatience, and as if that shows on my face, he speaks clearly, “I'm not asking for us to stop this dance altogether. I am willing to change my step if you'd just pick a song.”

“I’ve told you what I want…” I don’t want to meet his eyes like this. It all feels so obvious and complicated to explain. “The profound and productive love between friends, Aristotelian virtue...all that. I thought we were there until you tried to-"

I stop myself when he shuts his eyes so tight I’d think someone stabbed him.

I don’t want this. I don’t want to fall into the pull, to be lovers, but I don’t want him to loathe the part of himself that wants that. How can I make him hate himself when hate is so far from how I feel? How can I deny him without making myself worse than Francis?

“You can’t flirt with me,” he says. “I know you don’t mean anything by it, but I always have, and I can’t...not.” He tugs off his boot with unnecessary force, and as soon as he’s half-undressed he puts his legs under the blankets, refusing my long-forgotten offer to share. “So, don’t. You can’t-just...don’t encourage what you aren’t willing to accept, and I can let the matter drop.”

He's staring at me plainly. He makes it sound like a simple solution. As I consider it, I think, he may be right that it's the cure for this. I could have stopped myself from loving Francis if he'd just...left me alone. It would have taken time and heartache, but I'd move on.
But, what we’ve created is not that. I can't let go when we’ve barely touched something so promising- while I know it’s still there to be grasped. I'm afraid, by the time I might be strong enough to make the cut, I don’t think I’d survive the amputation. Still, if it preserves his comfort, I'll refrain. Still, I need him to know, "I've never meant anything against the way that you feel.”

He pulls the blankets up to his shoulders. “It wouldn’t matter.”

I don’t want to get into bed yet, “But, I don’t...I don't hate it, truly. It’s like you said. If it feels right, it must be right, and we do a lot of things in the pursuit of freedom that English society would frown on, so...I don’t mean to say you’re wrong, just—”

“Because I wouldn’t take it well?” He pulls his blanket to his chin, “Don’t lie to yourself. You don’t find it disgusting that I want such things- you’re disgusted that you do. It’s the philosophy.” He rolls over to face the wall.

“I wish you’d stop telling me I hate myself for this so I won’t suspect that you’re just hurt I’ve said no—”

“Alright, John. Aristotle was still a pederast.”

I have nothing to say to that.

OUR WORK is interrupted throughout the next day as Lady Washington has invited the congressional delegates from Moore Hall to dinner at the Potts House.

It means that the General’s house servants are given reign over the dining room we had been using to manage his papers. We spend half an hour clearing the table of sensitive military documents, journals, and writing supplies. Considering the late nights several of us have been pulling just to keep up with his correspondence and the short-handedness we’ve been working with among various distractions, shortages, and conspiracies, a fancy dinner is the last thing on anyone’s mind.

“What were we saying about wives being frivolous?” Alex says to me casually as we each carry a handle on a chest of the General’s books, moving directly past Meade.

His tone is teasing enough that Meade huffs and lets it pass without protest.

I’m just glad Alex still has his humor.

THE DINNER IS NOT what I had expected. I think, like Alexander, I had dismissed the affair as a formality to display Lady Washington’s hospitality to the esteemed gentlemen from Congress- an important task in the way of keeping reputations. As the only woman sitting at the table, she does a fine job of commentating on the concerns that the gentlemen on the committee had become such helpful advocates to address. Her excessive flattery of the delegates aside, I'm impressed with how quickly she’s perceived the state of camp, and I suppose the ladies do see more than we want them to.

But, as the conversation progresses, discussions of Washington’s recent interactions with Congress begin to close on one particular topic- his recommendations for Quartermaster General. I quickly realize that this is political recruitment- an effort to win the delegate’s support for Washington’s proposal in that department.
My heart races to hear her say, like any loyal wife to such a man as General Washington, that the job should belong to someone who keeps close counsel with her husband. She says that man should be intimately familiar with the needs of the army and the best ways to meet them.

I turn to look at Alex across the table, grinning when he takes a bite of potatoes, totally unaware.

With the way Rush speaks of his counsel, and how his place as Washington’s right hand neatly parallels General Mifflin’s proud origins, I’ll be glad when it destroys them to hear-

“General Greene has always kept good counsel, hasn’t he?” she says.

WE’RE DISMISSED FROM WORK after the meal to let the house servants clean up, and make short conversation in the hall- which I have no interest in. I politely excuse myself to ‘write personal letters’.

When Alex’s footsteps trudge up the stairs, I’ve tossed my letters on the desk and dropped myself on my bed. “Thought you had to write your father?” he says. I don’t look up from the mattress as I hear him hanging up his coat and starting on his boots and socks. “Wouldn’t I love to be a fly on the wall when Mifflin hears his department’s going to Greene.”

I can hear the smile in his voice and it bothers me, “It should’ve been you.”

That throws him, “Me?”

I sit up, “I gave Washington’s wife your notes. She knows what you’ve been working on and how you fit the description perfectly. She didn’t even offer you as a candidate.”

He laughs, staring at me perplexed, “Because...I’m not one?”

“Why not?”

“Nobody knows me, John.” He’s still smiling, bashful, but, “I mean- besides the men that want to complain about me for having the General’s ear, but Greene’s just the same- if not more of an advisor than I am, and he doesn’t have my advantages here-”

“Advantages?”

“Nobody knows me.”

My confusion must show because he seems to see that he’ll have to explain it and his appalled amusement fades into something sober.

“Did you try to speak to her on my behalf about this too?” he says.

I nod.

“Well, she’s not the wrong audience for that. I thought to do the same thing myself when I got here. But, I wish I’d known you were going to her so I could warn you it wouldn’t work. She already knows that I could be an administrator on my own and she’s not going to allow it so long as her husband stands more to benefit from having me here.”

“I don’t understand.”

“Because you’re too kind to see people for their value to a cause.”
He gets up, barefoot and shirt untucked, and walks to my cot. Unexpectedly, he lifts one of my feet to help me with a boot— for no other apparent reason than to just be close. I sit up curiously.

“Nobody knows me—”

“You keep saying that.”

“Because it’s important. If I’m not tied intrinsically to big names in society, His Excellency stands nothing to risk if he needs to cut me loose and sever his affiliation with me…”

“That’s...terribly cynical. He does care about you.”

“Alright, well- look at the trouble His Excellency’s had in dealing with Mifflin and Gates precisely because he can’t toss them without risking his own web of connections. There are some bridges that man cannot burn and I’m an island to him.”

“Oh, so that’s why you want me to be a sailor so much,” I say, needing to lighten the mood somehow.

“Careful there, Laurens,” he warns, tugging off my second boot and inviting himself onto my cot. He drops a book onto the blanket and sits with his legs crossed beside me, casual. I get the hint and lean away from him to grab my letters from the desk by my bed. No flirting.

We settle into reading, shoulders pressed together and pages occasionally turning. I’m glad to be back to the sort of silences that feel warm and cozy, glad for space to think about what he’s said. Lady Washington was so sure that Alexander and I make good partners, and I know my friend seeks to exploit his own potential. I had thought our partnership would mean maneuvering him into influence, but it seems the meaning of that is more subtle than I anticipated. Maybe he can be most effective when his influence is least-percieved.

I come to a letter from my father, and only need to read a few lines to see, “He’s made a response to our battalion ideas.”

“Hmm?” Alex leans over my arm, a warm weight that keeps me anchored as the words I read do all they can to drag my heart through the floor.

“He’s dismissing it.”

It hurts. As it hurts any son to realize their father’s defeated— having never even tried...a man too occupied with heavier burdens to imagine I should be doing anything but taking my share of his load. He’s tried to coax me from this ledge, to pin me safe and sanguine to the earth. But, it was him who had raised the whip on the podium, cracked it on the back of my happy, muddled Charlestown, and now, I don’t believe he regrets it. He can say all he wants about the humanity of slaves. If he was going to regret the poison in our veins, he never would’ve allowed it. My blood is raging, pounding in my ears.

When Alex’s hands cover mine and bring the letter closer so he can read, he helps me hold the weight. His hand tightens over mine as I start to shake with something other than hurt.

I pull away and throw the letter into the empty hearth. “It doesn’t matter,” I say. “Hang Congress.”

“What?”

“Hang Congress,” I repeat, lips curling on the words, “Forget my father! Forget Washington- this plan is not wrong.”
Alex stares, something dark catching in his eyes, “No, no the message is good-”

“It’s the only good message! We’re fighting for freedom right? How long can we rally around an idea, build ourselves around it and neglect the nature of that character?” Alex shakes his head in agreement, “If we neglect who we are at our core- if we fight for liberty only in words, posterity will come howling down at our hypocrisy and this question will come back to devour us. Mark me.”

He grins at my anger. “So you’re going to fight for this? Truly?”

“It is my inheritance, and he supports it,” I push up to my knees, and Alexander sits up to lean into me. “Why should I not take what’s mine that he’s too afraid to use?”

Alex raises his hands to show he has no answer.

I say, “He’s hiding because he’s too busy. He’s just scared- what this will do to our reputation, to our wealth. That’s all these men care about.”

“And you don’t,” it’s not a question, and he grins. “If America becomes something great, it will be because men like you form our character. Men with real advantages that the world gave to them, aware of how to use those gifts against her.”

"Exactly."

"So, I suppose the first step is recruitment," he says, pushing up from the bed to gather writing materials. "You'll have the men from your father's plantation, and if you know anyone of a similar mind in South Carolina, we can write to them or try to recruit a courier to gauge their interest. I'm afraid I can't offer slaves to that cause, but I know people who could help with financing or taking whatever else we need. Muskets and swords at the least, but if we have enough men, we could try to get cannons- that would convince them to give commissions-"

"Wait..." I'm confused, "What are you talking about?"

"Making a battalion?" he says, bewildered.

"Just like that? Without any Act to officiate it?"

He stares at me and the excitement that had made him so animated goes out like a light, "You just said hang Congress."

"Because I won't be able to do this through my father as of right now- that's not...I didn't mean...whatever you're saying."

"Making a battalion is what I'm saying." He puts his hands on his hips, "The best militia units were formed from fraternity groups in small communities that initiated themselves, they drilled and made themselves effective fighters and tacticians and it was their successes that got them charters from their states. Why can we not do that with a battalion-sized force?"

"And expect Congress to allow it?"

"Expect them to thank us with commissions. If they can’t be moved, we make them. The officiation can come after, can't it?"

"Alex..." I scoot to the edge of my bunk and sit up to stare at him, trying to catch the water he's pouring on this oil flame. "Those advantages I have that you so admire...I only have those so long as I can use my father's name and his money. What do you think happens to that support if I try to
raise...what is...essentially a slave revolt?"

"It's not a revolt if it's an organized fighting force working on the same side as Congress-"

"An organized fighting force made of people's property-"

"Willingly given."

"...which they will be even less willing to give up if they know that, when this idea fails, the blame for their slaves' involvement will fall on their heads as well."

He stops at that and freezes. When he turns away, it's slow and resigned, a concession even if he doesn't want to look at it. As he finishes readying himself for bed, he doesn't speak, pacified. I'm not sure if it's the logic of my argument or the fact that I believe his idea would fail, but that excited flame that had sparked in him for just a minute has flickered out. I regret it. I know the allure of the idea because it's a beautiful one, the prospect of challenging the world to an ultimatum.

Accept what we're doing or try and stop us...

He crawls under the covers without another word.

BARON FRIEDRICH WILHELM VON STEUBEN is a name that's been passed around offhandedly before in headquarters. Men arriving from France, seeking commissions and rank have become so common I don't think much of the name or title when a formal letter of introduction arrives in the pile of notes my father forwards me from Congress.

I remember Baron de Kalb had mentioned that Steuben had some connection to Fredrick the Great and that giving him Conway's job would be a clever response to his insults...

I hadn't thought much of it, but when Steuben's introduction confirms that connection, declaring him a 'Lieut. Genl in the King of Prussia's service, whom he attended in all his campaigns, being his Aide de Camp, quartermaster genl. etc', I'm not sure I believe one man can possibly be so many things...and if he is, that he could possibly be coming to us for a commission. Sure enough, when my father informs me that General Washington is the only man other than Baron Steuben's former commander, the King of Prussia, whom he wished to practice the military arts with, I'm convinced none of it's true.

The story has so many marks of Doctor Franklin and Beaumarchais's storytelling that, when my mind tries to conjure an image, I feel like I'm casting a Figaro to court the entire American continent. It's a strange picture...someone that our commissioners in France are so intent to maneuver into influence in society that they would create a man with too many merits to actually exist.

But if nobody knows him, it's the most effective way to make sure we'll use him...

I pick up the letter and take it to the window where Alexander had been working on his exchange letter. He doesn't look up at first and I consider him, all his surety and stress. In his sulking about our battalion, he’s managed not to see an opportunity, and in my surprise, I realize its brilliance. I think this is exactly what I had wanted from him all this time. A chance to build something together, worth all this useless mutual admiration that always fell short of surmounting the doubts they contradicted.

But, I think in this way, we can make something we’ll both admire ourselves for. I put the introduction letter under his nose, insistent that he pay attention to me. "You helped design improvements for the quartermaster department that Greene will take the credit for, and you're fine
with it. I understand why now, but what about the Inspector General?"

He turns and looks at me, confused.

"You shrugged at the post before, but...what if-" I point at the introduction letter, raising my brows in suggestion, "we make the Inspector General post something that will improve Washington’s performance- as you said, so the dissenters have nothing to complain about."

“What do you mean?” he says, looking down at the note to find the answer himself.

I pull up a chair to watch his eyes flick across the page, squinting and drawing his brow. I think, if my father is successful in making the appointment he intends for Steuben, Alex will do everything he can to charm this man into Washington’s favor on his own. But I want him to recognize that I can be a valuable partner in that endeavor. For all that I know Alexander advantages himself upon opportunities, I’m not sure he sees one here in the way that I do, and in return, I’ll press him into the best position to exploit his potential as I know he so desperately desires.

I’m seeing here a chance to prove that we are our best as a team. To prove that this is what we are...partners.

“The Baron von Steuben?” his eyes are dark when they jump to me, “I’ve never heard of him...are we sure he served under Frederick?”

“No idea,” I admit, but I can’t suppress my grin, recognizing the interest in his eyes. “But, if he’s effective, do you think anyone will care?”

He stares at me and seems to understand what I’m suggesting, a certain flame of industrious thought lighting his eyes that speaks to plans already surging into focus in his mind. He returns my grin eagerly. I think, if I’m made to reflect his light, with him looking at me like this, we could burn the world to ashes. “Absolutely not...”
The Post of Inspector General

Chapter Summary

special thanks to denialandavoidance for proofreading (most of) this. typos are always my own.

Every light is not the sun

... FRANCE AND SPAIN have been providing special succors since before this war began, agents and experts to gauge our interest in independence, our capability of carrying a war. My father encouraged me to learn Spanish while I'd studied in London, and upon my arrival in Philadelphia last year, I understood why. Through a front company, conducted by the French court, our unofficial allies have been laundering money and supplies for us. I haven’t mastered Spanish, but with our quartermaster troubles, I’ve learned plenty about the so-called “Roderigue Hortalez & Cie”. I know all about the Figaro man, Beaumarchais, and his savvy- his writer’s ready wit for invention…

“You’re imagining a plot because Franklin has stretched the qualifications of one or two of his recommendations,” Meade closes the file I’ve handed him, “but the ranks he’s describing would make too famous a character. Do you really think our ministers would suggest fraud on such a scale when we have a dozen men on staff who could call that bluff?”

I understand his doubts, and Alex is watching my reaction. “I’ve met Franklin,” I say, point made. The ministers want to ensure that we use the Baron von Steuben- using him and believing his expertise are separate subjects. “This is what he wants us to do-”

“You’re wasting time when we should be preparing an honor guard to receive him,” Meade holds out the file for me.

When I don’t immediately reach for it, Alexander looks at me again. It’s a familiar expression, one he’s worn many times as we’d had this same debate in every possible form. I could continue arguing it- as I had when Alex had begun showing doubts, but I don’t expect Meade’s loyalty to me to overcome his hesitations. I take the file and reach for Alexander’s hand, and he turns to follow me from the office.

He at least waits until Meade is out of earshot to say, “He’s right, y’know…”

I try not to let it bother me, “Sure. There’s no way Steuben is everything he claims to be.”

Alex tugs my hand to stop my steps, “Not about the wasting time,” he says, “or about von Steuben,” and I wish he wasn’t so observant- to know exactly what he needs to say to make me stop and listen to this again. He raises his brows, questioning something he obviously already knows.

Fraud on such a scale. I would elevate it further. Our army has never entrusted any singular officer with great responsibility- people panicked when Washington himself took power over his own station, but I would make this stranger the figurehead of our reconstruction, a puppet to enact our plans, and if our designs fail, a shield to our disgrace. I need Alexander to stand with me. He had
been eager to consider the idea, but as it developed and we found how our ambitions for the post threatened the character our commissioners had created, the more he had worried.

“If the ministers embellished this man’s story, it’s wiser to maintain his obscurity. In the public eye, it’s more likely the wrong person will see him, and as Meade said, we have a dozen people who could call that blu-”

“I could call the bluff,” I say, and I’m sure that Franklin intends for me to- or someone like me: traveled and familiar with the Prussian army, someone with the knowledge and discreet influence to mitigate the mess.

“What are you talking about?” Alex says, eyes narrowed like he expects insult from whatever he doesn't immediately understand.

“I would've heard of him,” I say. “When the war began, I had no battlefield experience to bring, so I inquired into training in the Prussian line- researched their programs. I know the names of Frederick’s staff and top officers. Steuben is not among them…”

He stares at me as if he does want to be offended somehow but cannot find a way to justify it.

I’m sure we’ll have to speak of this later, but while he’s quiet, I restore my argument, “The ministers have sent us an opportunity. This is how Franklin would have us use it- all the legitimacy of a ‘decorated’ European commander and all of the changes that we know to be necessary. Meade is afraid that, if I’m right about this and we use the Baron as a conduit, someone in Mifflin’s clout will expose-”

“And you’re not?”

In all that we’ve argued, I hadn't admitted it, the cause of my stubbornness for this assignment, “I’m afraid that you don’t think I could prevent it.”

“Prevent it?” he frowns. “By making him so effective, no one will ask questions? These men threw doubts against Washington-”

“By making the army trust him, so no one will want to ask questions,” this part of the plan I am confident of, having seen Alexander charm our professional peers and knowing my capacity to do the same. The difficult part will be- “So that we can control how the rumors about him are received…”

It had been my primary purpose on staff- a link to Congress. I had helped divert the whisperings against Washington all winter, proven effective in recruiting my father to his side. If I can divert the course of Rumor for this stranger, there’s nothing to say I can’t do the same for any other stories...perhaps even for the things I want to know about my friend, the questions I had never allowed myself to ask.

We’re to be partners, more than friends or family- to fit together. I want to know him.

It no longer feels selfish to wonder. More than his heart, his passions or opinions, I want to know the depths that he crawled from, the floods he’s rebuilt from. If I can prove it’s safe, perhaps he might let me...

“THE TROJAN PRIEST LAOCOÖN warned against accepting a gifts too good to be true and no one believed him either,” Alex says, untucking his shirt from his breeches that night.
I think this might be his way of comforting me about Meade’s rejection and his own doubts, so I grant him a small grin as I work my boots off. “Well, the Trojans weren't trying to have a big wooden horse train their army.”

He laughs.

"Meade might be right about the Baron's credentials," I say. That's not my concern, and I admit, "The French have been nothing but helpful, and if we're to be proper allies- it doesn’t do well to distrust them so much...even when some of their officers have been so ambitious with our hospitality."

“Well, they are still French.” He glances at me with a smirk. "And, we might do well to lift up one foreigner to account for how ruthlessly we tore Conway down."

"And then there's Lafayette..."

He hums, "How is Fleury?"

I shrug that I don’t know, and lean back on my cot against the wall, watching him untie his hair. “There’s nothing to say Steuben isn’t every bit the expert that Franklin and Deane described anyway,” I say. “My father’s been receiving recommendations about him from our most prominent men up the entire seaboard to Boston. All of Congress is eager to see what he’ll make of us—"

“And what Washington will make of him,” Alex adds with a pointed look. He’s brushing his fingers through his hair now, untangling the waves of it.

I draw my legs up onto my mattress, “I’m sure we will need to be careful about that. My father’s latest said the Baron and his staff dined at General Gates’s house no less than six times while he was in York. He even managed to charm Gates’s wife...”

“Elizabeth?” Alex huffs, brows drawn and disconcerted, “I thought that was impossible.”

I laugh, assuming he’s tried and failed at the very same. “Yes well, let’s hope Steuben’s miracles are confined to socializing and charming crabby women.”

“...why?”

“So he leaves the administrative recommendations to us,” I say obviously. The genuine curiosity in Alex’s tone catches me.

He nods in muted understanding though doesn’t seem so adamant about this piece of the plan, and I’m lost. He’s been studying military logistics for a chance like this and it’s unlike Alexander not to outright deny work that he doesn’t want- or be be so tacit in accepting the work he does. This cannot be self-doubt...

“Have you forgotten what Baron de Kalb’s initial mission was when he came to us?” I say.

He glances at me, sharpening.

“The French want us to need their help. They want French officers and French power to predominate in our military so that they can claim the space that’s left when England retreats—”

“You sound like a true Whig...” he says, but there’s no bite in it.

I understand his warning, and I understand Meade’s as well. I have no reason to distrust Steuben
before meeting him, but I have every reason to believe Alexander is equal to the post he will inevitably be given...every reason to want his designs to take shape, so I'll maneuver Steuben into the post and I'll pull the strings to make sure he gives us what we need of our foreign aid.

"Don't think because I want him to be a good officer, that I'm doubting your plan for him." Alex unties the lace of his boot and meets my eyes, meaningful and imploring, "I am with you."

I push up from my bed and kneel to remove his boot for him. When I'd tried to maneuver him into the Quartermaster General post, he'd done this for me- it's just as strange now. After the boundary he had placed on our flirting, the action had felt out of place, but I understand it now, a service in exchange for the faith I'd placed in him, an impulse to show respect and gratitude. He may not understand my plans for this post, but he trusts my judgment about the necessary training for this army. I want to thank him for that.

He shifts back on his bunk.

"We'll make sure that any fears about the French remain inconsequential by ensuring that the right man," I slide my hand up the back of his calf, glancing up to his eyes as I pull the lace of his boot and the knot unravels, "is pulling the strings."

A beat passes tensely.

Then, he tears his gaze away and scoots back, pulling his leg from the boot to start untying his stocking. I let the boot drop to the floor and glance back to see a fine tremor go through his hands. He steadies himself but says nothing.

He needs space, so I stand and walk to my desk, sit to sift through the pile of our personal letters. My father's recent note describes the Baron’s travels through York, the character of the man, and what I should expect. Father has directed the Baron to find me in camp, saying that he has learned that I speak French and am not 'une Mauvais Garçon'. It makes me wonder what else the Baron has heard of me.

Eventually, “It will be imperative that Washington supports the idea,” Alex says. I glance back. “Congress will defer to his judgment for the responsibilities of the post, and we’ll need His Excellency to make the appointment.”

I agree with a nod, turning in my chair. “I’d planned to talk to Lady Washington,” I say, “another chance to try convincing her of something.”

His posture loosens with a small smile. “I’ll recruit Gouverneur’s help, perhaps he and Reed could have some sway on the appointment.”

If we’re to bring Washington’s former aide into our pack, we should use our elder brothers, the men who worked with Reed especially. “When Harrison arrives I’m sure he’ll assist in the convincing, and Tilghman will want his say in it when he gets back.”

Alex hums.

I stretch my legs out beneath the table, the floor cold through my socks. We’ve been confined to our desks and our feet for four days, leaving the Potts house only to deliver messages and retrieve paperwork. I had idealized many things about war, but that’s the one thing I didn’t expect- the coldness of camp, of inaction. I feel we’re becoming statues, brittle, fragile marble. These winter months have been long and I miss the thrill of it- fighting, the soreness in my arms from lifting my sword, in my thighs from riding fast, in my back and chest from the force of it. I miss the heat in my
blood.

“I honestly hate the men most when they take guns and shot out of camp,” Alex says abruptly, either plucking my thoughts or sharing them somehow.

I raise my eyes to him and find he’s drawn his knees up onto the bed, glaring at the wall and absently rubbing the place behind his calf where I’d caressed his leg. I don’t think he realizes he’s doing it. "Did you update the quartermaster’s records today?"

“Yes. Greene can make himself indifferent, but I hate them when they leave,” he says. “If we had muskets, if we had bayonets and balls to shoot, I could be out there, watching exercises and taking pot-shots. Instead, no one drills and I’m up every morning taking reports of how many rifles got carried out with the last band that quit camp.” He huffs and flops dramatically onto his side, reaching up and dragging his pillow to his head. “I haven’t pulled a trigger in months.”

I sympathize. “It’s been so long since I’ve taken my sword out its sheath, I nearly forgot I had it until all our things were moved—”

“How long has it been, John?” he says, “How long since you unsheathed your sword.”

It takes me a moment to comprehend the innuendo, and when I do, I’m tempted to throw something at him. “Really?”

Alex turns his face so his grin is hidden in the pillow.

“You are horrible.”

He rolls onto his back and presses a hand to his chest, “You said it! Don’t pretend you had no such thoughts.”

“I’m not a child,” I say. “Why are you participating in drill exercises anyway? You’re an officer- and an aide. We shall never have a place on the drill field.”

His expression sours, and he considers me for a moment before shaking his head, saying, “Prussian training would have been wasted on you.”

“What?” I say, mildly offended.

“An officer doesn’t drill? We shall never have a place there? That’s very English…” I have nothing clever to say, and the consternation on his face smooths into a fondly teasing grin. He sits up on his elbows, the collar of his shirt dragging off to the side, exposing half his chest. “If you’re planning to impress the Baron, you’ll have to know how to call drill…”

I remember Conway’s taunts, a company of men laughing at my inability to keep a rhythm, calling movements on the wrong feet.

“It would be one of the first lessons you’d’ve had in the Prussian line, he’ll consider it the foundation of martial skill…” Alex’s voice drifts as he watches my face, and the slant of his mouth twitches. I’m sure he sees my embarrassment, but when he tries again, his voice is kinder. “I could teach you…”

“So you can laugh at my fumbling?”

His smirk softens. “So you'll have something to impress the Baron,” he says. “Though I probably will laugh.”
“Ah...charitable.”

“Everyone fumbles while learning to march, you’ll see plenty of it in the next few weeks, but not everyone should see you fumbling…”

I see what he offers- the privacy of a trusted friend who can correct my mistakes without faulting me for them. A safe place to say or do the wrong thing. But, I also see another way I will be exposed to him, vulnerable and indebted, and while it doesn’t bother me to bare myself to him, it bothers me when he asks for it. Why he seems to need it-

“If I teach you to drill, I’ll have you teach me to fence,” he says, bargaining.

I glance at him, confused.

“I know how to salute and give orders with a sword, but to actually fight with one…” he shrugs. “I never had a teacher.”

I realize I never questioned it. While we had been at headquarters all these months, each time I’d fenced with Lafayette, Alexander had never trained with us, citing paperwork or some mundane task. For some reason, I had always assumed he already knew how to wield a sword. And without formal training, he knows he’ll be graceless and fumbling. “I...suppose that’s fair.”

“Great,” he says, flashing the sort of brilliant smile I can hardly trust. “We’ll start in the morning.”

I’m not sure if I should be more eager to teach him swordplay or dreading to call drill.

“THE CADENCE ITSELF should always be sung,” Hamilton says. “Varying your tone keeps soldiers alert and ready for orders that change their movement.” Alex holds himself ridiculously while he instructs, spine ramrod straight and voice clear and sonorous, prim like he hasn’t been with me since the first week we met. I can’t tell if he’s simply enjoying his role as instructor or if this act is for the platoon of young boys he’s gathered for the occasion. None of them can be older than fourteen, I’d guess- I’m too distracted with feeling ridiculous and tall, lined up in a formation of children.

I want to be angry, but I exhausted my energy for it this morning, anticipating such a thing when I woke to find Alexander’s cot empty and a hastily-penned note on our table, giving directions of where to meet him. He rarely wakes before me unless he’s doing something upsetting. By the time I arrived in the valley on the bank of the Schuylkill, he already had the platoon formed. I could hardly scold him in front of twenty children.

He spends half an hour explaining specific movements: columns, flanks, and obliques. Pulling aside one boy at a time, he lines them up to demonstrate until a full squad is capable of performing the step, then he corrects them with precision, finely tuning the small details that lend to uniformity. Watching my friend instruct feels like a glimpse into his days in command as he takes on a stern persona that has the boys focused beyond their years, like proper little soldiers. Yet when their frustrations are too much and untempered passions spill over into tears and tantrums, he’s tender. He separates the boys and delegates an older adolescent to console them off to the side. With some of these boys as young as seven, they don’t know their left from right, and their tiny feet are uncoordinated and rhythmless. Really, this concept is so ridiculous, I choose to be amused with it all.

Until Alex announces my turn to call the movements and I realize I hadn’t paid attention to his directions about which foot to call what orders on.
By the time our hour is up, I’m decidedly furious.

Hamilton forms up the platoon to dismiss the boys with the order ‘Fall out’. They scatter into camp, to their mothers and whatever chores they keep during the day. I wait to be sure they’re all gone before grabbing Alex by the collar and turning him to face me. “What the hell were you thinking?”

He throws off my arm, stepping back and putting his hands up. “The fastest way to learn is to teach.”

“Teach children?”

“If you want to learn fast, teach a difficult class.” He meets my eyes, steady and placating. “Trust me. I’ll spend the first half of the lesson calling the orders while you correct the platoon’s form. Then, once the boys have practiced the movements and you’ve had time to see what foot the orders fall on, you’ll take over the cadence and I’ll correct you.”

“But why children?”

“They were available. And, they won’t tell anyone what we’re doing. This is still completely discreet.”

“Really.” I know he’s assuring me this for my own comfort, and even if our training sessions were discovered by other officers, we could endure the embarrassment. Still, I’m not convinced he’s put as much thought into this as he’s implying, “What did you bribe them with?”

“Lessons in marching and manual of arms.” He smiles, a flash of teeth like he expects me to be amused. It wavers when I’m not. “Their families are camp followers- most of their fathers have forbidden them from enlisting until they’re older while hoping the war will end before that. But their mothers know it’s best to be prepared for the worst, and they won’t find this training anywhere else in the line...besides, I didn’t tell them your name.”

It’s hardly a foolproof plan, but Alexander is giving one of his most charming smiles and the stakes are not so high to refuse him. I roll my eyes, “Go get your sword.”

WE BEGIN WITH footwork exercises, squats and lunges, advances and retreats, changing directions on our toes. I stand a step ahead and abreast of him so he can see how to perform each movement. I embrace the strain in my thighs, glad for a reason to employ them, glad for fair weather to enjoy being outdoors- even so early. I’ve certainly lost strength in the winter, trapped indoors and without rations for too many months, my legs shake sooner than they should in a simple squat.

When I glance over to check Alexander’s posture, he’s not looking at me, focused forward and steady, amusingly intense. We’ve recently been attending exercises with several officers from General Greene’s division and the volunteer boys on His Excellency’s staff. Alexander is only ever lighthearted about training when we’re running, and I assume it’s because the exercise never seems to tire him, and he enjoys watching the rest of us suffer.

He is otherwise so solemn and serious, it’s endearing.

I catch myself watching him. His thighs tremble finely under the strain and I’m glad for the modest looseness of his breeches. It shouldn’t distract me. It somehow does nonetheless. Emaciated by fever and lack of rations, he is still disarmingly well-formed and I have progressed beyond the point of looking for individual features to admire. The chaotic waves of his hair, the swell of his shoulders, the elegant curve of his arms, his boyish hips and trim waist- it all narrows mindlessly to a simple thought. I want to touch.
The thought takes root suddenly and grows unbidden no matter how I try to dispel it. I wonder how much of him would feel solid and where the flesh would give— which I tell myself is foolish to wonder because I’ve touched my friend often enough to know these things by memory. But, something in me begs for a reminder. I wonder if standing at this angle provides him a good view of the muscle in my own legs, the curve of my rear and dip in my spine and I wonder if he sees my features and wants to touch as well.

He isn’t even looking.

I have no alcohol to blame for this, and I’ve managed to avoid lewd thoughts while we’ve exercised together. I’ve had access to my friend’s body in caring for him while he was ill. I’ve avoided this intrigue for long enough that I should have more restraint. But, thinking about our recent nights together, reading in separate beds, I remember him in mine. I remember our booklet of poems— the beauty of boys’ thighs and mouths, and I wonder how far my hands could reach around the flesh of his legs, how the muscle would feel, tightening in my palms, tense as it is now—

“...yes, I think that’s enough,” I say, standing and collecting my thoughts with remarkable ease. I can’t even feign surprise with myself. “Your legs obviously don’t require my training anyway.” I’m not sure why I use the tone; the old tactic hardly feels necessary now and it only seems to unsettle him. I feel compelled to apologize, but recognizing my fumble may only renew the tension, so “I think we’re ready for swords,” I say instead.

If we’re to stay together in this darkness, it’s to be still and dignified. No flirting.

HEADQUARTERS GREETS US with a cacophony of music, the artillery band of fifers and drummers, marching outside the Potts house to hail General Washington like ‘the father of his country’ as the newspapers have been calling him. I understand at once- Meade had mentioned an amusing surprise to commemorate this day.

“The King of America...” I give a sliding smirk for the oxymoron and glance at Alexander as he trudges beside me. “It is right we should celebrate his birthday with ceremony.”

Meade and Gibbs are running out of the house to listen on the front step. My amusement is mirrored on Alex’s face and he says, “I’m sure Mifflin and Gates will love to hear how the army’s endorsing the concept.”

It’s always a good sign when Alex is amused with our enemies’ anger. It inspires a giddy confidence. I remember, “The wager money- this is what Meade was talking about.”

Alexander doesn’t have the chance to question it as I run off into the house through the back door, sprinting to find the coins I’d stuffed under my mattress. Dashing back down the stairs, I dodge several volunteer boys in my haste to meet General Washington and his wife by the doorway where they’re watching the performance from a proper distance, not deigning to recognize the allusion of royalty that this spectacle puts on.

“You should pay them, ma’am...” I halt my steps, catching myself on the doorframe. “If you’re worried how it might look to accept such accolades, give them money for the performance.” I hold out the coins to Lady Washington’s hand.

She looks at me, then glances to her husband. When he gives her a nod, she walks out to give the
musicians our tip. The General claps a hand on my shoulder and says nothing as he walks back towards the stairs to his office. He was smiling in amusement- rare for him. I wait for his wife to return to the door.

She glances at me as she passes inside, a small knowing smirk. “You’re wanting to speak with me?”

I know the rule: make conversation. “I hear Sullivan and Greene have invited their wives, shall we be expecting more of your dinner parties?”

She smiles, “More parties I’m sure, though I expect to be outdone- and I’ll expect you and Alexander to join us at every table. Missus Sullivan will want to hear all about our recent court-martials.”

I can imagine, given the number of times her husband has barely-escaped being called to one. “It is a shame that’s the first thing the ladies will see in camp.”

“Nonsense,” she says. “Perhaps when they hear the offense in Colonel Burr's hearing, they’ll feel ever more needed here.”

Burr’s hearing. I don't like her unsettling cheerfulness. As if sodomy is a larger issue- as if all the men in camp are tempted and the urge is to be expected and fought. It makes me sick that someone who can hardly understand, simplifies the Enslin-Maxwell case to a tool of social uniformity- to make the wives feel important.

“I plan to maneuver the Baron von Steuben into the position of Inspector General,” I say bluntly.

“Oh, good,” she visibly relaxes, taking no time to move subjects. “You know, I was afraid this was another try to put Alex in for Quartermaster General,” she says, and I don’t think I noticed it before, but I don’t like how she uses his first name. “You must understand why we passed him over.”

I’m not sure why I reply so insensibly but, “No, ma’am, I don’t.”

She takes my arm and walks with me towards the office where the aides have been working. “Boys like him will think themselves ambitious no matter how content they truly are in their place.”

That’s what she believes of him? I try to hide my revulsion, but I don’t think I’m doing well. “Boys...like him?”

She quirks a brow and I know I’m being too obvious, “He never wanted the post.”

“He told me he did." It’s close enough to the truth and I’m defensive of my friend, “I don’t believe he could lie about that.”

“Alexander is an excellent liar.” She speaks as if she knows him better than he knows himself, and I can’t remember what had made me believe I would enjoy her relationship with my friend. With everyone outside, listening to the artillery band, she has the privacy to say whatever she likes. “If you really mean it when you lie- at least a little, your lies become the truth, and Alex truly means everything he says. He is very good at convincing himself of things.” She drops my arm and looks over the papers spread out over our stations.

I don’t have anything polite to say, so I busy myself, organizing my place at the table. I have correspondence from my father about our suggested changes in the quartermaster department, updates from Clark about his surveillance of Mifflin and his finances, and a letter from Lafayette.

“The General has been looking forward to meeting the Baron von Steuben for five weeks,” Martha says. I should be glad that she’s still here- that she wanted to discuss this topic, but no matter how we
need it, I don't want her help anymore. “Given all the recommendations we have received for him, we have been following his travels and observing the company he kept. We cannot afford any more flatterers and frauds, and the Baron von Steuben has been very friendly with Gates...”

I stare at her, then down at the table, and realize, “And yet Washington looks forward to meeting him...and making him useful?”

She nods.

So, either the General is willing to entrust the Baron von Steuben with responsibility regardless of his loyalties between the American commanders, or he believes he will have his loyalty. Maybe Steuben hasn’t gathered the gravity of our politics yet, but it’s more likely... “Does he expect the Baron was putting on an act?”

“He asked neither rank nor pay. He knew exactly what to say- that he is so eager to assist the United States of America that if his distinguished European ranks were an obstacle to giving him similar rank in the American army, he is ready to serve as a volunteer rather than be an object of discontent’.”

I raise a brow and have to admit, “It’s a pretty line,” except that it implies he will only accept a rank similar to that he held in Europe if he receives a commission to the line. Of course, Gates might not even consider that, enthralled by the word ‘volunteer’.

“It proves to me that he was coached of exactly what our army thinks of foreign officers,” Lady Washington says. “It makes me believe he may have also been coached of why my husband should be especially wary.” We had pushed Conway’s ambition forward as the root of our cabal, and that word has surely passed to Versailles by now as warning to our commissioners to choose more carefully. “If Steuben knows our politics, then he should know how to show his allegiance,” she says, voice harder than it has any right to be.

Like her husband, I don’t think she will explicitly say the endstate she desires, but I know what she implies, “I'll have him renounce his faith in Gates’s military ability...or declare his faith in your husband.”

She smiles at that, lipless and reptilian, “I think I shall start on a schedule for the training that the Inspector General will conduct-” I open my mouth to protest, but she’s talking to herself and walking away, “I am sure Missus Sullivan can draw a list of her husband’s concerns, and Caty will be a doll as always.”

I RESENT LADY WASHINGTON’S involvement. “She has only been in this camp for a week, how can she presume to know what we need?” I huff, tugging my boot off with unnecessary force.

“Several nights ago you were saying how clearly she described our concerns to the committee in camp...” Alexander is smirking as if he’s amused at some incongruity he’s imagined in my anger.

“My father expects Baron von Steuben to arrive outside camp tonight, Hamilton!” I say. My use of his surname in private makes his brows jump. “If she decides to oppose any of our judgments for the Inspector General post, she could sway His Excellency to her side without our resistance- we have no access to whatever powers she has in their marriage bed. If we don’t employ her plans to her satisfaction, we could see this idea halted altogether.”

Alex is leaned against the wall on his bed, feet stretched out and crossed at the ankles so his boots
hang over the edge of the mattress, long graceful lines and slouching casual posture. He pushes up and places his elbows on his knees, giving his attention, “I am aware of the threat she poses,” he says. “Believe me. I’ve already begun explaining our plans to the General to avoid her sway behind our backs. I’ve found some degree of transparency with him protects my interests so long as he appreciates honesty.”

“How much have you said?”

“Besides the reports from our informants about his socializing in York? Only that you should be assigned as the Baron’s translator to direct his attention towards our primary concerns. I haven’t mentioned Conway’s post yet. Bringing him up requires a careful approach.”

“And what about you?” I say, ignoring my second boot to look at him.

“About me what?”

“Are you to be a second translator?”

He shrugs, “I’m sure I will be working with the Inspector General in the court-martials Tilghman left- if you’re successful in maneuvering him to that post…”

“I’d thought you would want to help me with the maneuvering…”

He seems to see the weight I’ve placed in the query- in this project, and he dodges my pleading look expertly, “I am sure you’re more than capable on your own.”

A path I know how to map myself and a ride that I need no escort for. But still, it’s in the nature of our relationship to be frank with each other, and, “Well, I would like your company.”

He doesn’t quite manage to suppress the smile that touches his face and for that I’m glad. “I’ll be busy,” he says, unintentionally coy, “but I’m sure I’ll find time to spare on this.” As if to demonstrate that, he gets up and begins packing a few books from his personal shelf into his satchel. I work at the other boot while he packs, wondering why he’s still fully-dressed.

When I ask where he’s going, he gives a vague half-answer about some work with General Greene, and leaves for the night. Knowing he’s trudging to Greene’s camp to give away his ideas and counsel, I worry that Martha Washington was right.

I don’t understand what influence he wants.

MY CADENCES DON’T MEET Alex’s expectations again on our second day of practice. “Have I lost your interest in this exercise?” he says, arms folded over his chest as I gather our dull swords for my turn of instruction.

“No,” I say. “I just don't have the hang of the orders.”

“You’re being slow,” he says, blunt. Then as if to soothe that injury, “When your interest is truly sparked, you become an expert overnight.”

I laugh, “I’d hardly stay up all night and study drill manuals.”

“Then you’ve given me an advantage,” he says, cracking the mask of poise and stillness and giving a glimpse at the playful face beneath. He jumps forward and plucks his blunt sword from my hand. “I
I chuckle at his sardonic bravado, confidence bordering on silliness, and take up my stance *en garde*. He has been laughing at me since his platoon of boys had gone. I'd be embarrassed on principle, but instead, I’m pleased with his ability to entertain himself with me, how boundless his interest has always been, even now- as we aren’t the type of friends he had wanted.

I realize- this is how Alexander is different.

Francis was never such easy fun. He was private and distant, it had taken months for him to play with me at all. I found his enjoyment of theater and brought him out from his walls, babbling gaily about my favorite plays until he became talkative, unable to resist disagreeing with my ‘rotten taste’. As boys of such an age, we discussed beliefs- religion and familial duty and what those things meant about our futures. I argued sportingly as I’d heard it said ‘Francis is good fun long as you amuse him’, and our conversations became sparring matches. Earning my agreement entertained him, and in every case, I became a dedicated convert- which captivated him. When we truly disagreed, I capitulated- opinions that I should have held firmly, sacrificed to my friend like a pawn, given up so that in capturing it, he would expose his heart. Though outwardly retreating, I was winning, for Francis was never bored with me, and though no great dialectician, he could be found at all hours in my rooms, spoiling to argue.

When we came to our lessons of the *Symposium*, he started a tiff with his family over where to spend Easter, climbed into my window and asked me to stay with him through the holiday. I agreed. He told me his disgust with his family- for their blindness to the beauty of the Greeks- something I understood, surely. There was nothing but raging after that holiday. Wherever we met, we’d butt and spar, walked arm in arm- in the halls or courtyard; I sat with Francis at my feet, leaning against me as I’d stroke his hair. In the world of our friends, no one had noticed. But, I’d felt the change acutely, saw the boundaries expanding.

That range had been free with Alex since the day I’d met him and he’d dared to flirt with me- dared me to flirt back. We’ve never been anything but at play and our battling had kept him in pursuit without demanding my capitulation...

He interrupts my thoughts, making a coordinated lunge at my chest which I block and swivel in on him. He attacks again. I parry, and he gives a solid riposte. His grin is equally surprised and sure, his sword pressing bluntly into my sternum. These swords don’t have the proper bend for fencing and I step away.

“Shall we try combination four with the feint?” he says.

I raise a brow, still rubbing my chest. “Sure. Do you need a demonstration?” He strikes without reply and without attempting any formal feint, his sword once again pressing into my chest. I grab the blade and tug the thing from his hand. “That’s not how a gentleman fights.”

“How ‘bout an American?” he says, his grin unbearably bright.

I can’t hold back a smile. “That...remains to be seen.” I swing his sword so the handle strikes his chest with a dull thud and earns a satisfying grunt.

He had explained to me his experience with swordfighting as a boy, simple matches at play with friends, then some practical training while with the militia. He had fantasized about being a fighter, as I had. Now, we have our war.

We may be doing this under the guise of fencing, but there’s no misunderstanding- we’re sparring to
train for our next campaign. Neither of us expects to face an enemy willing to parry and riposte or be sporting about a match. If he’s being such a rascal to provoke me, I won’t pretend all this pretense is necessary. Fighting by the sword is different from his beloved artillery or a linear platoon of musketry. Firing on line is impersonal, distant, and firing blindly towards the enemy is not murder. To strike a man down with your blade, you know when your hands have killed.

He takes up his sword and we take up positions. I give a nod. We step, studying postures. He waits for me to strike first now, observes and reacts, hesitant like the beginner he is, revealing to me the weaknesses in his stance and grip. I make the first lunge, he blocks and twists away and we spar in earnest, swords clashing and light on our toes as our dance quickly moves him to the defensive. I make notes in mind of corrections, leave several openings unexploited to continue the match, and we carry on like this until, in a bout of frustration, having been blocked yet again, he pulls away from the fight and tosses the sword down, “I’m doing this wrong.”

“You’ve only just noticed?” I say, teasing gently.

He puts his hands on his hips and I can’t tell if his huffing is from exertion or insult. His face is flushed and he’s sweating, but I know I’m the same.

“You leave yourself open when you make wide stabs at me,” I say. “If you miss the first strike, you’ve left your chest exposed.” I pick up his sword and let it slip down by the knucklebow into my hand, hold the hilt out to him.

He takes it with a calm gratitude that seems to apologize for his frustration, so I smile, encouraging. He’s still breathing heavily and I hear it. My eyes drop to his lips, unbidden, and the implication is unmistakable. It’s happened before. It isn’t new. If Alexander is anything it’s aware. Always aware of how I allow myself to draw near. It’s always right before the edge, right before the boundary is pressed. It stretches and bends. He had demanded no flirting, but his body still flirts with me, full of unnecessary grace and force, beckoning eyes and smirks. This side of the thing doesn’t frighten him, but it’s flirting all the same.

He steps back into position.

The clinking of swords continues for a time yet until I change the pace in a flurry of movement and land another tap on his shoulder. We’re close at this angle and I cannot bring myself to be bashful about it. Our chests heave in tandem and he waits for me to back down as he always does. Although, I imagine he doesn’t see it that way.

I feel disturbingly calm, despite the exertion of our match. “You need to take more care with your stance during the parry…”

“That so?” he says a little too quietly. We are still close, almost a breath apart, and I think he can see it- that I’m about to pull back.

It doesn’t feel necessary, as though he’s something wild but domesticated; instinct should tell me to flee but it’s numbed. I have an arsenal of snide rejoinders about the superiority of the Christian soul to the body’s pagan lusts, about the intellectualism of manly bonds without this depravity. But, I don’t see any productivity in those thoughts as they’ve never been able to convince me that a sensual bond is the lesser one, nor that a bond- free of all fleshly delights- is what I truly want...

“We’ll resume this tomorrow,” I acquiesce and turn away towards the woods that reach the horizon.

He lets me go as he always does and I feel his eyes on my retreating back, hating how quickly my mind conjures the word. Retreat.
I DON’T LOOK at him as we wash and dress, quite aware of how I want to kiss him and unsure if such a simple thing is allowed now. He washes his face and chest in our basin and the room is quiet but for splashing.

It gives me room to think. I pull off my shirt and wipe my neck with it. He had promised to be content with whatever I could give, and then quickly retracted that and prohibited flirtation. I understand why. I know how it feels to want someone who has nothing but disgust for your desires. But, even when I wanted to, I’ve never been able to find disgust for his. He knows that, he calls it my philosophy- to hate my own desires while I’m powerless to hate his.

So, I can see no other reason for his restrictions than to punish me for cowardice…

The thought makes me vengeful enough to disobey- to step across the room and touch the back of his neck, brush away the short curly hairs that cover the ridge where his spine connects to skull. He shivers and straightens up, turning to me with a strange slowness. I think he senses intent and can’t comprehend what’s brought it on. I think that bothers him and I’m glad it does-

A knock at our door jolts me away. It isn’t locked, so I retreat, putting my hands on my hips instead. “Come!” my voice isn’t as steady as I would like.

I walk towards the door, but it opens before I reach it, an unfamiliar boy poking his head in. He speaks French, “Sirs- erm, hello. I was told to find Lieutenant Colonel Laurens about the escort into camp…”

A liaison from the Baron von Steuben. I reach for the door and hold it open for him, noting immediately how his eyes drop to my chest. I forgot I had removed my shirt. He seems to struggle with himself for a moment, debating an unnecessary apology while I wonder why he’d feel obliged to apologize for seeing another man half-dressed as if I were a lady. It’s hardly an unusual sight in camp...unless…

Poor boy. “Well, you’ve found him.” I give a winsome smile, half-teeth and charmingly slanted. He doesn’t even look up to see it, and I feel sorry for him, too young to hide his obvious interest and just old enough to be at his body’s mercy. “I assume you talked with Meade. He arranged the honor guard.”

“Yes, I- I was told there would be a translator for His Excellency, General Washington.”

I nod again, “We'll be out shortly,” glancing pointedly down at myself to emphasize my nakedness, “You may wait downstairs while we dress.”

The boy snaps his eyes up from the exposed skin of my collarbone to meet kind eyes, awaiting his answer. “All of that is fine, thank you.”

He rushes from the hallway too quickly to make further inquiries, and I turn to Alex with an amused grin. He raises a brow at me and says “He forgot to give his name.”

I was never above exploiting attraction. In fact, “I think this will be easier than I anticipated.”

THERE IS A DIFFERENCE between easier and uncomfortably easy. We ride between an immaculately-dressed honor guard on borrowed horses to a cabin about four miles outside camp where we’re received by a handservant who directs the servants of the house to bring horses out for
the Baron.

As the venerated Prussian is prepared for the ride, the gentlemen of the family dismount to make introductions. The boy we had met is a translator named Pierre Duponceau, and Alexander begins a conversation with him. I send the boy friendly smiles whenever he musters the courage to meet my eyes.

The servant, Vogel, offers to make my introduction to the Baron, and I step forward and give a small bow which is returned with exaggerated ceremony. The Baron is pleased to hear my name and eager to tell me the acquaintance he made with my father. I’m used to the performance of men interested in using me to reach my father, but Steuben speaks to me with the familiar agitation of a man wanting to impress. I don’t think anyone’s ever tried to use my father to reach me.

As the horses are brought out for the Baron and we mount, he makes idle conversation in heavily-accented French. There’s something about his personality that the other boys seem to find magnetic, but it puts me off. He’s dark, tall and affected, and when he speaks- which is continually- he uses strong yet unmanly adjectives. He dresses like a fop, or at least a former-fop, one whose body was once suited for the fashion. He’s sociable in all the wrong ways, something distorting it like light breaking through a canopy of trees and fog. I don’t trust it and I don’t enjoy whatever performance he’s making. It’s one thing to be shrouded in darkness, it’s another thing entirely to grope about in it, ungraceful and embarrassing.

I turn my attention on Duponceau. His conversation with Alexander seems to have calmed his nerves, so I guide my horse to ride beside him.

Ahead in the distance, Steuben says something that makes Alexander laugh generously.

“I THINK YOU’RE USING this as an excuse to beat me up,” I complain, rubbing my arm as we report to headquarters the next morning after our exercises.

“Why would I do that?” Alex says, and I can tell from his tone that he’s only half-teasing which means he’s also half-not and I can’t imagine why. We had spent most of the night in silence at our desk together, compiling the drill manuals of every company his sources could gather. My cadence had improved this morning- probably from the familiarization that came out of that work.

As we come into the office, Lieutenant Colonel Burr is waiting by Alex’s station to consult about the court-martial. He’s a petite man with a high brow and airy posture. I decide it’s Burr’s case and prisoner exchange that put Alex in a foul mood this morning.

“I don’t understand it,” Gibbs says as I set my papers at my station. “If the boy wants to learn to fight, he could have asked me at any time. Why these lessons now?”

Taking out my pens, I fail to suppress a smirk. We’ve been marching before our brothers go out for their own exercises, but they must see our lessons with the swords. Knowing Alex can hear their conversation, I glance to see if my amusement is mirrored on his face.

It’s not…

“Oh, let them have their fun,” Meade says distractedly, opening letters. “Troup’s sent a private express about the expedition...the Marquis hasn’t received the troops he expected and they’re scrambling for supplies.”

Lafayette had divulged as much in his letters to me, and my heart aches for my friend’s reputation.
But, we've done all we could for him, made our appeals to Congress and given him connections to friends in the northern army. Our only solace is the damage this will inflict on General Gates and his Board of War. Washington had said, ‘The project is yours, sir, you must make it succeed’. The committee in camp had warned Congress of their deep concerns about the expedition. We’ve shifted the blame where it belongs.

Meade laughs suddenly, “Wait- Gates accepted the challenge!” he slams his hand down on the table in his own amusement, letting the curiosity build until he reminds us all- "He and Wilkinson are meeting on the field today to duel.”

“No…” Alex breathes as if he cannot believe the news, but a wicked grin is stretching over his mouth, and he leans over the table in amusement. “Do you think he’s been shot yet?”

I’m amused by the confusion raising one of Burr’s elegant brows. He’s holding the file on his case but now hesitates to interrupt the conversation.

Meade gives Alex a stern look, but he wisely changes the topic. “The Marquis says Conway's taken a clerking job in Albany since he was barred as his lieutenant. Word of our distinguished guest has reached their camp...and I think they’re anticipating the post he’ll take.”

“There’s no way Conway’s taking that well,” smirking, I reach over the table to flatten the letter and read it upside-down.

“He’s telling people he would’ve been able to teach troop formations in six weeks that Steuben won’t be able to teach in six months,” Meade says. He glances at Alex, knowing our plot for Steuben and the value we're placing in drill.

Alexander just shrugs and avoids my eyes. “He may have. Conway’s an expert drillmaster.”


Alexander glances at me out the corner of his eyes, frowning strangely, “He may have never been actively plotting- certainly not before His Excellency threatened him.”

“It’s hardly a threat to rebuke him for-”

“With the position Washington holds, any act of aggression could be perceived as a threat.”

Alexander is too foolishly kind to the pitiable- even if they are rightfully made so. There’s no space to regret how we handled the cabal. “The fact that he wrote such things in secret implies he was saying much worse aloud behind Washington’s back.”

“As opposed to what, telling him directly? The Commander in Chief, General Washington?”

“You do.” I challenge Alex to respond without relinquishing my compliments, and I wonder if he’s also thinking of our bed in the old cabin, how I’d praised him so lavishly for his bravery and gall.

He huffs and gathers his notes about the court martial, picking them up to take elsewhere. “Yes well, I have no reason to be afraid of him.”

Burr follows him out, ever more confused.

HIS EXCELLENCY INVITES the Baron von Steuben and the Committee from Congress to a
dinner several nights after the distinguished Prussian’s arrival. We review our notes of his titles in Europe, quizzing each other about his story until the moment Vogel knocks to make the Baron’s introduction.

As the meal is served, Washington graciously announces that the Baron has unlimited access to camp, allowed to poke and prod and give his opinions on the operations of the army. It’s a political move, met with approval from the congressmen at the table. It’s also the first step of our plans for him, and Washington throws me a meaningful look, mirrored on Alexander’s face- I realize it’s my turn to speak.

"I will accompany you, of course," I say. “We will need your estimate of our battle-readiness, and our estimate of your expertise.”

It’s half a lie to pretend Steuben’s tour of camp will have any bearing on what position he’ll be given, but he should believe it does. I’m curious to see what he’ll prepare. Politicians in York probably tried to steer him towards the Quartermaster General post to avoid Washington’s recommendations. With Steuben’s credentials, allegedly a Quartermaster General for Frederick the Great, he probably understood the suggestion, but if he truly knows the responsibilities of a quartermaster, he’ll know the job is half-civil and requires business connections that make the post better-suited to an American. It will say a lot if he prepares to report on quartermaster troubles, but it will say more if he doesn’t.

From what I’ve seen of Steuben so far, he seems ready to accept whatever position he’s given as long as it's important, which makes my first task easy- having him appointed. "We can have each company prepare a few formations for you to critique as you would in the Prussian line. Demonstrate how we maneuver troops."

He laughs, deep in his chest, “Certainly. I haven’t drilled in twenty years, but we can do that."

The Baron smiles in amusement, eyes crinkling, and I restrain the urge to rub my temples. He’s too smart not to know what positions we are intending him for, and whether or not he knows the political implications of leaning towards one position or another, he finds it amusing that it concerns me.

Several of the congressmen speak enough French to know what he’s saying, and they’re charmed with it, laughing because he’s a cocky gentleman.

Washington isn’t amused- but he couldn’t be- “I don’t believe you want me to translate that,” I say.

Steuben has the audacity to pout at me as if I’m the one being unreasonable- as if I’m stuffy and uptight, and as often happens with these sorts of things, it becomes the impulse of the room to overrule me and reinforce the image. “Well, it’s alright. Battle-readiness isn’t just a matter of being able to quickly maneuver troops, right?” It’s Hamilton’s friend, Gouverneur Morris who speaks up, “Hit and run tactics are half the reason we've made it this far.”

Francis Dana spends several minutes emphasizing the importance of ‘Indian tactics’ as he calls them, making amends for me as if my poor humor had actually offended. He brings up our plan to ally the Iroquois in Canada, and asks Steuben about irregular forces which the Baron answers with an anecdote of the Austrian Grenzer, light infantry recruited in the borderlands of Croatia, a sort of “white Indian”. Steuben mentions hearing that Americans are more racially-conscious than Europeans then defers to Duponceau who has much to say about his study of Indian warfare, about the Spaniard’s war in New Mexico where hit and run tactics have made the Comanche hegemonic.

We all listen to the boy talk, impressed with his enthusiasm, but this subject is counter-productive.

In Europe, there’s a focus on preserving land after a battle- that is not so necessary in America. Our fighting is more energetic and raw, brute strength laid against an enemy and withdrawn naturally. It
pleases instinct, and I prefer it, but for the post we intend, we need Steuben to focus on professionalism in the European sense—drill and discipline. The committee members are well-meaning and politically-savvy. They’re wise enough to avoid the impractical ideas of the ideologues, but they don’t know enough about the politics of conducting a war to know when their opinions are more harmful than helpful.

Except, "Anyone can teach drill," Reed says, glancing at me. As a former-aide, I think he’s judging something I don’t yet see.

I translate the subject of our conversation into English.

Washington nods slowly, “Yes, our ability to...retreat intact has ensured our survival, but if we intend to rise above survival— if we intend to win, we must not only take battles but take ground.”

I translate what he said.

Alexander has been uncharacteristically quiet, but as if prompted by familiar words, he rises to say what I wasn’t aware could be explained, looking towards Duponceau kindly, "The Comanche have no need to conduct a pitched battle because Spain needs them to have New Mexico. Britain doesn’t need the United States to have America."

This immediately catches Baron von Steuben’s attention.

“Spain cannot provide the means to sustain New Mexico— the Comanche do,” Alex says. "They dominate by breeding horses, grazing cattle, hunting bison. They cultivate the goods that Spain introduced, and hold them slave to their own demand. New Mexico exists to be raided for horses, porcelain, cannons— anything they want, because they can— because New Mexico is not New Mexico, it’s Comanchería."

It takes me a moment to follow my friend’s approach. It doesn’t seem necessary until I see the argument General Washington wanted— the difference between a war of character and a war of survival. There’s no true victory for our cause if we shake off the yoke only to become a colony of some other King. In order for the United States to exist, we have no choice but to rise above survival, our character must become hegemonic. We cannot have a true victory by just surviving until England gives up.

If we want Steuben to help us towards those ends, he needs to believe a true victory is necessary.

“When this war began, our first weapon was embargo,” Alexander is saying. "We knew that, if we want to be independent of Britain, we must be...independent of Britain, so we threw off the chains of our own demand. Something you must understand about empire— a colony is never capable of surviving on its own. A colony needs labor that sustains trade. For Britain, there’s Tories for that,” he needn’t say the true source of that labor, but he is right— the Carolinas, the West Indies, the population’s slave force provides all England needs from the colonies.

He had brought this argument up with me in our discussions of my Battalion idea, a way of turning the balance in our favor, but never for this specific end. To seize the advantage of trade superiority by denying labor— in order to establish our predominance on this land well after the war. He has to be careful not to implicate fear that European officers will resist the idea of forming our army into a fully-capable force to preserve our vulnerability to them. But, investing in a true victory is also a difficult argument to sell when our hit-and-run methods have gotten us so far, and changing our tactics will require great effort.

Steuben needs to understand why we need to be a professional army, and either not see the
implications of that power, or not care about what it means for European control in America. As we’re not sure of his loyalties to France or Prussia, or the concept of a King, we can only hope for ignorance. But, he’s a clever man.

“By relinquishing the field after every battle, we invite Tories to fill those spaces,” Alex says. “Our army will never be able to enjoy the same benefits from hit-and-run tactics as the Comanche because we don’t control the largest part of their labor or their trade. We will never be able to put England into the sort of chains New Mexico exists in, without fighting a pitched battle ourselves.”

“I cannot imagine you will,” Steuben says. Then, just when Alex has the conversation directed where we needed it, he leans into the table, smiling. “Though, I understand you’re West Indian, my boy, so you have seen their trade? I’m curious where you believe Britain to be vulnerable in the way you describe.”

Alex glances at the congressmen we’re hosting, then at me, as if seeking permission to humor this. I give him half a shrug. "You’re asking where I believe the next frontier of trade will be?" Steuben nods encouraging. "Well...obviously that's sugar as of now, and for that to change, London would need to recognize an untapped resource elsewhere- which would require finding one. Captain Cook's travels are the only major efforts England's still making for exploration, and he's just disproven the Terra Australis myth, so there's nothing of interest in the southern seas. His most recent voyage is to the Pacific Islands, and I doubt there will be any major resource to draw attention...

"Oters," I say without thinking. Then, quickly remembering where I am, I send an apologetic look to my friend. "Sorry, Hamilton is right, but the report from Cook's second voyage specified the value of seal furs, and for months, every merchant in London wanted shares in ventures to the southern seas for seal. Cook's current expedition will sail towards Vancouver where otter pelts are like gold. The Chinese are willing to trade twenty-times the rate the French would pay for beaver, so if we tap into that before Britain does, it could be our gold rush."

"How do you know he's going to Vancouver?" Morris asks, intrigued, and I realize how long these men have been away from Congress not to know this rumor.

"He's looking for the Northwest Passage," I say. "That's why his third voyage was approved by the Admiralty."

"What about Omai?"

I look at Alex. My friend must follow the reports of Cook's travels fairly-close to even know the cover-story for this voyage. I haven't heard the name since I'd left London. Ma'i was a native Pacific Islander that joined Cook back from his second voyage, and since he could speak English, for a few months, he was the darling of high-society. Since he was nearly my age, Dr. Solander had encouraged us to go hunting for waterfowl while I visited. All I remember is how white Ma'i’s teeth were and how easily he laughed at things he found strange. In Philadelphia, my father told me Cook's most recent voyage was going to return Ma'i to his home, so "He's probably in Tahiti by now."

"How do you know about the Northwest Passage then?" Morris says.

"How do you know about all of this?" Alex's eyes are brimming with the same bitter curiosity he'd had about my prospects with the Prussian army.

I could answer by talking about the complaints that Congress has been receiving from the Russian
consulate about Bostonians in Vancouver, trading otter- or about the report my father had received from Spanish intelligence about the sighting of Cook's ships off the coast at Juan de Fuca. But, I know that won't satisfy Alexander's true curiosity. *Doctor Solander was close to a family friend. When Cook made his trip to the south seas, Solander tried to arrange passage with him. When Cook brought Ma'i to London, he hosted his visit. I wasn't close to any of them, but I was close enough to hear things.*

Alex is frowning, but turns his attention towards explaining the conversation to Washington as Steuben continues around this subject.

I find myself explaining more about my connections in Europe until he starts speaking about Franklin and I have nothing left to say, at which point, Alex takes up the conversation again along with Morris and Duponceau.

Meanwhile, Meade speaks with me in English, keeping his voice low so the congressional delegates don't overhear. He explains that Washington needs us to convince Steuben to train the army for pitched battles because General Lee regularly promotes hit and run tactics, and Steuben's credentials rival Lee's in a way that Washington's don't. When Charles Lee joins the army, Washington will need a military expert to support his strategic goals.

I hate how necessary this stranger is becoming.

Steuben is warm in a way that has me thinking about Lafayette- the most successful example of a foreigner earning the trust of our soldiers. Gilbert had once told me that he didn't care if I loved him, he loved me. Similarly, Steuben's fondness has no qualification, but also- no escape. It seems to come more from his own confidence with himself than his opinions of us, and it irritates me like sore muscles, something I alone can feel and comprehend, making my conversation feel awkward and jilted.

I think Alex finds it charming. The Baron either catches every one of his witticisms or just laughs so easily he couldn't possibly miss one, and I can see my friend feels flattered. Alex is too wise to the tools of charisma not to notice the tactics the Baron is using, but he allows himself to be impressed.

“WHY DID YOU NOT tell me that Solander was to be on Captain Cook’s journey?” Alex says, untying his cravat as we ready for bed that night.

I don’t have an answer besides that it would’ve felt like bragging. “Why did you not tell me about Washington’s strategy disagreement with Lee?” I could have humiliated myself for not knowing, but before I can be harsh, I recall how it felt to take the blame for all the family’s secrecy about Cope, “Why did no one tell me?”

“It wasn’t relevant…” Alex says, simple and honest. His hands have dropped from his throat, the cloth loose around his neck. He’s frowning.

I shrug, “Neither was Cook.”

He wavers on his feet, shifting his weight awkwardly before deciding against some comment and turning towards the wardrobe to hang his clothes. “I suppose...I could have mentioned it in our preparations for the Baron. I expected I would be handling any questions he had about Washington’s preferred strategy...”

As if I wouldn’t be capable…
I don’t know why, but I start to talk- detailing my illustrious prospects elsewhere. I tell him how I’d been offered a position in training in the Prussian cavalry by my horsemanship tutor, how friends in the English Admiralty had encouraged me towards the navy before they’d learned my political leanings, my art lessons and studies for my introduction to Solander and the natural sciences.

“I chose to be here,” I say, watching my friend fold his clothes carefully, listening with tense posture. I know his bitterness, not having been told of these things, but the odds of meeting him, of nearly walking straight into him and being caught in his cold shock of beauty- it should have been impossible. “The rest is irrelevant.”

He gives no response to that.

MY CADENCE IS improving and February is ending in bitter cold. Our drill session ended early so that Alex’s boys could run home and warm themselves. “You sent Shrewsberry to deliver a message in York this morning,” he says as I remove my gloves for our sparring. “That trip will take more than a week...have you given up on our battalion?”

“Well with the wives coming, now will be the time to make your argument to Washington and his generals. Play to the ladies’ sweeter sensibility, and they do the convincing for you.” He pushes the blade of his sword into the frosted dirt and leans a hip against it, settling in to talk. “I assumed your boy was your primary counselor on this, so- bad time to send him away...unless you’re giving up.”

When I cornered Shrewsberry and asked if it was wrong to feel my father was denying me the chance for greatness, he was frank in his reply- “Their lives are not my legacy.” I grab my sword and motion for him to pick his up.

“You’re giving up because of that?” he says instead. “Who do you think you’re doing this for?”

I have no answer for him- nothing I could admit to.

“If you’re doing good, what should it matter who it benefits?” he says. “You hold influence and connections- you have the power therefore the responsibility to succeed. It would be grossly irresponsible and selfish not to do something because of why you think you might be doing it.”

I haven’t given it up, but until I’m right with my causes, I can’t accept support. The battalion was a cloud in my imagination, and if Shrewsberry’s estimation of my motive gives me a purpose to drop it for now, I shouldn’t question why it satisfies me. I don’t want this conversation, “If I’m given the battalion, my reputation stands a lot to gain-”

“-and to lose,” he says. “The sacrifices you’ll make surely merit whatever gratitude posterity will have...and not just your inheritance,” he yanks his sword up from the ground and tosses it aside pointedly- he wants to spar, but not with that. “You’ll be making enemies, the kind that will force you to constantly defend yourself, your character and your ideas. If you’re committed to this, you’ll never be able to retreat to private life. You forfeit your privacy- whatever freedom you could have with anonymity.”

Freedom? As if I ever had such a thing- with my name. The way Alex is talking about political dangers is a call for me to see my battalion as a challenge, one with a big reward- glory. I think he knows how much losing my father’s support has shaken me and he’s aiming to replace my need for his approval with my need for posterity’s. I appreciate what he’s trying, but I think that would only
make my motives worse and I'm not sure how to explain that.

“You say this like you think I should have something to hide,” I try to smirk and make light of this, avoid the talk and get on with training.

He hesitates, at a loss with me.

“You think I should,” I grin accusingly, half-amused and half-relieved to have a tactic. I know it’s one he won’t like, but that makes it all the more effective. “What would you suggest to dirty my fluffy white tail?” my coquettish tone earns an incredulous look. “Do you want to be my scandal?”

“Is that how you plan to convince the generals?” his voice doesn’t betray it, but I think he’s already upset. “I understand that it’s easier to be charming than risk your genuine thoughts,” he says. He is upset. “But if you want my help, you won’t be a coward about it- that’s a woman’s way and you won’t have that advantage with other men.”

“Other men. I could have it with you.”

He stares at me without response. Then, bending over, he swipes his sword from the ground and tucks it under his arm as he pulls his gloves on, hands shaking either with cold or fury. “Come ask me if you actually want my help,” he says, and starts the walk uphill towards the Potts house.

We hadn’t begun our swords training, but I shouldn’t chase him.

I prodded for anger and I got it. I’ve known my desires and hesitation would irritate him, but his pain has taken on a frenzy, desperation to sever the injury instead of offering up his hands and letting me soothe the strain- as if to insist he isn’t hurting. Around we go in this dizzying dance.

Love is rough and I know I’m particularly ungentle. I’ve learned not to play too long with unguarded hearts, but my mind has always been slow in chasing my own, finding the places it’s taking root. It was always clear when Francis was testing me, never like Alexander’s complicated metaphors and drunken admissions, ‘I know what I want to be with you’ had been a simple ‘I love you’ with Francis, and he’d worn the pain of rejection clearly when I failed to see what was happening. When my confusion made him cry, I had known to reconsider, I looked to find where my heart was latched into him.

I think Alex would rather bleed out than admit I can hurt him.

If I’m being honest, I understand...it would be worse to humor someone’s genuine feelings. I know not to be flirting. I should be more openly aware, but he should trust me. I’ve never humored him. I mean what I say. I don’t want the cure he’s offering, and without leaving me completely, distance will never temper how I feel.

If I’m being honest with myself, I’ve known that...for awhile.

I ACCOMPANY THE BARON VON STEUBEN in his full-tour of camp’s operations that morning. We ride with Vogel and Duponceau, observing men at drill and at work. Steuben takes notes while we stop in each camp and make rounds on foot, using me to translate conversations with individual soldiers and whispering to his manservant ideas for solutions.

He doesn’t approach me often and I know my posture must be forbidding, but I don’t allow him the excuse of letting that deter him and I judge him harshly for being unsociable. When he brings me his list of problems he’s found, I should be pleased that he’s placed no emphasis on matters of the
quartermaster department. I know this is my chance to insert my ideas for how he might intervene and earn the post of Inspector General, but Alexander should be here and he’s not. Steuben should be an imposing figure, and he’s not. I fold my arms over my chest and nod absently.

“There are major gaps in the outer entrenchments, many of the redoubts are unfinished or poorly-situated. Such as that,” he points towards Sullivan’s bridge over the Schuylkill. “It is indefensible.” He goes on critiquing the logistic and administrative design of the camp, the irregularity in regiment size, the disorganization of supply houses, and the overwhelming masses of follower encampments.

I grow increasingly frustrated that Alexander didn’t come. I could speak on behalf of his concerns—most of which Steuben is echoing without prompting, but I don’t. What was the point of Alexander’s independent studies if he forfeits the chance to use what he knows?

Is he avoiding me because of this morning?

“You are not writing anything down,” Steuben glares at my hands and exaggerates ‘anything’ in his characteristic way.

“No,” I say, looking at the notebook he’s holding. “I assumed you were.”

“You will need to make a report of our findings, will you not?”

Normally, I would have taken notation in case of this actuality, never expecting a distinguished gentleman to do menial work like writing his own ideas, but something about Steuben makes me suspect he’s not above that task and I shouldn’t allow him to be. “General Washington will be refreshed by an expert, willing to give advice to his face,” unlike Conway. I watch Steuben’s expressions for any hint that he understands why Washington would appreciate honest criticism, any hint that he knows our rumors as Lady Washington suspects. For such an expressive man, he gives away nothing. My father had wondered why General Washington never responds to his mentions of the Baron, but I think it would be folly to make an estimation based on such false images. “I think it would benefit you to give the report yourself.”

He considers me with a new light in his eyes, respect. “Then I will also warn him that this low morale among the men is dangerous.”

After several violent uprisings and an epidemic of desertions, “I’m sure he-”

“When things go sour, a man won’t fight for things to go back to how they were, he’ll only fight for the chance to make them better. He needs something sweet to overcome self-pity and rekindle his self-love.”

I realize Steuben wasn’t seeking advice as he carries on with a speech about how to rally men towards a cause as if we lack the ability. I don’t listen through most of it, but I gather the essence of his words. “You see something sweet in the American cause?”

He’s amused by my perception. “I see a place where a King might be human,” he says, “know and be known by his people.”

It would be an understatement that Kings are unpopular among patriots and I don’t tell him why he should avoid promoting the concept when he’s being sent by the French court. “Letting a man be human,” I say instead. “It seems you knew your King well—what led you to pursue something so mundane?”

Steuben has no answer for that, but the amusement falls from his face and he turns away towards his horse.
“I ask because, in our letter of introduction from Mister Franklin, he indicated that you worked as a Quartiermeister-Lieutenant on King Frederick’s ‘Royal Suite’ with his strategic planners and Prince Henry himself. I’m sure if anyone knows about the humanity of a King-”

Duponceau grabs me before I can mount my horse. “We don’t ask about Henry,” he says quick and low, then releases my arm. “It is because he loves us that we don’t ask. He doesn’t want anything from us but our trust- and in return he gives us protection.” Protection from what? With what? His robust reputation, I assume. My confusion must show, but Duponceau says, “You understand. You must understand.”

HAMILTON MANAGES TO AVOID me all day, and while Meade informs me that he’s busy with his preparations for the court-martials, I cannot help feeling his absence from headquarters is purposeful. When I come upstairs that night, he’s already in bed reading my copy of Symposium, turned to the account of Alcibiades’s entrance and angling himself towards the fireplace. He pretends not to notice me as I come in and shuck my coat. I glance over my shoulder and frown, recognizing the attitude.

“You know I have several law textbooks on the shelf,” I say, sitting to untie my boots. “If you’d rather read something for your cases…”

He’s quiet, then turns a page, rubbing his thumb and finger over the paper loudly.

“Steuben made his observations of camp today,” I say. Predictably, it earns no response. “He was concerned about Sullivan’s bridge and the size of the regiments. I told him Washington would appreciate candor, and I think he was impressed with the advice.” I believe Alexander’s either skimming the Greek or pretending to look at words he doesn’t understand. “Steuben’s probably capable of being a decent Inspector General on his own - he’s noticed a lot of the issues we’ve complained about, and he seems to have an inclination towards taking action, so we’ll need to move quickly if we want him to consider our thoughts useful…”

He turns another page.

“Alexander, I know you’re not reading that.”

“I am trying to,” he says, but then puts the book down in his lap and looks at me impatiently.

I press my lips thin. “Why didn’t you come?”

“You don’t need me,” he says, but he knows that isn’t why I wanted him there. He explains, “You were just saying how the Baron is capable. Do you really need to...do any of this? Supporting him is one thing, but making such a project out of it-”

“I don’t trust him,” I say. He’s making me feel my insistence on our plan is irrational, and I won’t force him to help me, but I can’t stand to lose his understanding. “I don’t trust why he left the Prussian army. Something went wrong- he doesn’t want us to know about it…” this earns a raised brow, and I explain, “I tried to ask him about King Frederick today and he couldn’t even look at me for the rest of our ride.”

“I asked him a similar line yesterday,” Alex admits. “Whatever reason he left Europe, I don’t think we have any right to demand that he remembers it- much less tells us about it.”

So, he saw it too, but “If he was sent away for something horrible, how can we trust him here?” I say. He should like to hear these doubts coming from me- with how he’d encouraged me to be wary
of trusting Washington. Alex has been friendly with Steuben and I can’t tell if this is sympathy or his foolish kindness to the pitiable. I want to be partners in this, and if he sees something in Steuben that I’ve somehow missed, it interests us both for him to share it.

“Because he’s selfish,” he says with a shrug. “Didn’t you see it- when you asked? He’s desperate for redemption- glory and a good name, that sort of motive is easy to trust.”

“That motive is the same as Conway’s.”

Again, he shrugs, “And I would have trusted Conway if Mifflin hadn’t gotten to him first.” His tone is standoffish, and I don’t want to have this argument again. It makes me seem more vindictive than I feel towards Conway, and Alex defends him more than I think he cares to. “The Baron believes our cause is the one most likely to bring him fame- it’s the most enlightened, most...revolutionary,” Alex says. “He wants this war, so we can be sure we have his loyalty as long as Washington remains the one most likely to win it. Conway was the same- only made the mistake of aligning himself with men who cared more about their position in the war than whether or not we do win.”

It’s a bold statement to make against Mifflin and Gates, the ‘Hero of Saratoga’, but I let him go on. Alex is leaning back against his elbows and looking at me with his typical stubbornness, but a vulnerable hope that I won’t challenge it. Instead, I motion at him, “Move over.”

“What?”

I walk to him and put a knee on his mattress, “Move in.”

He blinks, then draws his legs up and scoots towards the wall. I sit in the place he vacated and put his calves in my lap. “There’s just something about him I don’t like,” I admit. “He’s keeping secrets- obviously, we all do, but his...they’re darker, unpredictable.” Alex is watching me with some dawning suspicion. “I mean, for a man who has so much to hide, he’s uncomfortably open about himself.”

“About...himself?”

“He has strong opinions-”

“Which is good, isn’t it?” Alex says simply. “I mean, it’s easier to work with a man who’s straightforward and consistent...”

He knows I agree, “But, he behaves as if he has nothing to hide.”

“And you’re sure that he does.” Alex hums like he understands. “Because of the inconsistencies on the resume from Deane and Beaumarchais.” He talks like he’s decided this explains my judgment and I’m sure it makes the most sense, though I’m not sure it captures my feelings. I’m not sure my feelings make sense.

I’m struggling against a rushing noise in both ears, trying to gather my thoughts before he does, but Alexander is unconcerned with it. He turns and lies down, putting his head by my lap and pulling his blanket up to make himself comfortable.

“But, the Baron didn’t write that,” he says. “So, we shouldn’t worry too much about qualifications on a bit of paper- let’s give it a few days and go with what he’s claiming in person- see what recommendations he comes up with.” He toys with the knot of my sash by my hip, “If he seems like a fraud by then, and we need to pull his strings, I’m sure you’ll already have him ’round your fingers.”
Alexander is perceptive. It’s a trait I cherish when my thoughts are a muddle of clumsy lines, going nowhere and forming nothing; precise and sharp, he has a way of setting ink to my thoughts until clear images emerge. I’m not sure what he’s tracing now, but it’s not what I’m thinking. I still appreciate the effort- what it means that he’s trying. I know I hurt him this morning- purposefully, in a way he had asked me not to- trusted me not to. I know he has no reason to collude with me in anything, yet he tries to shape my plans into something he understands, something we can share.

He’s better at this than I am. The thought lifts my hand into his hair, stroking carefully. Touching him brings clarity and I think I was right to ask for physical closeness by crawling onto his bed, as if that small plea for intimacy served as a sort of apology. Still, it should be aloud. “I shouldn’t have taken that tone with you this morning. You asked me not to…”

He’s quiet, limbs drawn up towards his chest. Then, he moves his head and puts it against my thigh, encouraging my fingers in his hair. It’s a familiar position for us- and before us, the posture Francis had taken with me. Alex stares towards the wall with the same sort of clarity I always imagined Francis had, making me feel so dull by comparison. I think his sudden softness may be a distraction. It’s a tactic he’d recently acquired, but I can’t place what’s making him feel vulnerable enough to employ it.

“It wasn’t your tone,” he admits slowly, confounding me further. “The teasing and charm is all fine, but...you realize what you were saying, right?”

Suggesting a scandal.

I had been frustrated he didn’t see that I meant what I said, but with such a proposition, how could he? I should reflect how I came to be encouraging the very actions I always flee, but the subject is a thick one, and I fear touching it might drag me in- a dark exploration to undertake in my own time. Now, it would only slow me further while Alex races ahead.

“I’m sorry,” is all I can think to say because I hurt him, and for that I am. I’m sorry that I can think of nothing to explain, that my mind’s so infuriatingly blank, that I can’t give the understanding he tries to give me.

He doesn’t look up, just nods against my leg and gives it a small squeeze in reply.

He forgives me, but I fear for what.

ALEXANDER IS QUIET at our morning exercises which I find strange as he had been nostalgically talkative all night, even shared his bed, which I’m now convinced is the superior practice if I ever doubted. Even with the muddle of my mind, and a decorous distance between our bodies I was warm and comforted just to have company, far better than to be alone with my thoughts.

He’s stricter with the children and I think they notice the change but are too polite to say it. When he sends them away, I don’t hesitate, “Dear boy, it’s cold enough without you being so frigid.”

This earns the flattest expression I’ve ever seen on his face.

He picks up his sword and is rough with me as ever but with none of his usual playfulness. He’s focused and learning fast, but obviously still troubled by something. I worry I’ve caused it with my inability to explain myself clearly last night. I reconsider cheek in favor of earnestness as we sheathe our swords and pull on coats for the walk back towards camp. “Alexander, you’re worrying me,” I
say. When he just laughs through his nose, I pursue, grabbing the bend of his arm and stepping close to put my hand in his. “If you won’t tell me what’s bothering you, I’ll just guess at it.”

He glares but then glances away in a way I interpret as thoughtful, considering how to frame his concerns. I stroke my thumb over the back of his hand patiently until, “The case for perjury didn’t go through yesterday,” he explains. “The court couldn’t find that Ensign Maxwell had published the report about Lieutenant Enslin’s attempted sodomy further than the strict line of duty had required.”

“You didn’t say anything—”

“You had your own concerns,” he says, and before I can protest that reason, expands, “and, I didn’t want to think about it—much less talk.”

“But it bothers you now?”

“The strict line of duty…” he says with emphasis, but I obviously don’t understand his meaning. “Well, given the wording, I think we can assume what the verdict’ll be when Enslin’s case goes forward.”

“Guilty, I presume.” It’s the right answer, but Alex raises his brows as if it should completely explain his dilemma. “You think he should go free?”

“God, no! He’s an officer—he had no business with a private in his company. The damage that can do to a unit—the breach of trust. It’s flagrant disregard for good order, implicit abuse of his position…”

“If you believe he deserves the punishment—why should the verdict about Maxwell’s story bother you?”

“Well first—” he starts trudging up the hill, fingers laced in mine and pulling me in tow, “on principle, Enslin’s trial should be judged from a clear perspective with Maxwell’s report as a piece of evidence, and I don’t believe it will. I believe the court will see the charge against Maxwell’s statement as attempted evasion.”

That’s a fair concern from a legal standpoint, and even more reason we need an Inspector General to oversee investigations.

“Second, the nature of this crime will breed talk and these things are never entirely as they look. I’m sure the story will be twisted into something separate from the truth.” No matter how morally distant he is from Enslin, he makes this sound like it threatens him personally as a man with lust for the masculine. I don’t think he intends it, but he can’t seem to help it. “By the time the case goes to trial, we can’t be sure how much will have sunken into the minds of his commanders—and any witnesses called. If those rumors can’t be managed, how can we trust anyone’s testimony?”

Public speculation is a threat to any case, but I’m sure Alex knows that and I don’t feel the need to remind him. I don’t think that’s his concern here. “You pity him,” I say, knowing the risk of his sympathy. “You don’t believe his trial will be fair.”

“I think—we will run the risk of setting a precedent if we don’t punish this harshly,” he says. “But, I think that sentiment is shared by Colonel Malcolm and the trying panel, and I’m...afraid it will be an excuse to please the animal urges of the rest of camp— to be unduly harsh.”

“You think they’ll hang him?”

He bites his lip in serious consideration before shaking his head. “No, the court would need a
statement from two witnesses that he’d actually...” Alex winces, “penetrated the boy. An attempt isn’t enough to hang without political motive-” he stops to consider, “which, sentiment in his company might be. But, Maxwell’s lower rank already weakens his pull, and even with how the court’s accepting his statement, it still only describes lewd contact which implies attempted sodomy. Unless Maxwell’s secondary witness saw Enslin committing the act in a way Maxwell couldn’t describe or if he makes some other convincing statement against Enslin’s...habits, it isn’t enough to hang him, even if doing so would bolster morale.”

I don’t notice my tears until I feel the cold biting at moisture in my eyes. He’s talking about hanging a man as a way to raise morale in camp…

To believe an officer could become so hated by his own men for losing his professionalism with one, for perhaps loving the wrong one- one just far enough below him to drop the hammer on us all, I want to sob or vomit or scream. I begin to understand Alex’s worry for what offense the rumors will actively condemn- for what mask the army puts on their fear...anger or hatred. Fraternization or Sodomy.

I hate Enslin. With madness and fury. I want to kill him myself. I have more right than anyone.

“Hey-...Maxwell’s secondary won’t give the statement.” Alex's hand in mine is suddenly pulling me to a rough stop. He grabs my shoulders. “I’ll be sitting in on Burr’s questioning of Lieutenant Fairclough today and he’s a close friend of Enslin’s- he encouraged him to make the case for perjury and placed his word against Maxwell’s. If anything in his testimony contradicts Maxwell’s existing statements, his rank stands as some priority...at least in my estimation of the account.”

“Alex-”

“A better understanding of the defendant, more experience as an officer, more distance from the influence of the lower ranks in their company. Even if he has to confirm the attempt- it’s still just an attempt. The only completed crime was fraternization. It was...it was breaching his duty with favoritism or- or endangering one of his men by asking favors he couldn’t refuse.”

“What’s the worst we can do to him for an attempt?”

This jarrs Alex, surprised my anger turned against the accused so quickly. He shakes his head, “Ah-reasonably? We’ve never held a court martial for sodomy I...suppose we’d treat an attempt like endangerment or breach of duty, so losing rank or- at worst, decommissioning. With recruitment in the state it’s in, he’ll probably be allowed enlistment, but I doubt he’ll want it...”

“You’ll make sure it’s fair?” I say, holding onto my friend’s arms. “That everyone sees it as fair?”

When he gives a weary smile and manages to look confident, I pull him into a hug, partially so that my faith in him might ease the burden, and partially because I can’t have his eyes on my face right now. I know he worries about how I think of this particular crime and I can’t add my own feelings to his concerns. He would only draw the wrong picture of my mind, and right now, we are too brittle to disturb him with that knowledge.

He doesn’t take it well when he’s wrong- especially not about me.

I let his arms around me soothe some of the rage, cling to him as he expects I should. He believes that this case and how the camp will react to it will frighten me, and I can’t explain how far beyond fear I am. It’s an ugly picture I’m not ready to draw out.

“I’m bringing my report of the case to the Baron today, and asking advice for Enslin’s trial.” Alex’s
hand strokes gently between my shoulders- one of his soft distractions as if he expects this news to irritate me. “I figure, if we’re grooming him to be Inspector General, he should see how we’re carrying out investigations.” I pull back from him, meet his eyes, and he barrels on with his most convincing tone- the one he uses to encourage our most foolish, ambitious plans. “We ruined our chances with Conway, and forces outside our control removed the Baron d’Arendt as an option. We can have influence over that post in the way you described- we can have it together...but you have to trust me, and you have to trust him.”

“I do,” I say stepping back but tracing my fingers on the back of my friend’s arm, holding some small contact. “I understand why you trust him.”

He sees how I’m evading what he wants to hear, but for whatever reason, allows it. “Come with me then.”

THE BARON VON STEUBEN now occupies the house that was vacated when the Baron de Kalb accompanied Lafayette to Canada. I last visited the place when I intercepted Conway as he made his escape from camp. At the time, I was only beginning to understand the illusion, the performance for which we had all been unwittingly cast.

It never feels right to be at odds with Alexander, especially while we both want understanding, to work together- be partners. But, if that’s not possible right now, if we’re carrying these roles, I’m glad Steuben’s home will be the stage for it, a separate place to seperate this dissonance. As his manservant escorts us inside, Alex begins with his banter, playful now as he hadn’t been while we were alone.

The house is furnished as it was when de Kalb left, but Steuben’s staff has added drapes and small portraits that give the place a bohemian feel that has no right to exist this far from France. As we come inside, Duponceau is leaving the main office and informs us that the Baron is working on his report for Washington about the state of camp- he’s not to be disturbed.

That statement is somewhat undermined when a tall woman in a dark emerald dress flounces out, laughing at something said inside. Her eyes immediately lock on my friend, “Alexander!”

“Oh, it’s so grand to see you here!” she pulls Alex to her bosom and nuzzles against the top of his head, driving a pointed chin into his scalp. He shoves at her until her embrace becomes a headlock. Their affection more-closely resembles the roughhousing of siblings than a distinguished officer and the wife of his superior. “I didn’t notice before- you’ve gotten taller,” she decides, turning to French, "Pierre, you should’ve seen him last spring, I could hardly believe my little bean-pole was in the artillery."

He shoves her off, “Are you done?”

She pinches his cheek, “My little boy, I’m so proud.”

“You’ve had your fun.” Alex looks to me for help, but I’m too amused.

She grins towards me, and I have to say, “I assume you know each other.”
“He’s like a son.”

“Caty-”

“My husband’s like a father to him, which makes me his mother.” She pulls up her skirt to sit on one of the Baron’s sofas beside where Duponceau is writing on a lap desk.

Alex is beyond protest, just takes my arm and pulls me to the opposite couch to sit beside him, demanding my support. I put my arm around his shoulder and he crosses his legs and his arms. “Is she even older than you?” I whisper, leaning towards his ear.

“A year- if that,” he’s not deigning to lower his voice, holding her eyes, “She doesn’t act it.”

“Alexander and I met last year after Princeton,” Caty leans over Duponceau while he writes. “But, it feels like I knew him months before that. My husband spoke very highly of the valiant New York Artillery Captain. He was a sensation for the ladies.”

Alex shifts against me, glancing away with a tightly-restrained smirk. I nudge against his shoulder. They’re friends and she knows it. That and her ability to make his cheeks this pink instill respect- for her intuition and nature- she seems to fill all the space society gives her, and I think if I gave a damn about that now, I could be very fond of a girl like her.

"He had the most ugly infatuation with a mutual friend, Kitty," she says, turning to French and putting a fond arm around Duponceau. “Watching her end his courtship without her family finding out she had ever allowed it, was as I’d imagine a marital dispute plays out on Olympus, all this unearthly grace and wrath. No one dared come between them while they sorted it.”

I worry that the subject might offend, but Alex is still smirking and I recall the name. “Kitty Livingston?” I’m not sure their courtship so much ended as consummated out of spite.

"In revenge, your friend left a veritable wake of broken hearts last we parted," Caty says, turning to me. "I had never seen anything so cruel."

“I’ve never heard a vulture complain how the lion kills,” Alex bites back with a smile that only amuses her further. “If anyone was cruel, you know it was her.”

“I have no complaints for your methods.” Caty raises her hand in concession, "Though I resent your choice of metaphor- ungentlemanly.”

Their familiar talk leaves me more curious than anything, but I don’t have the heart to press for an explanation or interrupt their reunion. As their conversation dissolves into gossip- mostly Alexander providing updates about men that Caty has not seen while we were in campaign, Duponceau intervenes to ask clarification about the practice of our officers, welcoming their wives and daughters into camp. He seems to think Alex was eagerly anticipating their arrival.

I see he isn’t amused, but Alex gives a sly smirk anyway. "Why should that excite me?"

I’m surprised when Duponceau doesn’t shy from answering. "You have a reputation for taking pleasure in their company."

I open my mouth to protest that, recalling his agitation with the moniker, ‘Tomcat’, and thinking the subject is inappropriate in the company of a lady. Then Alex says, "I worked hard for that reputation."

“What for?” I say, falling into English in genuine curiosity. I mean, "Why bother?"
Caty’s eyes flick to Alex with the same question, one delicate brow raised.

He shrugs the shoulder tucked under my arm, “There isn’t the time for women,” he says, and when Caty almost baulks, expands, “Not in earnest, I mean. They’re a distraction, a leach of effort- having to explain so much about our work to a girl who hardly cares for it just to hold a basic conversation. So, the reputation discourages them.”

Caty does baulk at that.

“Well, at least I do care to hold conversation.” Alex makes a face of frustration with himself and this topic, “I mean generally, women do not make the effort to understand how a war carries on. They just come with their picnic baskets to stand spectator, wait for some pretty gentleman to explain things after the fact, all while cooing things about their bravery whether or not it’s true.” He tosses a meaningful look at Duponceau. “You’ll know if a woman would use the same voice with a child, she’s flattering to make herself attractive.”

“Her’s practicing,” Caty amends, turning to the boy under her arm confidentially, “Husbands are always a woman’s first child.”

“And that as well,” Alex says, “Women don’t spare a moment on you unless you’re willing to marry before you ever touch their hand.”

“Can you blame them?” Caty shifts, putting both hands primly in her lap. “All while we’re fighting about the rights of Englishmen, you like to forget the word is one and regard it as two- English men. What of the women? We own nothing without marriage- are nothing without it, unless our families are noble dynasties like Kitty’s that can support their daughters for twenty-seven years. Don’t you think her state would be the preferable one were you a woman?”

“I was teasing about that with her. She knew it…” Alex says carefully.

“She didn’t find it amusing.”

Alex is tense under my arm and I begin to see a fissure in their friendship. His tone is clipped, “Pierre, don’t let her tease you about marriage. She’ll feign confusion in three years, tell everyone it was all your fantasy- you’ll be left to confirm her story at your own expense and reconsider all that you understood.”

For his part, Duponceau keeps a sympathetic frown. “I don’t think I’ll marry.”

A hand claps against his shoulder and Steuben comes to stand behind their sofa. “Right you are. The worst plagues to a military are wives.”

As a professional and our social superior, his presence should end the conversation in favor of more productive things. Instead, he’s teasing and jovial and Caty finds this turn hilarious, goes into a new strain about how the men act so eager to get wives while talking like they don’t want them. I want to disappear from the conversation, but there’s no way to leave without notice.

“What about you, Laurens?” Steuben asks. He has an unfortunate habit of noticing me. I might admire his acuity, but his invitation to speak feels like an unwanted embrace, protective and patronizing. “What do you think of marrying?”

A chokey mouthful, bitter and cold. “I’ve no taste for it.” Steuben hadn’t asked much and I’ll say even less.

After Francis turned the world into a ghost town, me into one of his shades- after Jemmy, I had
nothing left to lose. I was spineless, an empty corpse ready to collapse. My self-righteous surety was stripped away and I wanted nothing. I gave in to everything. I crawled through existence when I moved at all. It seemed like a perverse adaptation, for a creature to be capable of surviving in such a state, and for all that I loathed what image the world painted of us, Martha had ensured my survival when no one else saw the threat. Her empathy was subsistence, marriage no more appetizing than firecakes or boot leather.

“Are you finished with your report?” I say, closing the conversation.

Steuben smiles, almost relieved, “Yes, and I was hoping to begin our new drill book.”

The abrupt change of subject has Alex’s head tilting towards me too fast for his usual discretion. The motion is small- should be insignificant, but it catches me instantly with its carelessness. The Baron knows we’ve prearranged this task. Judging by the tone in Steuben’s voice and the way he’s looking at me, he brought up the drill book, knowing that I intended to offer counsel on it- perhaps knowing that Alexander had been training me for the task. But, Alex never told me the Baron would know, we never clearly-agreed that the task would be mine, and I wonder how it’s come to be that he’s told our subject more about the plan than me.

Just how much has Alex told him?

I return my partner’s look, baulking at the betrayal, and his encouraging smile only infuriates me further- as if he thinks he’s being helpful. “You know the manual better than I,” I say, pointedly in English. I motion for him to follow Steuben into the other room. Help him with his damn book.

“Have I offended you?” he says.

He knows he has. He knows I can’t make a scene of it here, but I can communicate my feelings very well with a look, pushing up from the sofa to follow the Baron where I’m obviously being directed.

“It was only a suggestion to him,” Alex catches my sleeve while I turn away, “I don’t intend to degrade your capabilities,” he says. “I know that you can do this on your own.”

So he decided it for me. I know what he means by ‘this’, and how that meaning will be lost on Caty, how our English confounds the rest. But, the fact remains that he told Steuben the plan for me before he told me- that he’s pushing me to enact the plan alone.

I lean over, close to his ear so he will hear me. “I didn’t want to.”

I NAVIGATE THE CONVERSATION with Steuben like steering a ship through the Strait of Messina. I’m prepared to vigorously defend my opinions of which formations to teach- which movements the army will need in the coming campaign. But, it’s quickly apparent that Steuben’s taken my father’s advice to gain my friendship...so, I’m facing the ravenous pull of Charybdis instead.

He’s trying to charm me.

“You must hear this often from foreigners, but you Continentals make the most endearing soldiers,” he says, taking a moment from reading over the notes he had taken while I spoke. “To say I should be ready to explain why they shouldn’t be firing their guns at each other for practice.”

“You don’t believe me?”
“I do believe you,” he says, “which is why I’m pleased. I’m not afraid of an army of lions led by a sheep.” He smiles when some recognition must show in my eyes, and I allow it for the sake of dragging out his attempts, but I’m unimpressed, and he rushes to amend, “Not that your commander is a sheep by any measure.”

“No,” I say. “And he already has one lion on staff, so you should consider what other purpose you can serve.”

It’s clear he knows what purpose he’s intended for- the post that half of Congress and the army alike are grooming him to fill, but I’m not talking about the post of Inspector General.

I believe Alexander was right- that Mifflin cared more about his position in the war than whether or not we win it, but he failed to mention why that worries him so much, why it has made him so embittered against Mifflin and Gates’s faction. Perhaps Alexander knows he fills the roll that Mifflin once did for General Washington, an aide and confidant. He isn’t eager to draw attention to the threat that such a character can pose.

Perhaps that’s why he leaves me to the task of advising Steuben.

I don’t need to believe in Steuben to trust him, so long as I know one thing. “You told Gates you come as a volunteer for the United States. You told me you came for a place where a King might be a man. I don’t believe these reasons need to conflict, but perhaps you can make it clearer- why are you here?”

Steuben is intelligent, and it comes as no surprise that he sees what I’m asking, but I don’t anticipate that he’s willing to be so direct as to say, “You want assurance that we have a mutual self-interest.”

“You don’t need me to like you,” I say, managing my surprise.

He obviously knows that I don’t, and if I took pleasure in my dislike, it might bother me to see that he doesn’t mind it at all. He raises a brow with a coy smile, obviously understanding one key factor that blurs the way other officers tend to treat me. I am not my father, I am not a man to be politically appeased and managed, I’m a soldier.

“But, you do need me,” I say- as a translator, as the man who can manage his connections from camp to Congress to France. He knows I’m right, and he knows not to question why I’ve judged him as I have. Washington withholds his appointment for him to my discretion, and “It would give me some comfort, moving forward, if I can trust that your decisions serve the same purposes as mine regardless of my feelings about you.”

“You need me to reconcile my love for a King with my love for your cause?” he says.

I’d rather not know anything about his love. “I need you to reconcile your expertise with the lowly image you’re making.” I need his truth- however he will put it. “Americans are eager to believe a story if it’s one that suits their interests, but they won’t believe a highly-qualified foreigner has no interest in rank.”

I see it when he understands what I’m talking about. “The man whose job this is...” his fingers stretch over the drill book. “He was a Major General. I intend to be the same...once I’ve proven equal to the task. I’m sure, once I’ve taught your men all I know, I’ll have earned that much.”

His optimism is a mask I recognize well. Belief in justice while experience forbids the hope for it. I’m glad with the amendment- that he will do the work required of the post before asking the
recognition of rank. Even those who never worked with Conway, now know him as the Inspector General who skipped camp. They’re not eager to trust whoever fills those shoes. “Conway made enemies because Americans are very good at seeing when a man is faking his causes. If you want anyone to believe you deserve this, I need to trust you’re being honest with me about why you want it.”

“Ask me what you are going to ask me.”

“Why did you leave Europe?”

A stretch of silence passes between us, and I’ve been warned it’s not a question he can be expected to answer, but it’s one he must know the world will be asking. If he expects to earn glory and good name here, he will need an answer that not only satisfies the curiosity, but inspires others to believe themselves capable of the same success as servants to America. As the man offering to manage his image here, I deserve to know- “You wanted fame…glory…”

“I did. From the first day I saw him,” he says, treating my assumptions as he should, a prompt for his story. “High-ranking officers in the Prussian line conduct drills themselves, even at the battalion-level so that the leadership of the line cannot ignore the responsibility of their station. Majors, colonels, generals- we learn the faces of our men and love them all. Frederick values his soldiers so highly he leads marches himself, and we would die for him.”

I don’t need to understand his love for his king, but I let him talk.

“I was part of the initial assault on the Austrian center that fell back on Prague, and the blood I spilled on that field made me wish to bleed for him to death. I volunteered for the Freibataillon when no one else wanted the post. I marched with my King, two-hundred miles in ten days to the Reichsarmee. I was there when we caught the French in our crossfire, and outnumbered two to one, we mauled them because our King was clever and strong and he made us so. I commanded Brigades at Kunersdorf, Hülseen, Liegnitz and Torgau. In four years, I learned more about life, death, and the world than I had ever been able to find in any book, all for my King. I was thirty-one when he took me into his personal staff school and taught me all he knew about leadership.”

Staff school…I know what the Baron is describing from my study of the War of Austrian-Succession. Shortly after Czar Peter withdrew, Frederick sought to restore the high-command of his army by creating a school of thirteen men he handpicked for a Special Class on the Art of War. “Spezialklasse der Kriegskunst.”

The smile Steuben gives in recognition might be believable if his face hadn’t gone completely bloodless. “Yes, exactly, my boy,” he says. “I was the baby of the class, obviously.”

A course taught by Europe’s most famous military leader, and this man claims to have been his protégé. Yet I had never heard the name Steuben. “Then I repeat…why did you leave Europe?”

“As you said, I want glory. I will be honest of that if you don’t believe such a thing is ugly,” he leans over the table, smiling confidentially. “Whigs like to consider personal ambitions low-talk, and I don’t like to offend.”

“Not at all.”

“The thirst for glory is what I love about you Continentals. That’s the spirit of republicanism, every man acting for virtue. Glory will come to me after your victory- through your victory, and that’s why I understand and love your men better than Conway. My fame can wait-”
“No one is asking you to wait,” I stop him short of one of his moralistic rants. “We need you to teach us what you know. I can see you assigned to a post that reflects your abilities. As long as you understand that your fate is tied to our success, I can work with you, translate your orders, and ensure that you’re received by the men. But I cannot make them love you. I can’t make them willing to march into death under your orders. That love belongs to Washington alone. They see themselves in him-”

“Like a King,” he says. “I have no problem seeing myself in others, but it’s not seeing themselves that make the men love Washington. They love him because they believe he loves them. It’s a certain seduction, if done correctly, to look someone in the face and show them ‘I see through you. I am with you’.”

“I’m not sure that Washington would appreciate-”

“I’m quite talented with such things myself. I can always tell if someone is a liar for instance,” he says, leaning over the table towards me. It makes me want to retreat, but I cannot cede that to him. “I know if a man grew up an orphan, if a woman knows how to dodge a slap. I can see if a boy still needs his father’s approval- or if he’s shifted that need onto a friend.”

“Do not do that with me.”

“If he imagines how that friend’s mouth would look, wrapped around his-”

I jolt up from the table sharply, hitting the back of my chair against the wall. By all accounts, my reaction should be a victory in his little game, but the look he gives me is not a pleased one. He knows, by making the jab he just did, he’s exposed himself as well, and I know I was right about the nature of our roles here. He needs me.

With the ground levelled between us, at least we can move forward.

I WOULD LEAVE the Baron’s house were it possible. But, as he’s been attending the tables of Washington’s generals, he has chosen tonight to invite them to his own. The servants in those respective houses are preoccupied with unpacking their wives and cannot be spared to prepare meals. As the Baron’s kitchen takes on the task, Alexander has his conversation, asking whatever advice he expected to get about the Enslin case.

I go to the bookshelf for a distraction, but I only recognize more Plato, a copy of the allegory about the cave. I don’t want company. I don’t want my own thoughts, but Caty Greene joins me without invitation. “Do you enjoy theater, Laurens?” she trails her fingers on the spine of Don Quixote. “I think I’ll begin Pierre’s lessons with Shakespeare.”

“It’s kind of you, reading with the boy,” I say.

“I think it’s the most useful thing anyone can learn.”

“Reading?”

“Theater,” she smiles and looks down at the cover of Plato in my hands. “To get anywhere in life, we invent our characters, make a play of our stories. We perform and the more people we convince, the more true the play becomes. Once you convince yourself that it’s your reality, that you are your character, there’s no more point for anyone to question it.”

But, people question her performance- as a wife, as a distinguished lady- the rumors I had heard
about her flirting nature and obnoxious opinions must mean that she chooses not to convince herself of her own story, that she has no interest in that reality. I think I understand her- her friendship with Alexander, how she draws herself to me. If Alex has told Steuben pieces of our plan for him, this woman must know all of it. She knows the performance we will need from the Baron, and I cannot tell if this conversation is cautioning me or counseling me.

Either way, the message is clear. “Then the most dangerous thing is recognizing the truth?”

“Maybe,” it’s a simplification, but she allows it. “If you know yourself, you inevitably share…” she says, “it’s human nature. Self-discovery can be a solitary journey, but self-realization rarely is, and we all betray ourselves eventually. We seek at least one person to understand, and that’s how you end up like Fairclough.”

“Alexander talked to you about the case?”

“While you had the Baron preoccupied,” she tucks a curl of hair back into the pins on her head. Her arms lock at the elbows and I’m glad she doesn’t share Lady Washington’s amusement with this subject- not that she could. “Fairclough was Enslin’s cabinmate. After Maxwell spread the story of what he saw, Burr needed to call him as a witness, otherwise it’d be the word of an ensign against a lieutenant. Fairclough knows more than I believe he now wishes he did.”

I glance into the other room where the Baron von Steuben is telling a story from the Austrian Succession, bringing the boys around him like an old patriarch. If I hadn’t had suspicions since the start, I might feel like a fool for not putting a name to it sooner- the way Steuben brags of being a bachelor. Everyone rebels in some way against expectation, but no one can truly be so pleased to fail the daylight initiative of rearing a family naturally- unless the actions toward that end are hateful, blinding and painful. Even among those of us who see clearly in the absence of light understand the importance of letting our eyes adjust if we want to exist in the day.

“Do you think he has any idea what this could mean for him?” I say. “For what we’re trying to do?” I’m being vague, but I wouldn’t risk such hints to just anyone. Her- I think she stepped out of the cave, saw what there was to see in the light, and decided sight is no way to understand the world. The eyes can be tricked, and seeing might be believing, but it isn’t always truth.

She already knows. “I think he understands it’s a possibility. I think he knows he will need your help in mitigating that.” She turns away from the bookshelf, leaning back against it. “If you want to protect the Baron’s secrets, you need only support his performance...and vice versa. When he exaggerates, explain the details as if they support every claim he makes, and know that sometimes the best way to deter a rumor is to create a more favorable one.”

She’s right, and I’m glad to have good counsel about this. But, watching the way Steuben speaks, I don’t like how he lures my friends into the dark, how they follow. “Why do they...believe in him?”

“By they you mean Alex?” she says, but not unkindly and my friend’s name doesn’t worry me on her tongue as it had with Lady Washington. She considers my question, turning a keen eye towards where Steuben has the room captivated, Alexander included. “I think they’re comforted by him- his existence,” she says. “It’s natural, when you see yourself in someone, to want them to succeed.”

“It’s not like Hamilton to see himself in others.”

“Is it not?” she’s smiling gently, then cracks a small laugh, having teased at doubts I didn’t even know I had. “No,” she agrees. “That boy doesn’t trust his heart any further than he could tear it out his chest and throw it. I’m sure he’s rationalized everything in his mind.”
That is probably true, and with the way Alexander spoke of Steuben’s motives, I have to believe he had heard the same story as I was given about Frederick—about a young idealist’s love for a King. Alex had drawn his conclusions from that. But, “I don’t think he understands his mind outside the fleshy cage God put it in,” and if his instinct is to trust, he will shape his thoughts to justify that choice.

Caty laughs at that, takes the copy of Plato from my hands and replaces it on the shelf. “You don’t need to worry for Alexander,” she says. “He likes the Baron, but he’s agile about these things, quick to reform if he needs to.”

“Believe me, I know,” I say. Alexander’s affection ebbs like water, and catching it has required a tight hold and solidity. But, I don’t think she knows what Steuben said to me, and if my friend had entrusted this stranger with knowledge about us, it’s hard to keep faith in his judgment with him. “I’m worried about myself— as the Baron’s advisor. What it will mean for our friendship.”

“Alex is a practical man. I can’t imagine he’ll fault you for caution.”

It’s not caution, and I believe my friend will see that, but there’s no reason she needs to.

We join the party arm in arm.

CONGRESS LIKES STEUBEN, Washington likes Steuben, and Steuben is determined to be liked by the army. We have a common cause—whether or not he is qualified as he claims—whether or not I like him as a person, I can trust desperation towards a common goal. He will have the post of Inspector General inevitably, and no matter how he believes in our causes, no matter what Alex believes of this stranger, I won’t believe in him. But, he will be effective—because I will carry him myself. I have the power and connections, I have the responsibility to succeed.

Over the next three days, I spend all my time at the Baron’s headquarters, assisting with his reports to Washington and helping his staff translate our drill manual and training regimen. The work consumes so much of my time, I have a bed arranged on his floor, I pass my work for Washington on to Harrison. After missing two of our practices together, I tell Alexander not to wait for me.

In the mornings, I go out with the Baron into camp and we lead physical drills to increase the men’s stamina—the ones who are well enough to exercise. He yells Prussian expletives at the men who slack, performs the exercises with them, sweating right by their side. I join him. It raises morale and returns some of the ethos we have been lacking, a warrior mindset. We leave dirty and sore, with aching muscles. Every morning, more men come.

In the evenings, I attend dinners and help him socialize with Washington and his generals, translating and explaining things he’s yet to learn. He learns quickly.

The boys of his staff are endearingly kind and frustratingly loyal. I don’t blame them for their attachment to the Baron, if anything. I judge the Baron more harshly for it. I was told as a boy that all sin is the same, that there’s no divine scale judging the severity of wrong, but have never believed such a thing. It struck me as a lazy way to deflect shame, placing petty crimes beside the sins of the powerful.

Powerful is the only way to describe his hold on them.

ON MARCH THIRD, Meade comes to Steuben’s headquarters, bringing General Orders from
Washington. Captain Courtney from Maxwell’s company was dismissed to release Maxwell from his arrest, and Alex requested Steuben to oversee it. Of course, I will attend as his translator. I haven’t seen much of Alex in the last four days despite an adamant invitation from Steuben that he should visit whenever he has the time.

While we walk to the New York regiments, Meade explains that Boudinot has set out for Valley Forge, following a long correspondence he had been carrying out with our office about the prisoner exchange. He brought a list of paroled officers which- I’m surprised to hear- includes our friend, McHenry.

Meade explains that the doctor had been a battlefield surgeon of the Fifth Pennsylvania Regiment, serving at Fort Washington. He was captured while treating the injured during the siege on the fort in the months leading up to the British invasion of New York. “While Rush headed the Surgeon General’s department, McHenry was usually pulling the strings, so we all got to know him well,” he says. “We made contact when we heard Hammy was sick- and then Hammy recruited him to keep tabs on Rush.”

“Maybe now he can join us properly on staff,” I say, smirking and impressed with Mac for his discretion, managing to break his parole and make himself so useful.

“So next time Hammy's on his deathbed, he can just give him spy assignments from the other room?” Meade laughs. He says he suspects McHenry will return to camp in a week or two, and we spend the rest of the walk talking about work at headquarters, how busy everyone is despite Harrison and Tench’s return to camp. “I think Hammy’s had it worst. Washington tries not t’let him work with Elias. They like to feed off each other’s suspicions. So, Tench and I have a theory that, since the General assigned them together on Charles Lee’s case, he’s afraid there’s something to be suspicious about…”

I should tell him, “I suggested Washington give him work. I don’t know if it was that intentional.”

Meade hums, “Normally I would agree, but with Washington...about Charles Lee...most things are.”

“So what are you expecting?” I ask. “Something to do with their strategies?”

“We don’t know. Hammy won’t share the work with anyone and all Elias gives is a daily reminder that Lee has no fond feelings for Washington,” Meade says.

“Well, if Alex isn’t sharing with anyone, he probably doesn’t have anything substantial.” With all that we have argued about the value of working together and being transparent, I know, "When he knows something, he’ll tell us.”

“I was hoping you might come back to the Potts house for awhile and just...be with him.”

I nod. I owe him that. Moreover, I want that.

ENSIGN MAXWELL IS A burly man with a dark brow, rough face, and none of the warmth in his eyes that can make such features handsome. When Steuben meets me at the jailhouse, I’ve already introduced myself to the officer tasked with his release, and helped the guards remove the prisoner's irons. “Well, I figured he would be ugly,” Steuben says bluntly.

I wish I didn’t find that amusing, and to avoid laughing, I look hard at the Baron’s face and then at Maxwell’s, squinting as if in comparison.
He stares back, then huffs in offense, clutching his chest dramatically.

A military jail would typically exist separate from the prison meant to hold captured enemies, but the design of our camp is atypical in this as well. When a British lieutenant in the cell beside Maxwell's fails to salute the Baron, Steuben stops to scold them in broken English- which we've learned is even more terrifying than when I translate for him.

I walk ahead.

Colonel Burr is consulting with Hamilton outside the jailhouse as we pass them with Maxwell in custody. I stop, caught by the unusual physicality between them. Burr leans one shoulder on the brick foundation of the building, arms folded and hip cocked. His slanted grin is mirrored by a coy expression I recognize on Alex's face. They turn to the proceeding, escorting Maxwell as we come outside, but I saw what I did.

My friend had never restrained himself from flirting overtly with women- even those he shouldn't, but he's stiff and frigid around other men, so the sight of that expression leaves me shaken as he approaches. I've seen men give Alex similar appraising looks which Alex never encouraged. There has always been honesty in his flirting- a sense that he would follow through- for whatever reasons he had. He'd used sex as a way of putting distance between us when I had sought his guarded friendship, but he doesn't seem to have an intention to draw Burr into his bed, so there must be another reason.

Whatever it is, he should know he can tell me. “You two are awfully familiar…” I say, leaning over to Alex's ear as he falls into step with me.

“Precaution.”

“Against what?” this case is bothering him and I know Enslin and Fairclough are part of it, but now Burr is in that mix and I'm confused. When he's quiet in response, I know not to press him, but I think it's necessary to say, “Secrets between friends are the root of all strife”

He turns away and gives a polite salute to the Baron before leaving the matter in our hands.

Steuben at least has the decency to wait until Alex is out of earshot to pluck at the tension in his characteristic way. “What happened there?”

“I don't know.”

I DO KNOW. In fact, I think I had predicted this would happen. I've been unable to find the words to have the understanding we both desire, so we had allowed our actions to speak for us. Our deeds became the words we couldn't say, and my deeds have been saying some very confusing things.

What are we? Alex was asking for clarification, demanding that I communicate clearly, and I had given him nothing but an excuse to make us nothing.

And here we are.

Alex hasn't spoken a word to me outside his jilted response to my curiosity about Burr. I had come back to the Potts house on Meade’s request, but with Harrison and Tench back, we’re all sharing tonight. Harrison and Meade are in the other bed snoring, and I sit in the very center of the mattress, covers pulled back, waiting for Alex to join me and confirm my fears.
He undresses, standing behind the closet door, then comes to the bed without ceremony. “Move over,” he says. I do, but when I hold up the covers to put my arm around him, he takes them instead, pulling them over himself and turning his back to me. When I reach out for him, he removes my hand and pulls away, leans over the bedside desk to blow out the candle.

If he’s been looking for an excuse to leave, it did not start with the question. ‘What are we’ was justification for a choice he had already made, a way for him to rationalize his instinct- not to walk away, to be...whole.

In the time I’ve known him, he’s never done anything in parts. The second he had said "this is part of it" and I refused that part, he was lost. I think I’ve always known that, denied it, been living in fear of the day we’d have to face it. I had kept him by drawing out his attack, by ceding ground to him, hit and run.

I was good fun as long as I amused him, but he had never exposed his heart.

I think he wanted to- he had asked me how, to guide him along a path I had been down before- without knowing the cost of it. I had taken the posture of beloved to keep Francis as my lover...and in so doing, I lost myself. I cannot make that mistake again and he refuses to make it at all. So, Alexander’s interest in me is not boundless- because I’ve placed walls around it. He’s found them in every direction. I denied him, teased his desires, and unless I become a dedicated convert in this regard, I’ll be forfeiting his interest, and he will leave to preserve himself whole.

I’ve known for a long time, our battling is too costly...

IT’S NO SURPRISE that Alexander’s not in the room when Billy comes upstairs to rouse us. In solidarity to the Baron’s efforts at discipline, and by my request, Washington’s entire staff attends his exercises. When we join the Baron’s company, Alex is already outside among our old group from Greene’s division, conducting bayonet drills.

The sight of him catches me, wild and furious, he drops low and lunges in time with the orders. He’s only one man in the ranks, but I find the deep red of his hair and the anger in his movements, mesmerized by the force of him, the violence and flame- as if he refuses to be moved by the world itself. My friend is an embodiment of the army- unlikely and strong, efficient and cunning.

I remember how he described the pirate mates from his childhood- the outlaws that had defended one-another’s dignity, died dueling for the honor of their lover.

Suddenly his fury doesn’t seem so coordinated, but alone and unguarded.

We file into the ranks of men doing calisthenics, and I’m not feeling sociable, but I listen to the talk of the soldiers around me. Idle conversation shows the course that Rumor is flying, and of course, we had known there were pockets of discontent for the Baron’s training. Thus far, he has led through screaming and intimidation, and even emaciated, our army is not feeble enough to bow to that forever.

Still, when I hear the same men that are benefitting from the training regimen that Steuben designed- officers, blathering crudely about the Enslin case which has thrown Steuben’s staff into turmoil, I have to restrain the impulse to jump at them and start a brawl. They go on brashly about how it’s one thing for men to get confused about their feelings, it’s another for them to be so weak to their perversion. What kind of man is Steuben if he’s too weak to root out the issue?
I find the same anger I felt at Lady Washington, discussing it like a spectacle for the wives to gawk. Men who have no stake in the matter, performing self-righteous disgust when what they truly feel is fear. Fear that they’ll attract unwanted desires, that someone they trust may feel more than they know how to handle, that they themselves might feel the same. I can call it depraved for the sake of propriety, but I will not feign disgust I’ve never felt- Geneva, wide shoulders and firm lips, the strong hand gripping my eager length with his. I cannot be disgusted because it was never blind lust. I was in love.

I fumbled into Francis’s arms and shared my thoughts and dreams, questions I could ask nowhere else. He intrigued my mind and soul, but I was- have always been a body- flesh and blood, and I wanted more than kisses. Such things that vigor in the heart flutters and heats like any other exercise.

Francis had wanted to join mind and soul with the polite restriction of body- kisses and caresses, never pollutions, but he gave in to me in pity. ‘Are you really so needing?’ I felt guilty- almost as much as I felt complete, but he shared my lust no matter how he hated it.

Once he had decided what we were was sinners, he seemed to seek out proof of that fact. He aches for proper pollution. When he turned to the brothels in town, he brought us all along and I drank myself stupid to keep my smile easy while he pulled girls into his lap, kissing and playing the loveable scoundrel. Everyone was so proud when he found a girl blind enough for him to court correctly.

I felt frozen.

Courting Martha had only left me colder. And now...I don’t think I’d noticed the thawing until my true friend moved out of reach.

ALEXANDER IS HALF-DRESSED when the rest of us come back to the room. As I lead our way inside, he’s putting his arms into his sleeves, gathering up the fabric of his shirt over his shoulders. Meade and Harrison clamber into the room behind me as my eyes fall on the bare skin of Alex’s back. He fumbles to pull his shirt on before they come in, but I don’t miss it.

Dark red nail marks dragging from his spine to flanks.

I swallow something between a whimper and a growl, like a wounded animal is trying to break out of my ribs. The rest of the room seems to rush, muffled noise and motion while my brothers get dressed for the day. Alex packs his bag. I wash my body mechanically.

The claim is unmistakable. Only visible to anyone who might get his clothes off. I want to grab my friend as he walks by me to the door, put a bite on his throat too high to cover so no one would even try to undress him, but even if we had the privacy, I don’t have the coordination to make the kind of attack he would allow, that would allow me to hold any ground...stake my claim.

I’m horrified that someone else put up such a fight with him- that he allowed the sort of roughness it would’ve required to produce those marks. It’s hard to imagine a woman being capable of it- the width of the lines and bruising…but I can't believe my friend would have risked something so reckless and impulsive while Enslin’s case and Steuben’s fame have camp on-edge.

And yet, the way he’d been talking to Burr…

Meade is stamping his feet into his boots as he walks out the door, and Harrison glances over his shoulder at me. I motion him away with a short promise to be down in a moment and an excuse
about gathering books.

The thought of Alexander with a man between his knees, eyes closing in pleasure- neck falling back, sensual and confident, would be easy to dispel. I’ve had plenty of practice, but the images aren’t normally accompanied by the idea of reality- and my mind normally tries to insinuate me into the picture- which provides the immediate discomfort to prevent arousal.

Instead, abruptly considering Alex and Burr- and all the associated images of my friend’s flushed face, left an engorgement that I cannot show up to work with.

I wait for my brothers’ footsteps to leave the hall then lock the door.

There’s no way to protest how Alex slakes his needs. There’s no way to express my possessive disgust without him assuming it’s propriety, without being like Francis when he’d told me to be ashamed- no that’s not quite right. He never said such a thing...and yet I felt it.

I am tired of shame. I sit on my bed and open my breeches.

We had always teased fondly, but Francis treated me like an animal when I wanted him. He pitied me like I couldn’t help my urges, pretended as though he could. When his body remained cold to my touch, unresponsive like a corpse, I believed his was superior restraint. Francis had always been an actor, all elegance and beauty, of course he could control his body in ways that I failed. But Alexander is the same, and he wants shamelessly...as I once did.

It never occurred to me to pity Alexander. He controls his body with more grace than Francis, postures himself like royalty, and commands a room with his performances. His arousal must’ve therefore also been a choice he was making and my discomfort was my own. How could I pity him?

But, Francis had done it to me, consoled and condescended- until I believed myself broken and ill. Even after I’d rejected every piece of his philosophies and rooted out his influence, there he is- the ghost in my head. It had taken years for me to regain my own esteem after Francis ceased to speak to me. I had forgiven him for that, accepted it.

But, was I ever truly pitiful?

I was a child, standing petrified in the dark, and the only hand that reached out to me belonged to a boy even more cowardly than I.

I’m tired of holding still as if I’m afraid. I move myself, grab a handkerchief and push it into my breeches, rocking against my hand. I have been down this path before, and now with Alexander, we have come so close...to something permanent, properly inescapable. We have come so close to the suicidal point, and there will be no Martha to save me.

I lick my hand, return it to task. My mind presents a picture of the musculature of Alex’s back, the dimples at the base of his spine, the curly hair beneath his stomach, nearly shows cock and bollocks before—I thrash like a netted carp, and fill the handkerchief.

Seeking the scent of my friend’s hair, I had pushed my face into his pillow, and the dark presents to open eyes the same ghostly light as closed. I lay, unable to do more than shudder and blink. I’d resisted the malpractice since leaving Martha’s marriage bed, likely the reason for coming off with such alacrity. Was this the origin of the notion that onanism dimmed one’s sight?

I gather the slimed handkerchief and drop it into the chamberpot feeling null, voided, but better. To think of this blankness as an empty canvas would suggest too much hope of filling it. This is not that sort of revelation.
Whatever the cost, I'm committed to Alexander, and he left me in the dark.

*Symposium* is open on the bedside table, but there’s no reason to see what page is presented. What a conceited fool I had been, to think I had the rough, starving animal under control, when it was simply dormant, knocked into hibernation by heartbreak at the age most boys attain a peak of barbarous vitality. And now, with my Alcibiades scorned, the beast’s dragged me backwards into a second adolescence. The humiliation is forthcoming.

Alexander was right that I have been on this road before, I know how the ground has crumbled behind us. There will be no turning back, and without Alexander’s attention, there will be no putting the creature into chains.

GENERAL WASHINGTON IS working in our office as I come downstairs, and he catches me as I report in, "The Baron Steuben is requesting you," he says, and it strikes me as strange for Washington himself to be the one to tell me—then he holds out an unsealed letter to my hands, "Carry this to him. You're welcome to read it."

I glance at him and realize to open it now, tugging the parchment out of its official envelope. It's an unofficial appointment— the best we can do while Conway still holds the post in Congress.

Our new Inspector General.

"He'll be gratified, sir," I say, both polite and honest. "He's the right man for this."

"See to it that he is."

I consider all the things which that mission will require as I walk to Steuben's headquarters. With all our concerns about morale in camp, about Rumor and the men's loyalties and love, there's only one solution I can find. Caty's counsel, my friends' belief in the Baron, my own distaste of his character, and my fury against the entire army, all things converge into one inescapable point.

I don't believe Steuben will like it.

When I come inside, Vogel is bringing out the water from the staff's washing. Duponceau's cheeks are still flushed from our exercises as he brings me into the Baron's office. With the rabid enthusiasm of the Baron's fighting drills, it's easy to forget that Steuben is not young like his cohabitants. With his coat and vest off, sleeves pushed up his arms, he has the sinewy strength and splotchy complexion of his age.

It makes him human, and I'm glad to see him this way now— as I'm going to ask him to make a show of it. "I've heard men are calling you Ares and Hades in the same breath," I say. "They were talking about you again this morning."

He drops his washcloth into the clean basin, and laughs, "Yes. They can't seem to decide if I'm training them to die or to win."

"On some level they understand your position about it."

"My position."

I bring the letter out from my pocket, but don't hand it to him yet. "At our level, looking down on their lives, die or win- it's all the same."
He hums, lips pursed in displeasure.

"You need them to believe it's not the same to you. That it's very different- you give a damn whether they live or die, and everything you tell them is for their own good."

"But, that's what I have you for," he says.

"That is what you have me for," I agree. I step forward and hand him Washington's letter. "I don’t need to tell you that you’re going to be our Inspector General. I don’t need to tell you what the job entails." He opens the paper and his hands begin to tremble, expression implacable. "I do need you to know that this camp is about to be extremely guarded against men like you- at the time that you’ll need them to trust you most. They will not accept you easily- while this case goes forward with Enslin, the men will be unsettled by you. They likely won’t even know why. But, the moment someone puts a name to their resentment, you’ll have lost your chance to frame this story."

He knows what I mean and he puts the paper down, folds his hands to stop their trembling. "You warned me that being anything but my genuine self will only foster deeper resentment."

"Which is why you’ll tell everyone the truth- as much as you can bare to give."

He stares at me, and I know this is hard to hear. Even his closest advisors had not had the courage- or the cruelty- to draw this story out of him, too painful for him to bare. But Steuben knows that we are the same. He knows he needs me and my judgment, and I know this is how he’ll earns the trust of the army- and how he will protect his boys. With the force of his robust reputation and all the fame he has accumulated, we will create a more compelling character.

They can follow an honest man. They can believe in a flawed hero.

"Admit that you were demoted after completing Frederick’s school," I say, steeling myself. "Admit to the shame that's driving your thirst for glory. We already sympathize with that thirst in our hearts, but we don’t trust it in strangers. You have to show where it comes from."

"And you believe that's shame?"

I know this revolts him. I know the discomfort of allowing others to impose shame onto your anger- to completely mistake your feelings, simply because that's what they believe you should feel. I resent it too. But, I know the Baron is ashamed- not of what he did, but of who he implicated, how his downfall dragged others down. I can only assume the details of his history, but his feelings about the crime we both share- I know.

"No one needs to know what's causing your shame, they'll draw their own conclusions if they must, but if their instinct is to trust you because they feel you’re being as honest as you can, they will shape their thoughts and make up a story they can forgive. A story they can believe in."
A New Training Regiment

We are made of all those who have built and broken us

...“IF IT NEVER ILLUMINATES anything, you can’t call it light.”

“Then what shall you call it?”

“I don’t know- it’s part of the ether of the universe. Why must ether be light, there could be dark ether-”

I set my quill down, “Caty, you’re distracting him,” I say, cutting Duponceau off.

By befriending Steuben’s staff, Caty helps me uncover the pieces of his history which he has shared with them. But, their philosophical debates have been an interruption for the past week of working in Steuben’s office, and I’ve needed to focus more than ever. The Baron’s work in camp has extended into nearly every logistical department of the army: commissary, quartermaster, engineering, and administrative, so he has me preparing reports for the soldiers’ upcoming training regiment and the task often requires me to seek counsel and compile conflicting advice.

I recognize most of the movements that regimental officers suggest from their own manuals, but I never completed my training with Alexander, and since what I’ve come to think about as my “reawakening”, he has become a distraction in my attempts not to be distracted.

At headquarters, Alex is professional, poised, and distant. He doesn’t speak to me or venture to look at me unnecessarily, yet somehow, he manages to make his absence impassive, as if taking offense would be an overreaction. He attends Steuben’s exercises every morning without reminder, and outruns the Baron’s officers with the same enthusiasm as always. Knowing that I would be unwelcome at his side, I don’t even attempt to join him at the front, and without that chase, I fall behind. But, he has always been ahead of me- a faster heart, faster awareness of where it’s taken root, always leading me, anticipating me and accounting for me.

He makes himself unaffected by my absence, but I can’t be unaffected by his. If it wouldn’t have made me pitiful and if I wasn’t so proud, if it wasn’t so necessary that everything between us be genuine or not be at all, I might have said so before...he is a part of me I’m weaker without…

“Join us,” Caty says. “We’re discussing the question- is there light in the center of the sun.” I know what they’ve been discussing. They’ve been discussing for half an hour. “Of course- there must be light in the place from which it originates. He’s being stubborn.”

“It’s unfair to try and convince him in English,” the boy complains. “Sir, you know something of the natural sciences, don’t you? Can there not exist a form of dark ether- a warmth that’s generated without illumination?”

But, “No,” Caty says, “this is a question of definitions, if something is defined by its interaction with something else- can it exist without that interaction?”

I hate this conversation enough to risk inciting a separate argument, turning to Caty. “Why all this philosophy? Didn’t you say that knowing yourself was a dangerous endeavor?”

Moreso now. The initial ruling of the Enslin case was released into camp with Maxwell’s acquittal,
and predictably, the general soldiery has been more focused on the sodomy issue than the fact that a lieutenant was fraternizing with one of the enlisted boys. The things that the men say, off-handed comments and jibes among themselves, things that may have once made me afraid or ashamed are now infuriating...

“It is,” she shrugs, the wide collar of her yellow dress falling off one shoulder, but she takes no heed to it in our company. “But, practicing dangerous endeavors in the safety of camp is the occupation of soldiers, isn’t it?” She motions a hand vaguely around the Baron von Steuben’s headquarters, “There’s nowhere safer.”

A part of me wants to deny that, the idea that such a thing could be safe anywhere- the sort of self-exploration Caty tends to encourage. Such a thing is never safe, and I refuse to believe that Steuben may change that, but the argument is moot and cowardly. Treating philosophy like a rehearsal, like martial training...I set my pen aside, “…Light inside the the sun?”

Duponceau glances at me and Caty smirks.

“Pierre is right,” I say. “Physically, such a thing as dark ether may exist- and likely does. But, as there’s no means of testing it, this is a theoretical discussion. So, I agree with Lady Greene…”

“Ha!” she claps a hand on my arm, inadvertently lifting her collar back onto her shoulder.

Duponceau’s frown compels me to explain, “Follow the logic of the allegory of the cave. Even if one’s never perceived the light, it exists still without their knowledge. As there’s no way of ever knowing, isn’t it better to believe it’s there and maintain pleasure in that thought?”

“Not if it’s untrue- if knowing it’s untrue would lead to new discovery,” Duponceau says wisely. “Plato also likened the sun to the child of goodness itself- because by illumination, it brings truth to our eyes-”

“So you’re saying the goodness of the light is in the truth it brings- the evidence it provides to our theories?”

“Precisely.”

“Then what about the blind man?” I say. “Light can bring him warmth, but it cannot bring him illumination or truth in any form he can accept. Does that mean the sun is not good for him?”

“You both are missing the point of that analogy,” Caty says, pressing herself up from the table and walking to the bookshelf.

I know Steuben’s copy of Plato lacks this story. “You are right- the purpose was to say that truth cannot be found through only our perceptions, but must come with an intrinsic sense of goodness. So the question becomes- is the thought of light within the sun good?” Now, it should be clear to them both, “I’d say not, but I’d also say it’s not bad. So- there’s really no difference.”

“The difference is in our willingness to think of it, Laurens,” Caty says, giving up on her search in the book and turning to me with exasperation for poking holes in her effort to debate.

“Willingness or need?” I say. For someone trying to focus on his work that distinction makes a difference to me. “If you’re talking just to ease the discomfort of not knowing- you’ll only make matters worse for yourself.”

Duponceau has narrowed his eyes. “What do you mean?”
“The allegory,” I say, nodding to the book in Caty’s hands. “None of the men in the cave knew they were in darkness. Only men who came out and saw daylight knew there might be anything to fear in it. Similarly,” I glance at Caty, “a man injured in training might only learn to fear the fight. A man who seeks answers to questions that cannot be answered only learns disappointment - to fear the asking.”

After a long moment, Caty’s voice carves the silence, “Everyone has ghosts,” she says. “Fears from a time that’s not relevant at present, but the ways they affect someone’s present actions are relevant. We may never stop being afraid, but the better we know how those ghosts affect us, the more we might control that…”

“I like that,” behind me, Steuben’s voice comes emphatic. “Ignorance is not bliss but powerlessness.” The Baron’s entrance into the room is a cue for Caty to leave us to work on his manual in peace, and our debate ends at once.

We rearrange the table and begin.

There’s little time to compose and print the documents for the drill manual, and the Baron must commit the English to memory, whether or not he understands it. I need to be sure he’s capable of this much before we propose the manual to Washington. For the last few days, I’ve attended this effort in the mornings, returning to Washington’s headquarters to perform my duties there before supper, then managed strategic dinner parties with the Baron and the congressional committee, planting rumors - with Caty’s help - that cast the Baron as a sort of renegade Prussian hero who has always loved generously and romantically.

ON MARCH FIFTH, Morris and Reed are hosting one such party. The topic of the table is the New England regiments’ service to commemorate the massacre in Boston on this day eight years ago. The congressmen spend the meal regaling to Steuben the importance of this day to the revolution and especially to the Massachusetts ranks.

Since his unofficial appointment - or more likely, since the success of his morning training sessions, the congressmen had been more eager than ever to befriend the Baron. After dinner, once the plates are gathered and the servants and staff have tucked themselves away, the political curiosities come out - what truth was there in the rumors of the Baron’s expulsion from Prussia, what exactly had brought about his retirement from that line?

I have no real love for the Baron, but I have to respect how he calmly navigates their interrogation. He knows what sort of rumors are spreading as I’ve been monitoring every corner I can access without raising alarm. The majority of the soldiery assume that, when the Baron speaks about his scandal, he refers to a lady lover in a part of Prussian royal society that he should not have accessed. That rumor has only served to lionize him further for those who believe it. The other truth - too vile for most to consider - makes him human and profoundly sympathetic for those deft enough to see it.

To all- he’s too well-liked to expect anything but the best.

While the Baron directs the conversation towards his ambitions of training the army in European-style maneuvers, Joseph Reed separates himself from the conversation. I watch him keenly. But, he only refills his drink - and then surprisingly, approaches me. “I am told you are a Middle Temple man,” he says.

I glance down to his hand where he’s tapping the rim of his glass - a minor tick, and incline my head in confirmation.
“Law then?” he says. I don’t need to confirm that, more interested in the purpose behind his overture, so I let him talk. “I studied there in ’64, but I cannot say I got as much of it as I should have. Met my wife within a couple weeks of enrolling and you know how distracting that can be,” he laughs to himself and I force a smile as if I can relate.

“...Have you a practice or...?” I’m striking more for the purpose behind this conversation than a reason to lengthen it.

“Yes, actually,” he says. “I’m in line to be the president of Pennsylvanias’s Supreme Executive Council if all goes well.”

“I will congratulate you in advance.”

“Yes, I know I’m the most dedicated to assisting the army, so I like to think it’s in everyone’s best interest; and having been on this committee and served him in person, I’m certainly most-aware of what General Washington needs.”

Reed is aware of the political blunder he’s made in criticizing Washington to General Lee. I’m not surprised with the realization, considering I had received a letter from my father, reporting that Gates had asked him how to resolve the divide between himself and Washington. The Cabal has passed, leaving its conspirators scrambling to restore their standing with His Excellency. I know Reed’s making an appeal to me by framing his intentions, but I’m familiar with how this works. It’s better for him to play both sides of the fence until Washington’s either proven himself or been properly disgraced; Reed will wait to see which it will be.

It is somewhat flattering to know that I’ve come close enough to General Washington to be seen as a possible bridge to his good favor, but I’m not sure what to make of being considered such by Reed—whether he thinks I will be most effective or most easy. I’ve seen how he maneuvers in conversation—a clever-tongued rival to Hamilton while we were seeing Lafayette off to his expedition. He’s never seen me maneuver…and I’m not eager to give up the opportunity to be underestimated.

He gives away his motive when we broach the subject of Lafayette’s expedition. He tells me that Congress had cancelled the campaign on the second of this month and reveals that he has opened a correspondence with Lafayette. I barely take the time to rejoice in this news.

He intends to regain Washington’s favor through the youngest members of his family.

THE BEST-SUPPLIED MEN in camp, the Connecticut regiments hold a celebration on the seventh for the arrival of men from General Arnold’s division. Arnold was among the first of the officers requested when camp was built, but the true hero of Saratoga has spent the winter in his home state, recovering from the musket ball that found his leg.

I make the walk to Steuben’s headquarters to inform the Baron that the Inspector General’s department will need to composite a design for the layout of camp to accommodate the additions. But, by the time I arrive, the Baron is already bent over a map with a familiar officer.

I know Pierre L’Enfant as one of the shiftless French volunteers that arrived with the Baron and follows in his loyal entourage. Steuben requested the position of Captain of Engineers for him, but Washington has been employing him to translate his letters from Lafayette’s staff- the Marquis’s demand to have his army correspond only with Washington directly has been observed religiously.

When introduced, he holds out a hand and fumbles to say, “Call me Peter, please.” With his spoken
English shaky at best, when I’m told L’Enfant has come to him as an administrative expert with ‘Washington’s approval’, I must assume that means Hamilton’s.

L’Enfant can be no older than me or Tallmadge, and since Hamilton had spent the weeks of his illness studying military administration, for him to pass the chance to provide expertise, this boy must either be highly-qualified or a convenient messenger to imply that Alexander’s relinquished the last task he would have advised the Inspector General about. He wants nothing to do with influencing the Baron personally—nothing to do with my plans here...nothing to do with me...

That meaning is confirmed when the boy’s escort, one of Steuben’s brigade inspectors, Major Fish, approaches me and asks, “Is it true you’re putting in for reassignment here?”

“What?”

“I was talking to Alex this morning and he was curious—”

“Alex.”

His brow twitches in mild confusion, “Hamilton,” he says. Fish is a young, mousy sort of officer, effective at his work but unassuming and seemingly unsociable. One of the first tasks that Steuben had performed as Inspector General was to design his chain of command and request officers to fill positions of command inspectors. Major Fish was among the first volunteers, and for that I was grateful to him, but I hadn’t known he knew Hamilton well. “His Excellency was hosting General Greene last night and we were surprised you chose not to attend.”

“The Baron required my company at the Moore house.”

“Which is why we assumed your priorities were here,” he says, perceiving some offense I don’t mean to project. “It was innocent speculation. We know your duties here are vital—”

“My duties here for General Washington are vital.” I should walk away from this discussion, but I’m too frustrated to abide it. “Tell Alexander my priorities remain in assuring His Excellency’s best interest for the Baron. Say that exactly.”

Both brows raise now. “Should I convey your tone as well?”

I frown and do turn away, busying myself with the copies of Steuben’s newest additions to the manual. I only know Fish as a professional, but he doesn’t seem offended, and if anything, takes my temper as an invitation to step closer.

“He warned me that you may not like the question,” he says.

“Then why was he speaking to you about it?”

Fish seems to find the question odd and laughs strangely, “Why should he not speak easily with his friends?” When he see how the words catch me, he explains, “We were mates in college.”

“He’s never mentioned you.”

“Strange,” he says, bristling, “since his other friends have all known me by his description before I stepped foot in camp.”

“Strange,” I return, “since if you knew him as well as you claim, you’d know the reserve he holds on that title- friends.” I don’t have time for this and I know it’s petty, but if Hamilton is asking about me to colleagues, assuming that I’ve abandoned my loyalty to our family, his interest is enough for me to...
fight and prove that wrong. “You’re from Poor’s regiments, aren’t you? You’ve just come to camp. What do you know of his friends?”

“I know you’re one of them,” he smiles with sarcasm and watches with his hands folded in front of him as I gather papers from my desk. “Apparently close enough for him to have given his ‘I don’t keep friends’ speech.”

I stop and turn to him, careful not to show that I had thought myself singular in that intimacy with Alex. I should change my tone in respect of a peer- as he has. Instead, I’m wary and cold. “Why...has he not mentioned you?”

Fish shrugs with a laugh, “Because he won’t admit he keeps me?”

I find myself smiling slowly at the humor he finds in that and think he is right to. If Fish is a man who has come close enough to Alexander to understand what barriers he places around his heart, he could be a useful source of information. I grab his arm and pull him into the Baron’s private office. “You met in college?”

He steps around me to one of the Baron’s guest chairs, across from the polished desk and away from the clutter of books. “We trained together,” he crosses his legs, “while we were with the militia- the Corsicans-”

“And the Hearts of Oak,” I say.

I’m asking for more than Alexander told me himself, and he hears that and says, “Also under Mulligan...has he told you about that?”

“He’s mentioned the name.” The friend who admired Alexander’s exotic stories. “I know His Excellency still employs him in collecting intelligence, but Alexander never told me much about him.”

“He was a mentor to us in the Sons of Liberty- well, a mentor to me. To Alex, he was...family…”

“You sound unsure of that.”

“I think Alex was unsure of it,” Fish says. “Mulligan made him...clumsy, awkward. To feel dependent on another person, indebted to them or under their influence, is not his way. It was only after he commissioned and outranked him that he was capable of admitting his affection.”

He uncrosses his legs and leans against the armrests of the chair, looking at me as if this should be significant, but, “Why are you telling me this?”

“Because I’ve learned from it, as all his friends must.” He tugs at his sleeves to pull the fabric from the bend of his arms, but the action seems more like a fidget. “He wasn’t asking whether you’d like to transfer to this office. He was asking whether he should suggest it to Washington.”

This is a warning, and it takes several minutes for any emotion to sink through my surprise, but I’m quite sure the first is anger. It’s a presumption- not just with my career but also with my loyalties. “Was he planning to ask me?”

“That’s why he mentioned it to me,” Fish says, unfazed by my growling tone and raising his brows with emphasis. “Which- now knowing you two are close, strikes me as particularly unusual as I’m sure you’ve noticed that he prefers to be direct.”

I don’t answer, turning to pace distractedly. According to Major Fish, Hamilton was eager to reduce
his friendship with Mulligan to something professional because he was afraid of it becoming anything other than that. But, he has been eager to torch our friendship entirely, doggedly refusing my judgment of the Baron, rejecting my offers to share work- to negotiate him into a higher social position, sending L’Enfant in his stead, now manipulating for my reassignment...

This does not follow his usual pattern of his retreat, and Fish is having similar considerations of our mutual friend. He’s slow to give his diagnosis. “If he’s told you about the nature of his friendship, you must assume that he wants yours,” he says. “I was able to see his interactions with Mulligan to know how he tests the strength of the bonds he desires and expect it, but I’m not surprised he’s making it difficult. Alex is a man out of war and tragedy, and he needs friendship in many ways, but he doesn’t believe in it—”

“I’ve noticed,” I say. “Which is what he means in saying he doesn’t keep us.”

Fish shakes his head, “But, if you believe that, you’re a fool. He’s told you how he approaches such commitments, so he does trust you.”

“Not right now—”

“No,” Fish stops me immediately. “He doesn’t change his mind. He doesn’t set his faith in someone or begin in any direction he isn’t sure of. If he extended a hand to you, it must still be there.”

I doubt that. Perhaps Alexander keeps stoic surety that he will never commit himself to something he can’t endure. But he has stopped pushing the boundary of that endurance with me. If he pushed, if he let things dissolve into a proper fight, maybe things could change. Instead he seems resigned to own dissatisfaction, and I don’t want my affection to be something he simply endures. “He wants me reassigned to be away from him- he must be sure of that as well,” I say.

This seems to be the point of fact which has Fish confused, and he sounds less sure of his next words. “I don’t think he wants it…” he says. “When he warned me that he didn’t keep friends, I realized that the phrase was a warning that he would run- and a welcome to try and keep him.”

“Did you?”

“Perhaps not as close as I would have liked- or as he needed. But, we’re mutually content, I believe…we both believe.”

*I promise I can be content.*

Perhaps Hamilton is right. But, with hunger and rage and pressure of years kept confined, the roguish beast in my chest howls for nothing less than satisfaction. Our case calls for a different means of retreat because concessions will not be made. Content would be unbearable…

I COME TO THE POTTS HOUSE that evening, bracing for a fight, not expecting to walk into one.

General Washington has Alexander in his personal office upstairs, shouting so loudly that it’s difficult to distinguish what he’s saying in the boom of his voice. I stop in the front hall and catch Meade’s eye where he’s sitting in the office and pressing a hand to his temple, attempting to write some correspondence despite the noise.

When he sees me, he doesn’t require prompting to explain, “Hammy was caught with a lady in camp.”
“Is...that really such an ordeal?”

“If he’s been so flagrant about it that the news is coming to the General, yes.”

As he says this, I glance up the stairs and see Tallmadge, pressed against the wall at the top of the first flight, trying to hide his face in his trifold cover. I catch his eye and raise both brows, utterly bewildered why such information would require a report to His Excellency from an intelligence officer.

But, as I walk to the top of the stairs to inquire about it, I overhear what the General is screaming: anxieties about his own reputation for being unable to control his own staff, for allowing a boy under his direct supervision to run “rakish and wanton,” “rifling through skirts while every gentleman in camp is asking to bring his wives and daughters to the army”. Apparently Hamilton’s affair has been consistently with the same woman and something heinous enough to have sparked the General’s concern for his aide’s respect of the families in camp.

Tallmadge creeps down the steps towards me and wipes a hand over his mouth. “I didn’t want to say anything,” he says, “but my informant was saying she’s married and...well, I couldn’t tell the General that, but I had to tell him something to make it stop. It’s better he takes a verbal lashing from the General than…” he shrugs and I understand his meaning—real lashings or a duel...

When Hamilton emerges from the office, I’ve lost everything I planned to say to him and he’s too red-faced and stricken to speak to besides. Knowing that he’s found a girl he was so serious about as to risk all this— that he’s seen the same girl consistently—a married girl.

He pushes past me without meeting my eyes, making a hasty break down the stairs and to the front door, letting it slam closed behind him. A moment later, Washington appears in the doorway of his office and sees me on the landing.

“Laurens, a word…” he says.

I follow him into his office and standby while he spends more time than necessary organizing his papers.

He folds his hands over his desk when he seems to have decided his thoughts. “It can be...difficult for me to realize when I have a problem with someone,” he says. “Disciplinary issues are often addressed before they ever reach me- not always in the manner that I would like, but it’s common for the men to wear a different face for me than they would for their regimental commanders. With Hamilton, that’s never the issue.”

I realize, besides Washington himself, General Greene is the only commander that I’ve ever seen scolding Alexander for anything, even when he’s stirred trouble, starting fights, speaking obscenely, roughhousing in the ranks. I should have wondered why that was, but I understand it now— Hamilton is the General’s jurisdiction and no one dares encroach there.

“With him, the problem is that I can never tell if my reasons are making it through to him…”

There’s a marked note of distress in the General’s voice, heavily muffled under layers of obvious disappointment and frustration. I know what he’s asking— why he chose to say this to me. “I’ll talk to him tonight,” I say.

ARRANGING MY BAG in the bed by the windows where I know Hamilton has been recently sleeping, I marvel at the irony. Two proposals, equally impossible, reinforcing each other’s
impossibility.

I have Major Fish suggesting that I forcibly prevent Alexander running away from affection, and General Washington suggesting that I take this bed again to prevent Alexander running away from headquarters at night. Suggestions from the General are to be heeded as orders, and so I unpack my bags, giving guard duty priority. But, I’m sure that sharing a room with my friend now will do more to drive him into the arms of his lover, and antagonizing him on behalf of the General will do more to convince him he wants nothing to do with me.

After the tongue-lashing he received, Hamilton knows that the General would send Gibbs or one of his lieutenants into camp to search for him if he doesn’t return tonight, but I’m not surprised when he arrives, pissed and stumbling on the stairs.

Meade rises to help me gather him, and upon consideration of his drunken ranting as we drag him into the bedroom, cursing me for coming back ‘just to taunt him,’ then cursing Washington for inviting me to act as his ‘nanny,’ then cursing Tallmadge for reporting in the first place, Meade elects to move his bedding to the attic room. He leaves me alone with Hamilton, giving a sympathetic, “Good luck, my friend,” before departing.

I don’t blame him.

“You realize how horrible you’re being?” I say, hefting Hamilton up to put him on the mattress of his bed. He’s in no state to offer real resistance. “You’re so drunk right now, I’m impressed you walked home.”

He glares at that, mouth twisted into an ugly grimace.

I grab his leg forcefully and tug off his boot. “And, sending your friend, Major Fish- who you’ve never mentioned,” I rip off the other, “to suggest I transfer off this staff? Are you trying to ruin everything for yourself? Your work, your friends, your reputation...your health?”

“It’s her fault,” he jabs his thumb at the wall, on which the other side is Washington and his wife’s private quarters, and I know he means- “Martha. She makes’em strict on useless t’ings.”

“This is your own fault,” I say, hard. “You know that you’ve been wrong and you’re afraid because he doesn’t underestimate you…it makes it easy to disappoint him.”

“You think he’s right,” he accuses, concentrating hard to speak clearly as he’s been slurring and accenting his words sloppily since arriving on the front stop.

“Of course I do!” I grab his coat collar and drag him upright to remove it. “Leaving your station without authorization would be enough to give other men a hundred lashes! Let alone stumbling around in this state. But a married woman? What happened to ‘I’m not some sort of fiend’?” I’d jumped into a brawl to defend him once, but I’m not sure I would again if… “What if her husband found out?”

He manages to shove me away before I can get at his vest buttons, popping those out himself, “I’d ‘ope he’s found out as he’s th’one I’ve been fucking...”

Some emphasis of this statement is lost in his slurring. I more than make up for it, throwing his coat to the floor with a dull thud. Some part of me had expected this...and yet the thought of him doing something so dangerous with a stranger- with another man...to have done so several times with the same man-

With a married man...
I turn and step to the fireplace, grabbing the gill of whiskey the boys had been saving from this week’s rations. I’ll replace the drink later. He is too drunk, and I am too sober while he keeps talking.

Alexander flops down onto the bed, sitting up against the wall. “I’m not a fiend,” he says, “cause I’m not risking a man’s fam’ly like if I’d taken ‘is wife. Men cheat all the time, ‘specially in the army, at least with a man, I'm sav’n the dangers of the female sex. There’s no chance of unintended evidence, and no one suspects it…”

No- of course they wouldn’t, and I’m well-familiar with the evidence to which he refers, but it’s strange to think of sodomy as the safer sin- especially right now. I recall how I’d wanted to be noticed with Martha, how easily our friendship was perceived as romance and how easy it passed as just that. Our sex would have been expected, a natural consequence of courtship, an amusement for any healthy man and woman. My father may have even been comforted that I had heat in my blood- if we hadn’t produced a child. In a way, I had acted the part, but by ill-luck was made to be ashamed of that too and the contradiction leaves me void.

There’s no risk of such blunders with a man- you need only hide the act itself from a world which barely pays attention. So then, “What Tallmadge reported…” a more favorable rumor- something just illegal enough that the Major would be duty-bound to pass up, but given to a friend too loyal to report the more damning details of adultery. Tallmadge would already believe he’d prevented the worst of it, thereby concealing the crime with a more severe punishment...

Alex’s eyes slide up to me and narrow with a smirk and I find myself thinking of Francis- it had taken months for him to settle with one girl, and once he found his Miss Stephens, he was lost to me entirely. I was the more insidious rumor, the ghost haunting him at parties and driving him into girls’ beds, but I’m not sure what to expect from this solution Alexander’s found…he’s taking the same risks as Francis had feared- just not with me.

I don’t know how to protest how he sates his needs or what to ask that might help me understand why he’s doing so in this way- with no warning. But, I do need to know, "Do you love this man?"

He scoffs a laugh at that, shaking his head as if amused with my naivety, and that's fine. I should know that such a thing wouldn't matter to him, I should be glad that he isn't lost in this regard, but it is affecting me- the thought of him doing this without feeling when I would offer him more.

But, “…Do you want me to transfer off this staff?” I let my voice carry the hurt he caused.

He flops onto his side and turns his back, obviously having heard but refusing to answer. I take the whiskey to our table and sit heavily.

The silence swallows.

I DRESS DOWN for bed and feed another log into the fireplace to last through the night.

Alexander is quiet and I’ve resigned myself to the thought that he’s asleep until, “Camp is full of eyes,” he says. He’s turned over and facing me when I glance back at him, clutching the blanket up to his neck. “But, they’re all too dull to see anyt’ing.” He hasn’t bothered to untie his collar or remove his unbuttoned vest. “Burr wants t’is case t’resolve guilty b’cause Washington always wants men to make an example of, an’ it’s the perfect chance to have ‘is attention. None of t’whispering will speak of t’at.”

“An example?”
“Fifth article, eighteenth section of t’ Articles of War,” Alex says, half muffled into his pillow. He’s still so drunk his coherence only proves he’s recited the details of this case many times. “There’s no specific clause for sodomy, and so ‘is conduct is unbecoming an officer an’ he knowingly committed false returns to a superior, but everyone knows his crime.”

“And, Washington wants to make an example of it?” I say.

“Washington wanted to make the punishment for breaching articles five-hundred lashes rather than one and Congress reigned ‘im in. You should assume, at any point in time, he wants stricter discipline.”

If Major Burr wanted to facilitate that, he cannot be the man whose bed Alex has been visiting. A man actively after Washington’s favor wouldn’t take such a risk. Still, “Why are you telling me this?”

“B’cause I’m being ‘horrible’,’” he says with a vague wave of his hand. “I ’ear what people say...and I hate them, and I can’t stop it or speak up and this…” he pushes up onto one elbow and gestures vaguely down at the ruin he’s made of himself, “t’is is what I can do about it.”

I shake my head, understanding what he means, the spite and the powerlessness that drove him here, but he wouldn’t say any of this if he were in command of himself. I’m in no position with him to hear these things.

“I knew y’d be ‘ere tonight, I guess I...I wanted to tell someone,” he says, “and you’re good as anyone- considering you already know...’ow I’m like,” he pushes a hand up into his hair, further disheveling his queue and letting waves of red fall over his face carelessly. Swaying where he sits, he seems like he may collapse back into the sheets. “M’father use’ t’say pride comes in a man’s ability to do as he likes, and I can’t let t’em take that from me without my consent. This is ’ow I keep it,” he laughs at the irony in it, keeping his pride by ruining himself.

I get up from the ground by the fireplace, unsure where to stand or what to say and the quiet stretches on. For all that we rave about freedom, Alexander tends to assert his duty first. Except in this—depravity and his right to desire who he does. I feel guilty in the silence and he cringes in fear of it, but at least he doesn’t seem to know how to continue either. I step towards the bed and sit at the end where his feet make a ridge in the blanket. My proximity makes him curl away and cover his face.

“He was best at t’is,” Alex says, his palm pushed over his eyes, mouth twisted in a wry smile under his hands. “My father. Mother never understood why we ’ad to confront such things- why we’d put ourselves through trials to fight back.” His laughter comes pained then, “John, this could really ruin me!”

I had already said that and he seems amused with the idea. “Stop talking.”

He drops his arm with a heavy flop and looks at me, still grinning, “Why? Does it bother you?”

“You would say none of this if you were not so drunk.” I wish that the whiskey had done more to give me courage. I hate silence, but everything between us must be genuine and intentional or it must not be at all. I would rather feel as loose and sloppy as he is if it would make me say what I think.

He frowns, “But I would not be so drunk if I did not want to say this.”

Oh...

I fear whatever else he intends to say, “Then because I don’t want to hear it.”
He goes quiet, looking at me in a way that I can’t turn to see. He either gathers whatever answer he’s trying to find in his staring, or he gives up with a huff. “Does it bother you to know what I’ve been upset about…or to know ‘ow I’ve dealt with it…” without you.

Whether or not he meant to imply that, my role in this is too pervasive not to echo between us. I fear that he might hear a distortion- might assume that my discomfort is a product of disgust. The tension in my fear of that misunderstanding bleeds out into the room. But, he was willing to fight for me against my shame. I should be willing to return the favor against his fear.

He’s looking at me again when I glance over and meet his eyes. “It bothers me because, if you’re going to do this sort of things with anyone, it should be me.”

He stares, unsure what to make of that, eyes roving me up and down until I have to turn away and fidget with my coat buttons. We have become so many coiled knots. I wonder if he would’ve given up on this pull if I had persisted in dismissing it- whether this tension would still exist if I hadn’t been on the other side, always holding it taut, flirting and wanting. If I had listened when he said to stop, would things be like before Germantown, loose and comfortable? Was this discomfort worth it for the possibility of satisfaction?

“That’s not why I told you,” he eventually says. Which just serves to confuse me. “I can take care of myself- especially in t’is, I didn’t tell you for pity. I shouldn’t’ve told you…” he pushes his hands into his hair.

“For pity-?”

“For sex- that’s not your responsibility,” he says. “I just needed someone t’ know.” At least one person to understand… “It seems everyone knows about the Baron, and I thought since you already know that I’m like this, if I could say it to anyone-…but, it shouldn’t have been you…”

“I didn’t say what I did out of responsibility.” I’m appalled, but Alex is already pulling his legs away from me, physically withdrawing.

“It’s simple enough to take care of, and I have someone totally discreet with the same itch to scratch. We’re not doing anything technically illegal, so it’s easy. It doesn’t mean anyt’ing.”

“But it should!”

He raises a brow at first in surprise with my passion about this- and I think that my meaning may have gotten through. Then he smiles slow and my stomach churns- it’s the one he always gives when he’s condescending and endeared by my naivety.

He sits up and reaches for my arm, tugging on me to join him properly on the mattress. I would have come there eventually if this conversation had taken a less hostile direction, but now, I’d rather take Meade’s vacated bed.

“He’s my optimist,” he says, and when I recognize his embrace, I feel the taunt. “You’ve been so serious I thought you’d lost your sentimentalism- joining hearts and productive love, but ‘ere you are…” He laughs, all blustering caresses, squiriming affection with false intent- the same touches he’d teased me with when he’d thought it an easy way to discard me. My traitorous body manages to ache despite that. Urgent and slow, sensuous and intending to arouse, his fingertips leave me shivering. “Would it mean something b’tween friends? To show how sensible you can be?”

I tear his hands off and push up from the mattress, fumbling away from him.

If this were a test, I might forgive it, but I was never a thing to be caressed until I met him. Eager and
blustering was fine, but any time a lover was tender with me, it only ever felt blasphemous, wrong and uncomfortable. Alex showed me tender without shame- tender with both intent and feeling at once, and that was something my heart could not forget. For him to make a mockery of the touches that brought me out into the light- touches that my body had only ever accepted with him, it cuts deep into whatever soft place I had painstakingly exposed.

I rub my eyes dry as I lean to grab my bag, and if Alexander notices the tears, he wisely says nothing about it. But, “You were ordered to stay here,” he fumbles up from the blankets, voice taking an unusual high pitch.

I toss my coat and bag onto Meade’s empty mattress and grab one of the chairs from our desk, dragging it loudly to prop in front of the door. If he manages to get dressed without waking me, he’ll have to move the chair to leave and I’ll hear him at that.

He flinches at the forcefulness in my movements, but I don’t care if he sees my anger, if it’s ugly or confusing- I don’t care if he regrets it. “Go to sleep, Hamilton.”

I SEND A COURIER to Steuben’s office the next morning to convey that I will be spending the day at the Potts house before attending his table tonight. It feels strange- prioritizing my own needs, but this is something I have to resolve. We can’t survive another fatal stab like the one Alex made last night, and whatever this is, it’s better alive.

Fish was right that Alexander challenges me, everything he says is a hint of something he’ll never admit to wanting- a plea to pass these tests. It’s not our arguments or his cruelty that I should worry about, but the silence- and we broke that last night before he panicked and struck out. He’s not desperate to make us nothing, just desperate to define whatever we have and dangerously resigned to its loss.

But, if I lose him now, it will be because I allowed it. A man running forward for what he wants should always be faster than one running from something he fears. I’m sure I can keep pace with his energy and figure out which knots to unravel.

I work on translations from Lafayette’s officers while Meade and Tilghman handle rations distributions and Harrison organizes reports of the men who were sent to hospital camps. When Alexander comes in from a meeting with the General, wherein I’m sure they discussed his behavior yesterday more calmly, I bring my translation to him and set it on the table by his elbow. “You need four more copies,” I say.

“What are you doing?” he turns to me. “This was my task, I-”

“Will no longer have an excuse to refuse the Baron’s dinner invitations.” I push the page in front of his hands, “I’ll tell him you accept...before you reach the point of insult,” I move to step away until his fingers catch my sleeve.

“He knows I haven’t meant to refuse, I’ve just been-”

“Busy,” I say, “with the court martials.” There’s implication in the quirk of my brow, recalling his admission of how the Enslin case is affecting him. He always makes sport of plucking my words from me and I think it’s time I return the favor. “And understandably preoccupied with it.”

A flash of vulnerability crosses his face and he’s quick to change the subject, pouring forced-levity into his tone. “Shall I presume Caty will be in attendance?”
"I can see to it that she is," I say kindly, needing it to be clear that the point of this endeavor isn’t to antagonize.

"I assume you’ll have the Baron serving something stronger than ale?"

I’m sure he doesn’t need that after last night, but the thought of it seems to comfort him like the answer to an unasked question and I find myself agreeing to arrange it. As he walks away, I consider the conversation and realize what he must think- that I want him to be drunk...I want him to be honest.

He’s right- whether I’m ready for it or not. I would not be so drunk if I did not want to say this. It’s natural to avoid prodding at the places that matter because that’s what you do when you care for someone- you make things stable. We may have failed, but the instinct is still there, difficult to overcome even when we need a disturbance to open ourselves raw in the right places.

WASHINGTON GIVES LEAVE for Alexander to visit the Baron after a note arrives on his desk in response to the one I’d sent that morning. Alexander is in enough trouble with the General, I thought it necessary to request his translation services for 'unfamiliar formations'. But, when Washington asks me to explain what I'm struggling with, and I have nothing to give but the basic formations I know, I realize it's the most blatant lie I've ever given.

He either doesn't notice or doesn't care, but he agrees that Alexander can attend with Meade as an escort. The conversation delays my departure from the Potts house long enough for them to leave without me and avoid an awkward walk in my company.

By the time I arrive at the old stone house de Kalb once inhabited, Caty has gathered the boys of the Baron’s staff into his parlor, translating a copy of Romeo and Juliet aloud into French. I've come in on the end of it, and Vogel is acting out the romantic death of Romeo as Lady Greene dictates, dramatically clutching a knife over his chest.

Alexander’s back is turned to me even as several of the boys have noticed me and given smiles in greeting, enough to alert him that someone's standing behind him. His refusal to turn and check confirms that he knows it's me.

"What an intense love," Duponceau is saying, as Vogel bows and the boys clap for the performance. "To move a hand to suicide."

Caty leans an arm over the back of the sofa, "I always read it as spite," she says. "The lovers declare in their death ‘if I cannot have love, you cannot have me- your family name can end, no son to carry your legacy, no daughter to bring children’. They're enraged."

"What a fascinating reading-" Alex says, notably in English which confounds half the room. "It did always bother me to think of their death as an act of love. Shakespeare understands human nature too well to think the descent into madness could be so quick."

"You wouldn’t die for love?" Caty says.

"God no," he scoffs, and I expect him to rationally explain the uselessness of passion, how love is just a mania anyway, and ending your life to prove your own madness is an even deeper madness. I expect his words to cut with his familiar rejections- the same he gave to Lafayette’s definition of love, to my own, declaring my desires impossible, irrational, then, “Such a thing is so shallow-” he says. “Death...so mundane and corporeal. To place love on the same plane as physical existence
seems so callous.”

I stare, stricken with a simple conclusion that had taken me months of agony and Martha’s love to find. The caveat of my love for Francis which dispelled the illusion. From Alexander’s lips, even this cuts me, a sharp pang of longing, to reach out and take hold of him, implore him to see it, to understand that I know it too- that we match...

But, he turns to me and plays at surprise as if he hadn’t known I stood behind him, and I no longer trust this performance. Until I understand why he makes it, why he taunts at this ache of want he knows that I feel, I’ll make my distrust known. I return his look with a measured one of my own, then turn out of the room and walk up the stairs to meet the Baron in his private study.

WHEN I HEAR VOICES INSIDE, I stop and knock. Joseph Reed opens the door, stepping aside once he sees who’s calling and waving an arm in exaggeratedly gracious invitation. Reed has been one of the legal advisors for the Baron’s additions to our inspection, searches and seizure policies, and I assume that’s why he’s in conference with him now.

Then, “We were speaking politics, I’m afraid,” Reed says. “But, I am glad for a translator. We have been making fools of ourselves with French.”

I glance at Steuben who’s half-seated, leaning back against his desk with his feet crossed on the floor. “What were you talking about?” I say, tucking my concern away tightly.

“Do you recall Lady Greene’s discussion yesterday?” Steuben replies, “About the light and ghosts which are not relevant to who we are now.”

I don’t understand, “How does that relate to politics?”

“I was explaining the concept as she explained it to us. You see, Mister Reed’s ghosts are of the future,” Steuben says. I still don’t understand and throw the Baron an incredulous look. “He’s telling me about posterity. Politics and glory.”

Ah.

“I was relating with our dear Baron about the necessity of remaining neutral, especially in matters of warfare.”

I translate this and Steuben’s brow furrows at the summary. “He was insisting that I should wait for General Lee’s return to camp before training the army in professional drill,” he says. “That it would make my position in this camp more secure to figure out a way to appease both of our commanders’ strategic intentions.”

I look at Reed and frown.

“It was not a warning,” Reed says, listening closely to understand Steuben’s thickly-accented French. “I was merely informing him of General Lee’s position in the matter,” he puts a hand on my shoulder and squeezes in a way he thinks conveys friendliness, but I understand the thinly-veiled threat in their conversation. I don’t forget that Reed had sent General Gates’s praises to Lee in the letters we intercepted. “We are all aware how politics works in the army- appeasement and caution.”

“But not inaction,” I say, quickly regretting a naive slip of my tongue. I may not like Reed’s approach to military diplomacy, but if he’s to be an enemy in a political field, I’ve learned by now to lure him close and understand his game before deterring his trust. “Even if we don’t approach an
open battle, does it hurt us to train for it?”

“It does if it loses our support from Congress,” Reed says. He drops the hand on my arm. “You and Hamilton and the Marquis...I have heard the three of you were close- that you boys fit the character of the bayard perfectly, lusting for glory and command.”

I don’t bother to disagree.

He explains, “One day you’ll see the value in managing your politics. Glory in the battlefield is only glory in a future that cares about war. If we win our cause for liberty, if we are able to make such a thing secure, do you not think we shall have peace?” He looks at me with the sort of idealism that feels forced, as if he’s trying to sell me his craft. “No one cares about a soldier in peacetime...but a statesman, a founder, a president, those are the men we name roads and cities after.”

His future. President of Pennsylvania’s Supreme Executive Council.

I glance at the Baron and know he thinks as I do. The future is just as dark as the past- the things we cannot know just as foggy in our predictions as memories are in our recollections. We may worry about the future, about how we’ll be remembered, but if glory is only found in treaties and politics, in public life and the masks of civilized society, if we may only force a victory by the pen, I would still choose the sword. The Baron would still choose pitched battle.

Men like us were not made for peace because we know we will never have it. The world will not let us, and so we wish for a war…

THE DINNER IS SERVED on plain china, and conversation flows easily with fewer issues of language as all our guests have some grasp of French. L’Enfant and the Baron spend some time explaining their plan for incorporating the additions to camp. I give a small report on the Baron’s drill manual. Duponceau explains his recent progress of hiring a staff for the Baron’s house and arranging a tutor for his English lessons. Then, we move away from business. Gouverneur Morris begins the gossip about the families of the officers coming to camp and Caty and Alexander are very willing to direct our talk from there.

After the table is cleaned, Steuben tasks me to select a wine from the three bottles he had brought from his travel through Boston to York. I’m attempting to read the labels he’s affixed to their packaging when familiar footsteps follow into the cellar.

It’s Hamilton. I glance at him just long enough for him to know I’m aware of his presence, then turn back to the task. He walks to a crate beside me where the Baron’s stored his staff’s whiskey rations for the month and he opens the lid. Before I can comment, he explains, “One bottle of wine will not be enough for five guests and his staff.”

“Would one bottle be enough for you?” I jab before I can hold my tongue.

He laughs because, wanting not to fight, he can do nothing else. “More than enough.”

He finds a bottle and I select my own, but neither of us moves. He’s standing close enough to tease moving closer, and the knife he planted with his idyllic words about love digs deeper, makes me weak and liable to slump forward into him, to reach out for reassurance. It would be safer than this- the silence threatening to seep in. I’ve been rash several times today, but I’ve also been too restrained. All these politics, concerns about glory and posterity, strategy and appeasing commanders, duty and inclinations, we are failing ourselves and each other the more we let this
silence take us, and I have been done with it for so long.

With his face turned down, it’s awkward, but when he looks up and meets my eyes, it’s impossible to speak, to breathe, to think. I hate the moments like this- his attention pinioning me in place and wiping my mind blank when I most need it to work. And then, his eyes drop with reluctant inevitability to my mouth, and I don’t need thoughts to find words, “Are you ever going to kiss me again?”

Alex laughs through his nose. “I think I can resist the urge.”

It’s easier for him to deflect, and now that he’s taken that course it’s easy to cut back with the sort of teasing he hates, “That’s a strange new skill, where did you get it?”

“New?” He hears my flirting tone and isn’t having it, pushing the lid of the crate back over the box and hefting the whiskey to set atop. “You haven’t noticed the act this whole time?”

“No, I’ve noticed,” I say, digging my heels into this pursuit. “Playing at restraint.” I take the step that closes the distance between us, looming close enough that I must actively concentrate on standing upright or be pulled into him. “‘I promise I can be content’? You nearly convinced yourself-”

“Convinced you.”

I see rage burning under his gaze and I want to reach it, take hold of it and burn us both to ash so we can be reborn how we were supposed to be. I touch his face, thumb the cut of his jaw and lean closer enough that my nose brushes his cheek. “Should I question it?”

“No need to,” he says, teasing closer. His lips barely brush mine before moving back for space to speak. “You think I’ve been friends with you since October without resisting every fake advance you’ve made? I’m resisting the urge to throttle you right now.”

Brashly, “I wish you wouldn’t,” I say because he must know he’s already hurting me, touching a stranger, a man like me- who isn’t me. He wants me to admit it. I want us both to stop.

He shoves me back, just a taste of the open anger I’d relish, then grabs the bottle of whiskey, uncorking it with his teeth and drinking as he stalks away.

THE BARON HAS hosted parties nine of the seventeen days he has been in camp, and those days he has not hosted, he has attended. I admire his energy and sociability, and I find myself lacking and exhausted in my attempts to attend him and translate.

In that effort, Caty Greene has been a godsend. When I have wanted silence, she entertains a room easily with debate and gossip. With Alexander in the house, that responsibility is lifted from both our shoulders and she reports to me about our ‘beloved Baron’. “His generalship came from Baden,” she leans her arm against the table to come nearer to me and lower her voice. “He was never a Lieutenant General in the Prussian service but one from the periphery. He was a general commanding the “Circle of Swabia,” one of the ten administrative districts of the empire, an ineffectual army of the Holy Roman Empire at the Reichsarmee.”

“Why are you telling me this?” I say, half-sure of the answer.

“Our friend, the Baron, is in a critical moment. We are lucky that he has no problem winning hearts, but with the ruling of the Enslin case and our expectations for the arrival of General Lee, we will need to adjust our operations.”
I sip my wine and convey interest with a look.

“He will not avoid making enemies if he intends to be our friend,” she says, “and it’s all well how we’ve handled his history up to this point, but after the case with Enslin completes, allowing speculation without contest will be dangerous to our purposes with him—perhaps his life.”

“His life.”

“And subsequently morale if the worst occurs.”

I could laugh at her, and I’m drunk enough that I do without thinking. “The worst being they hang him for falsifying rank and...what, being a sodomite? Men don’t truly hang for that.” Enslin’s trial is a testament to the army’s inaction on this fatal offense.

“If there’s a political motive for it, they do,” she says.

There’s enough concern on her brow that I humor her. “So, what do you suggest?”

She shrugs, “Make him too vital to our cause to dispense of him if the truth is widely known. Incentivize the entire army to protect him despite their own feelings. Make him synonymous with our victory. We must shift our focus from making him liked to making him needed.”

That is already a part of the plan, but “The only way we’ll do that is by seeking out a pitched battle…”

“And completely reorganizing the army,” she says, an operation which has already been underway in some small but noticeable ways. “Washington wants them to become professional, but there are whisperings of doubt that we aren’t capable of that, from key members of Congress and men that we have needed the Baron to befriend. We cannot afford him beginning to listen to that. He cannot know how divided we are.”

She is right. If he knows the merit in Reed’s suggestions— in the doubts that our generals and politicians are loudly crying, he may hesitate, and we cannot afford that. “I agree,” I say, and I’m sure she has a plan for how to address those whisperings.

Caty gets up and walks into conversation, doing what she does best and flirting openly with Gouverneur Morris, speaking like a sprite, ill-defined, impish and funny. She is like this in conversation with men. A combination of bagginess and dexterity, of chaos and precision that makes her an irresistible actor to watch, even if the performance is not believable.

Alexander approaches her, scolding with a slight slur in his voice. “You’re a married woman.”

She turns on that with a laugh, and I listen just to hear how she addresses his hypocrisy, “I have no intent to betray my husband’s trust with another man...you dirty boy, thinking such things of me.”

“I know that! But, how will my dear Morris take it well when he learns this?”

I frown, understanding at once what he’s truly vexed about and wondering how far he will take his frustration out in public—whether I will be dragged into it.

“Gentlemen are rarely good for more than a few sweet interactions,” Caty says. “After that, you get to know them too well and you know I’m really not interested in that.”

“My point is that it is cruel to imply that you are!” he huffs, and with his face as red as it is, I assume that drink is carrying his feelings which means this will become sloppy and uncoordinated very
quickly.

I’m moving to intervene when the Baron steps between us and takes Alexander’s arm, inferring from context that an distraction was necessary and expertly diverting to explain the harmlessness of flirtation. “Believing something is a step away from acting on it. She’s quite skilled in dissuading those actions,” Steuben says.

Alex huffs, “Dissuading the belief would seem like the more manageable task.” Morris invites Caty to dance, drawing her away from the debate, and she accepts, leaving Alex complaining to the Baron instead. “Why pretend to lack propriety if she doesn’t intend to benefit from the indecency?” Steuben laughs at Alex’s choice of words, and Alex is drunk enough to elaborate, “Truly, I don’t understand what she gains from flirting like this if she has no interest in partaking her own spoils…”

His frustration is too loud and implicates more than he means to say. I’m afraid the Baron will see directly through to its causes and I cannot afford that embarrassment. So, I stand up and grab my friend’s arm to stop his mouth. I turn to Steuben, “Speaking of rumors- Lady Greene was telling me some interesting stories about your service under King Frederick.”

The accusation in my tone immediately catches the Baron’s attention and Alexander quickly drops his own criticisms to defend the Baron from mine. He asks how we have been addressing the conduct of officers in camp, speaking about the exercises he has attended and what he’s observed. He holds the conversation for several minutes, keeping it out of my hands and away from my topics until I cut in, turning to him, “Would you like to draft a treasitice for their code of conduct?” It’s another offer for Alex to join our effort and steady the ground beneath us, but he laughs and leaves this whirlwind of a conversation- as I expected he would.

We both know steady won’t save us.

RICHARD KIDDER MEADE has never missed an opportunity to best someone in the sport of poisoning oneself, but he is a friend that knows when to rescue a man from the impulse to do so- especially those unfit for it.

I thought I was rid of Alexander for the night until Meade comes to me, half-carrying the man who can scarcely seem to hold up his head. He doesn’t have to ask for my help. We drag him across camp with as much dignity as possible, though I’m not sober myself nor do I have enough sympathy for him to worry about such things. Meade has enough of his wits to laugh when Alexander’s head lolls into my neck and he starts repeating variations of my name.

“Laurens...Lauren, Lawrence, Laurenth, Lorenzo, Lorenge...Lozenge”

“Stop it.”

He confirms his intent to annoy me when he stops trying to walk altogether and goes purposefully limp, but it only makes it easier to drag him. “Why’d you keep volunteer’n me t’work f’ the Baron? ‘m so...busy.”

He’s whiny and inarticulate, but he has been sober and sharp for weeks which makes his recent bluntness dangerous. He has had the time to internalize his complaint and now the looseness to voice it, “You studied military administration and you’re always saying you can handle more work,” I say.

“No-” he pulls at my head with the hand I’m holding around my neck to carry him, “You’re
dragging me into your work.”

“And you’re dragging my ear off my head-”

He grunts and releases me.

“If you’re so busy, I could take up the prisoner exchanges,” Meade says, locking eyes with me in sympathy.

But, I don’t need it. Alexander wants an answer and I can give it. I want to. He deserves to know what he’s denied us. “We were supposed to work together to charm the Baron,” I say. “You and I as a team. I know that you have been busy with the court martial and the prisoner exchange. I understand that you don’t want my help with your work, but I would have relished your company in mine…”

“So you can coddle me about my health too?”

I’m confused, but Meade gives me a look that explains he has a reason to say this, and I assume his frustration comes from Missus Washington again. I’m sure he deserves it among his philandering and drinking and slowly-improving health. He’s earned the concern of the entire family, but I’m offended he pretends that’s my reason for wanting his company. He knows better.

“No, Hamilton,” I say. “I miss you...working with you.”

The instinct to notice his surname on my tongue has survived the poison he imbibed. He’s looking at me, mollified, and he tries to walk again which I’m sure he means to be helpful. Meade and I drag him over the threshold into the Potts house where we prop him up at the stairs and I remove his coat and vest and cravat while Meade goes to the stove for water.

We talk while Alex sits and sips until he’s ready to be put to bed. But lifting Alexander with both arms around our shoulders, we don’t fit in the stairway, so Meade helps him climb onto my back and leaves us there while I carry him upstairs.

I don’t believe he needs to be carried for anything but exhaustion. He’s unnaturally heavy because he’s so loose, and when I deposit him on his bed, his arms tighten and drag me down into blankets that crinkle and puff up around us.

When I struggle to sit up, he grabs for my shoulders and misses me, instead wrapping himself around my waist with startling agility then burrowing his face roughly into the side of my hip. “It’s your own fault…” he says, but his voice is muffled in the fabric of my breeches.

“What?”

His arms are a vise around my stomach, and one leg’s hooked over mine to complicate my escape. “If you truly miss me…” He speaks like he’s skeptical- both because it’s what he wants to believe and because it’s what he is afraid to. “It’s your fault.”

I’m too drunk to speculate his meaning, so I focus on removing his boots before he rubs mud into the blankets. He allows me to move his legs and drop them, one by one, onto the floor.

“I can’t believe I still wanna sleep with you.”

He’s abrupt as ever. I hear that clearly. “Alex…”

His knee digs into my thigh, elbow jabbing the soft part of my side as he pushes himself upright,
“You stopped coming,” he says. “If we were suppose t’be a team, s’your fault we’re not. You stopped coming to our exercises.”

Such things that vigor in the heart flusters and heats. It suddenly makes sense- his abrupt retreat and the onset of this pitch of fear. But, I’m stuck, “You still want to sleep with me?”

“Which is why you stopped coming,” he speaks with so much surety, I don’t understand his meaning at first, then open my mouth to protest, but rather than allowing me to answer, he pushes his face into my arm as if to hide. “You’ve been gone,” he repeats. “I didn’ understand why- what I did. I stopped touching you like you wanted but...I never knew why people complained about an empty bed until I had someone missing from mine.”

I’m not sure if I have the right to approach this subject or the coordination to do so now. But, he’s offered another angle of approach that I’m willing to accept. Leaning my weight back against him, I drop my mouth to his hair, “I thought you always preferred to share.”

He laughs wryly, “When I knew I’d be getting something out of it.” he grins and looks me over in a way that may have once made my skin crawl, but I just feel hot all over. “I only flirt to have what I want- makes it easier to manage expectations.”

“...You flirt with a lot of people.”

Alex waggles his brows which I think is supposed to be amusing, but is a cruel reminder that his attention can be as fleeting as he chooses, that there are always other men in camp he can turn to. And I, who has earned more of his trust than anyone, who needs him more than anyone, still have no grip on him. To make a claim on him- for him to allow that, would delve into a dangerous territory that he no longer trusts me to brave. I would drag him into my darkness, but if he chooses to move away from me, how would I find him again?

Despite his promises that he will not be disappointed in me, that he will fight his nature and my own, that he cannot leave if I want him; even if I find the words we need and I manage to resolve this, even if we become as entwined as two men can be, there is no guarantee I can keep him. I didn’t want him to go, but he left. Perhaps it was my fault, but he is capable of it…

I remove his hands from me and get up from the bed, find the whisky flask by Meade’s bed and take a bracing pull from it. I can feel Alexander’s eyes on me, but I need to be away from him. I still want to sleep with you. What an unfair thing to say. I know he is not Francis, but I’ve lost it all before. Martha won’t be here to catch me this time; I have to do this on my own. My head still swims from the last swallow, but I take another long gulp before it steadies.

“John?” Alex is on the edge of the bed now, feet over the side and planted on the floor, watching. I drink.

He stands and comes to me, hands folding over the flask, gentle. “Come to bed.”

I shake my head, and my face feels hot, eyes stinging. He’s scalding and shapeless. How can I commit to that? “I can’t…” not again.

“We needn’t do anything,” he says carefully, his fingers just brushing the back of my hand. “Just come to bed.”

It doesn’t comfort me to be spoken to like something fragile- like my timidity is only about this old overture again when he has given me far more reason to be afraid of his heart than his body. He believes I taunt him with flirting, but he taunts me with the opportunity for true feeling he’s secretly
too afraid to return. I lift the flask and open my throat for one more long drink before pushing the whiskey into his steadier hands. I trust him to put it down flat without spilling, and he does.

I shuck my coat and hang it, untuck my shirt and sit to untie my boots. “You’re wrong that we needn’t,” I say. “You’re wrong that it frightens me.”

He looks at me, hands flat at his sides and swallowed-up in his sleeves. He looks young and burdened. “I never said that.”

“But you think it.”

“If I thought that, why would I tell you about my affair?” he says, but that’s why he’s been drinking—to loosen a tongue he knows is too tight. “Why would I tell you that I still want you?”

“Because you’re drunk.” Truly, he’s sobering fast while I slip further.

He raises a brow and pulls up the second chair at our table, leaning to help me with my boots, but he leans too fast and his hands are unsteady. “I don’t believe you’re afraid of desire,” his eyes flick up to check my expression. “But, I believe you are afraid of something.”

He’s sharpening slowly and he’ll see me soon anyway; I’d rather withhold that satisfaction. If I’m afraid of anything now, it’s simply... “You.”

He stills and I watch, very aware of my own breath. When he moves again it’s to finish pulling off my boots, then he gets up and goes back to the bed, picking up his own and lifting his legs to put his feet back into them.

I grab the side of the table to sit up, “Where are you going?”

He doesn’t answer.

I stand and ask again, and without fully-lacing his boots, he starts for the door without a coat. I stumble to intercept, thinking perhaps I should apologize, but I don’t think that would help. Alex isn’t angry. But he is something. It’s not sober, and that’s my first thought, “You’re drunk,” I say, meaning that he can’t go.

“Let me leave.”

He’s steadier than I am now, and I want to lean on him. I want him to keep me upright. That feels fair. His eyes are dark and sad, and I forget the word ‘no.’ “Where are you going?” My voice sounds feeble to my own ears.

It makes him sadder. “John.”

“Where are you going?”

I can’t think of anything else to say, and I think he realizes any response he gives will be met with the same question. So, he answers, “Somewhere I’m wanted.”

It’s the lie that breaks me. He’s said it as if he knows where he is and it hurts to think he should leave. He shouldn’t think that, but it must be my fault, so I touch his face, slide my fingers over his cheek and around to the back of his head, pull him down into my chest, mumbling, “Come here,” and wrapping my arms around him tight so he has no choice but to fall into me. He goes boneless and allows it. “I’m not Socrates...not with you,” I say and open my legs so that I can lean back into the wall and keep him tight against me. “I am afraid, but not of this. I don’t want you to resist the
urge."

“You’re more drunk than I,” he decides.

I hum my agreement into his hair, hands brushing down his arms and across his back between his shoulders. He stands and allows it, then shifts his weight to haul us both upright. I release him slowly, holding his arms so he won’t leave, so I can drag him back to the bed. He doesn’t resist that either, kicks his boots back off, and we situate under the covers.

I don’t stop touching him- don’t want to, and he lets me. I feel tactile and enjoy assigning myself the descriptor- tactile. I sit up and unbutton his shirt, putting my mouth to his chest as it’s uncovered, traveling up his neck where I can turn my head and get my mouth over more skin, sucking and nipping to the hollow under his jaw. He doesn’t turn his head for me, so I kiss at his cheeks and mouth- which also offer no access.

“Come on,” I say, tugging at his arms to have him sit up where I can get his shirt off. He obeys and I work at the buttons of my own. With my fingers occupied, I can appreciate his form- the dip of his collar, his hair loose about his shoulders, “You are…I think…” I lean to kiss his throat, tender and hard. If he wants to be where he’s wanted, I will show him not to leave my bed. “I think I could do anything for you,” I say, because it’s true. I could do anything for him- anything because of him.

But, he’s heavy and petulant, as if unconvinced of his right to touch me in return, kiss me, or enjoy this. “John…you don’t have to…” he says. “Especially not…now…”

“I don’t need you to say that,” I drop my shirt and putting a hand on his chest, “I’ve always stopped you when it was too much.” I tuck my hair behind my ear where it’s coming loose of its tie, and my balance fumbles clumsily. Alex’s eyes are worried as if he believes I’m not with myself- as if that’s the only way I could do this. “I’m thinking clearly,” I say, and lean to kiss his shoulder, “I’m just braver now.”

Sinking into the sheets beside him, half on top of him, my mouth against his collar, I flatten a hand over his chest, marveling at the warmth of his skin, the fact that I’m touching him like this, scraping lightly with my nails and moving to the bud of a nipple where it stands out in the cold, his breath catches and the sound exhilarates- then he stops my hand and I look to find his face turned away and eyes closed tight…

I shimmy up and kiss at his throat until he releases my hand, sliding one leg up his thigh to excite a response. It works- he grunts and turns over, curling up.

I recoil, light-headed and unsure in a familiar way. He’s certainly not eager as I’d expect. Unbidden, I recall how Francis had been unresponsive the first time I’d wanted this, when I’d been foolish enough to believe that I might be a beloved friend as the Greeks kept, that he might truly feel a reflection of the love he inspired in me. Francis had soothed me with words- all lies, but for me.

Alexander has none now. He had said that this was part of it- claimed to still want it, he took this liberty with strangers, so why not me? Why not now?

I have a mind to pull him back and continue my exploration despite his tense posture. He’s done as much to me before and he has only ever encouraged this, so curling up behind him, I trace my fingers down his side, delving under his breeches. I regard the dark with safety now- like a warm black cloak, reaching out and finding another with me. He squirms and I feel the jut of his hip moving under skin, flesh and bone, living and warm, and it renews my courage. I reach, fingers brushing over coily hairs-
“John.”

His hand’s caught mine again, grip sharp and nails cutting. Without words, his meaning is clear, something so mundane and corporeal. After a silence in which the space between us stretches into a chasm, he kicks his legs off the side of the bed, gets up, and walks to the other cot.

It’s alright. I tell myself I understand. Alex would have the dignity to tell me if I disgusted him, and he was right to stop me. Were our places turned and he’d drank the whiskey and relied on implication to express his wanting, I wouldn’t take advantage of it either. Alexander is—first and foremost, an honorable friend.

But as I lay my head on the pillow a flood of tears oozes from me, horrifying and hot, making my whole face tight, my breath catch and stop as panic begets more panic.

I hold back the slide into hysteria until I’m sure Alexander is settled, letting the salt stream over the bridge of my nose and puddle hot under my face. Once he’s pulled up the blankets of the other bed, I stumble quietly for the door and close myself outside it, stifling the sobs into my knees so I won’t wake the family or concern them.

COLONEL BURR DELIVERED the formal ruling of the case against Enslin the following morning, giving a speech about dignity and sin after reading Washington’s official statement. Alexander was right that His Excellency approved the ruling, and I’m not in the mood to be lectured about something as frivolous as sin.

I spent the morning accompanying the Baron in teaching a class that had taken several days to arrange. All the battalion commanders had gathered with their sergeant majors to learn from the Baron himself how to properly clean and inspect a musket. They’ll be expected to teach their regiments before the first day of drill, and they’ve been forewarned to expect major changes in their daily schedules to accommodate the new training regiment. Of course, this means that Steuben’s inspectors will be producing records of their progress with those classes, and I’ll be tasked with accountability of those reports.

I had hoped it would grow warmer as the morning wore on, but it’s bitter cold outside as I walk from the chapel. The snow of February has melted, but the soil remains frosted and hard where carts have dragged across camp and made ruts that direct where one can walk.

Enslin’s punishment is slotted for tomorrow morning, to be carried out by the Baron von Steuben, and I agree with the ruling— to make a denunciation of fraternization, but I cannot forget my disquiet with this case and the public method of it concerns me.

Alexander emerges from the chapel among the crowd of dismissed officers, moving like the embodiment of discomfort, clunky and ungraceful. The sight makes me feel awake and clear-sighted as I haven’t all morning. I barely slept, slipped downstairs and laid restless in the study until Billy came in to arrange the General’s papers. A grogginess at the trial had made the sight of Alexander feel slow and distorted, too slow to conceptualize him and what I’d nearly done last night. Now, I see him sharp. I feel numb and cold like a weapon.

He doesn’t avoid me, catching my gaze and holding it. “Washington deferred to the Baron von Steuben’s judgment for the drumming out,” he says.

“Because I advised him to defer,” I say. “Steuben will think he has our trust if he’s empowered with discipline, and he’ll prove his loyalty to Washington’s strategic plans.”
Alex rolls his eyes and turns away.

“That bothers you?” I say, hoping it does. It bothers me.

He glances at me from the side, oblong, and falls into step without answering.

“My father wonders why His Excellency doesn’t sing the Baron’s praises as everyone in Congress does,” I say. “I’ve warned him to withhold his speculations about Washington’s reticence until we could confirm that Steuben is on our side of the feud with Gates.”

He scoffs a laugh and I know he begins to see my move, “Our side.”

He’s still bitter that we didn’t take harsher action against Gates, but our disagreement about Steuben is an excellent periphery to take out that frustration on. It is the one place I hold more sway over General Washington than he does, a field where I have a marked advantage. “Shall I add the Baron’s judgment on Enslin’s case to His Excellency’s reservations? Or are those just your own?”

The comment hits its mark and earns an impatient look, “Your feelings are the same about this case. I may not like the verdict, but I don’t disagree with the Baron. I certainly won’t mistake my moderate, rational feelings for an idealistic image of him...or a warped cynical one.”

His tone is just as belligerent as I feel. I want to be on the same side of something as him even if it takes battling to get there, and while he doesn’t mean to have a row, I think he knows we need to about something. The easiest way to rile him now would be to pretend like we don’t, so I take his hand nonchalantly. “Warped is harsh,” I say, “given that I’ve based my support of his appointment on a rational estimation of him.”

He takes my defense as he should, a mark that I’m sharp to his attacks, even as I talk nicely. “Though your estimation is still skeptical after repeated demonstrations of his capabilities.”

Holding hands, I guide our path towards the woods on the edge of camp and he allows it for the privacy as the chapel clears out and men are dispersing to their regular stations. “Steuben visited Gates so frequently, everyone in Congress thinks them friends. It doesn’t help that he’s obviously not gullible enough to see Gates as a military equal. He knows our politics, and no matter how we’ve tried, we haven’t gotten him to admit any ill-feelings about anyone in Congress, so we can’t trust that he’d voice any genuine misgivings about Washington were it inconvenient for him-”

“What you’re saying is-”

“He’s fooled more prevalent men than us.”

“Well, I assure you, I do not underestimate him,” his lip curls, insulted. To have his judgment placed against Gates’s worse to be doubted by me. “Do not mistake my trust for blindness.”

I let that stand for a moment, then. “It’s unlike you...not to demand a man prove his trust a dozen ways before extending your own.”

He stops walking and turns to the river, goes quiet and shoves his hands into his pockets. He wouldn’t dare argue with that jab, knowing that it strikes too close to the core of our problem. “What do you suggest then- to prove his trustworthiness?”

It’s the right thing to ask. “Steuben is here for a military career. He can’t have that without standing on the shoulders of others. The only way to ensure he will stand with Washington is knowing that he is willing to burn bridges with Washington’s rivals. Once he extends that trust, Washington will reciprocate... and I’ll do the same.”
It’s an offer— a chance for Alexander to restore our partnership. He’s told me where it was lost, given an invitation, and walking the ridgeline beside the Schuylkill where we’d sparred and marched, I believe we both want the same ends. If he aids in convincing Steuben to renounce Gates—something which, given his grudge against that man, should be a priority— I would defer to him about the Baron von Steuben, and we can be on the same side of that.

I watch the wind caress his hair and he remains stalk-still like a statue. I want to reach out to make him real.

“You’re lying to me…” he says slowly, confounded.

I’m appalled and immediately cut, “Why would you think that?”

“You hate the Baron. Even if he renounced Gates, you wouldn’t—”

“I don’t hate—”

“You find him vile.”

“...I find him dishonest,” I give him that, but studying his face, I see that he's firm in this belief. He trusts Steuben more than he trusts my judgment of him. “You always lectured me about trusting His Excellency too easily, look at yourself- we barely know Steuben, and he’s lied about every piece of his resume. Now, he lies to us. His affiliation with Gates—”

“Oh don’t make a show of protecting Washington’s reputation or my own!” he says. “This isn’t about his friendship with Gates or his secretiveness or the lies on his resume. This is about how he is- how you can’t stand how he is or the thought that he might be successful despite it.” I don’t understand, but, “You hate him...so much that you won’t begin to see why he’s really here.”

“I’m seeing him promoted exactly how he wants—”

“By being entirely ingenuine about him in every letter you’ve written since he arrived.”

I can hear his disgust with it: to be ingenuine, but I’m not a master at acting myself in every role as he is. “Timeo Danaos et dona ferentes,” I say. “I can’t very well describe the man I recommended for Inspector General as a snake and a liar if I want him to be useful.”

“You’re consumed with this plot…” Alex shakes his head as one who refuses to listen. He wraps his arms around himself and stomps towards the Schuylkill, looking so ill that I have a wild desire to catch hold of him and shake him by the shoulders. Before I can reach to, he turns. “Do you find him a snake for lying about himself or being too honest about it?”

“Too honest?”

“He loves men!” Alexander throws his hands up as if I haven’t realized this. “He loves men and cannot love women. Like you.” I don’t feel the greasy urge to lie and deny him, slippery and vile, that cowardice is beneath our understanding of each other. “You’re still too ashamed to admit it. So you hate him for it, hate that someone like you, who acts as you’d like to, could possibly be successful and influential—”

“Stop.” It’s too much to say not to truly offend, and I’m shaking with pain and anger. “What makes you think I haven’t?” I say. “That I’ve never...acted as I wanted to...with a man.”

This throws him in the most satisfying way, his mouth frozen open and gaping. I never understood why Alexander needed me not to flirt, as his assumptions about my lusts were never wrong and he
knew that. But in this, he looks like a fool, fumbling in the dark, and I realize he might have felt that too- known to be embarrassed before I ever knew what was confusing him. He never knew how I could be so aware of myself without accepting that part of myself- he never knew there was another. I hope it hurts him now, to think that I only hesitated with him.

He sees that my mistrust of Steuben and my hesitations are related, but he misunderstands. It’s natural to fear the dark, and no matter the comfort I’ve found there, I know to be afraid. I know the illusion- that the darkness is not a place to be visited but an Eden to escape, an isle of lotus eaters. I found Francis in the dark. But, Francis was rightly afraid, and Francis knew to leave.

Only a fool with no tether to the world would give themselves over completely to the dark, and what Steuben does, luring his boys in under the guise of safety, allowing them to find wonders without warning them of the cowards, providing no tether. It would be unworldly and inept- if I believed he didn't know the consequences. Instead, it’s cruel.

“It doesn’t matter if you have in the past,” Alexander finally speaks, his tone forcibly even. “I’ve spent enough time taming beasts, I know you’ve been keeping yours chained up.”

His logical retreat makes me want to scream that this beast is loose, to admit how I need him to guide me now more than ever, but I’m too frustrated with his secrets and silence, his accusations to deflect me away from his own discomfort. I would indulge it and let him preserve himself, but I cannot bear that vulnerability- not after last night. “And so it humiliates you to associate with me, too much of a coward to be myself with you,” I say. “Or is it just shame that you couldn’t make me comfortable- safe enough to unleash that beast. It all comes to your own insecurities or you wouldn’t care so much about it- you hate how I threaten your own perception of self.”

This infuriates him as I’d hoped, cheeks turning a deep scarlet. We’re throwing words like knives, blind and hoping for the other to break and cry out in fear or pain or anything. There is something that needs to be said, some mark we need to hit, and until that blow lands, our dance will keep dissolving- into something bitter and urgent, but we’re much more coordinated at this, at circling each other like wolves. “I wanted you to be able to trust me,” he says firmly. “I wanted my dearest friend to be truly happy- to make him see all that I-”

“I never asked you to,” I say. “You promised you could be content. Yet you still press me to accept your desires, accuse me of shame and try to manipulate me to action.” I immediately see I hit the mark by the horror on his face, and I marvel how we love to cut ourselves on each other, taste our own blood. But that’s the appeal of Alex’s heart- how bloody it is. I imagine that’s the appeal of my own, not necessarily the challenge I made of pursuing it, but the implications of that challenge, the damage already there, scarred and mangled and ugly in the way that makes the approach easier, the prey less dangerous. In that way, we match.

“I am not manipulating you to do anything- you just-”

“Torture myself by reliving how much I enjoy it?” I interrupt again. “Have you considered that I have always been aware of that? Have you considered that I don’t want your help? I don’t care if you don’t like my decision- it’s not yours to argue.” I don’t know which part of myself I’m losing, but every word is not at all what I mean.

His voice is pitched high, defensive. “And my patience is not yours to test-”

“Your patience,” I say, unable to stop myself now. “This is exactly what I mean, telling me not to flirt as if I don’t mean what I say, as if my rejection deprives you. You’re manipulating me with guilt-”
“But it does!” he cries. I’ve never had him in this kind of retreat, all emotion and defense, eyes welling up in frustration that words, his last reliable ally, are failing him. “You are the only one I can want! I only ask that you release me if you can’t…” he wheezes, tears spilling over, and I remember his promise to fight for me, to overcome both our natures with logic and philosophy.

I want to kiss him like that again- how he kissed me that night, soft and possessive like a premature victory.

He collects himself, pushing his hands into his eyes to clear them, “I understand that it’s easier to believe that the guilt comes from me when I’m the one most often addressing it, but-

“Oh, you understand?” It’s a play at partnership by saying ‘I see through you’, but we can do better. “I think you spend so much time assuming to know the way I think that you fail to see that I know exactly how you do.” He steps back and I forward.

Alex isn’t afraid of the dark, he’s afraid he isn’t alone there. He’s afraid that, finding comfort in a friend, he’ll settle and be left behind. But, he can’t run away from this any more than I can. He’s admitted to that, and now I won’t allow it.

“It would be so much easier for you to conceptualize the thought of me if I just rolled over and spread my legs like one of your easy rakes, but I don’t go away in the morning and you still have to speak to me and that terrifies you. It always has. Which is why you’re so desperate to simplify this thing between us-”

“Which thing?” he says as if he’s set the multitudes into a tidy list while I’m left with the knotted mess. “Friendship?” he scoffs, tearful and angry and the heat in his gaze begins to permeate around us; entrammeling him. He’s stopping firm in his retreat, holding his ground with the familiar rage that pools beneath. An eruption that’s only for the finest gentleman. The dark desperation that shrouds a deeper uncultivated truth. How long had he been saving this rage for me and only me?

I’m not afraid of it now. “We are more than friends.”

“Then what are we?”

“Partners- at least.”

He doesn’t protest the title, and I take his tight expression as grudging acceptance.

“And as partners, you will stop trying to run away from something we both know you don’t want to lose. You’ll stop trying to make explanations for my actions and trust me to speak for myself…”

He scoffs again, amused through the bitterness. “As if you ever would. You don’t talk about yourself.”

That is probably fair, but, “And you do?” He turns and begins walking again by the riverside, ignoring me. I step after him, “Sober, I mean. You’ve been sleeping with a stranger, refusing to let me flirt and never sharing my bed unless you’re too drunk to fear it.” I grab his arm to slow him down as we move further into the cover of trees. He’s been looking for any excuse not to follow me along the path we’d set out on, and I’ve given him several. “You wanted me to be drunk last night- for something to blame my actions on, some way to justify it if I acted on desires you aren’t ready to believe in- desires that frighten you.”

He tugs his arm free and steps away from me, but I follow him, gentle.

“I know they do because every time I’ve had the chance to act on those desires- by your own
invitation, you try to stamp them out, douse them with lust because that’s so much safer. I think- and correct me if I’m wrong, I believe I understand what you meant about sensibility and madness, but I implore you not to run away just because the intensity frightens you…feel it anyway.”

“I’m not running away,” he says, offended by the implication. “I asked you what you wanted. I listened to your expectations of friendship, reassured you in every way you doubted. I tried to give you what you had the right to expect.” He turns and takes a few steps backwards, deeper into the woods. “You tried to take more than you asked for, and I was even willing to give that-” he cuts himself off. “I have been willing…”

And, none of this may not seem like a lie to him, but, “Then why can’t you kiss me anymore?”

He stops.

Some part of me expects the same excuse Francis provided. A flowery verse about how it would ruin the virtue of our friendship, how longing like this will leave us untethered. A dictation of my own wretched inner monologue. I would rather he just kiss me to make my mind quiet.

That plea must show on my face because he does. He pulls me down by the neck, dragging me low to have my mouth. It’s a short, bruising kiss, then an immediate retreat, but I pull him close with an arm round his back and hold him in my proximity. He closes his eyes like a half-hearted defense and falls back into me, soft and slow, but I don’t allow that either, draw on his lip and turn his kiss heavy and warm.

A low rumble escapes his throat, and I think it has more to do with the strength of my arms around him than anything my mouth does. His hands grapple between my shoulders and I reach up into his hair. When another groan leaves him, it’s followed by a frustrated grunt, and he nips at my mouth, kisses harder as if I’ll call off my pursuit as I always have.

I press him into the nearest tree.

We continue like this in the safety of the forest, my hands gripping his waist hard, nose pressing into his cheek and his breath harsh and hot on my face, but as my passions ignite, he smolders out, loose in my arms. I only want to pull harder, expose his neck to the sky. When I turn and kiss along his jaw towards his ear, Alex seems to melt into nothing until he’s trembling and weak-kneed, falling into the bark I’m pressing him into. He doesn’t resist the affection, but he seems powerless to reciprocate so I pull back.

“Are you alright?” I say, half-grinning at him, not fully-collected myself. I cannot help nuzzling at his cheek.

He shoves me back so sudden I nearly stumble, then takes a moment to gather himself before trudging off, smearing his mouth on the back of his hand.

I SPEND THE REST of the day with Steuben. A random sergeant has brought a list of complaints from the line that the Baron requests my advice for. I’m not surprised to find several reports of men being romantic with each other. Soldiers have been presenting complaints of this since Maxwell was released, and Burr’s announcement at chapel today won’t help matters. The Baron turns them away every time with a hollow promise to address the issue, but it’s darkly amusing to see them come to him, expecting sympathy for their revulsion.

“What if we held a play?” Caty says.
“A play?”

She plucks a feather out of a beaver skin hat she’s been playing with and attempting to embroider. “Yes, something to occupy the men rather than the sexual exploits of their friends. They’re bothered by these things because they have enough time to dwell on their thoughts of it- they make themselves afraid.”

“If their problem is leisure time, they don’t need a distraction- they need duties and training.”

“Then a reward for those things,” she says. “It would give the men more reason to love the Baron- which introduces conflict to their prejudice. It would certainly bring Alexander over more often. What about a Beaumarchais!” she pushes up from her seat as if to bring that idea to the Baron, “The French would love it!”

I know Washington will never cast suspicion on the French’s front company scheme before we have an official alliance, so I offer her a more appealing subject of conversation. “I believe we shall be seeing more of our friend in this office. Hamilton.”

“Really?” she’s intrigued, but I’m not pleased with this topic either. She is far too keen not to have drawn her own conclusions from Alex’s petty attacks at the Baron’s party. I’m sure she has an awkward amount of insight into the source of our tension. “Are you saying you’ve grown bored with your own drama,” she says. “Or was it boredom with your work that drove the theatrics?”

“They reinforce one another,” I say dryly. “The point is- I made a proposal, and if he follows through with the offer, we shall have proof that we can trust the Baron. If that’s the case, we can have him become his own keeper, and you and I will soon be out of a job.”

WHEN I RETURN to the Potts house that evening to attend the General’s table, I bring him the idea of hosting a play as if it were my own. He listens and agrees if Steuben’s staff is willing to host the event- after the men have completed his training. He leaves the matter of timing to the Baron’s discretion on the condition that he can select the piece for the performance.

Alexander is absent, and after supper, Billy explains to me that Hamilton claimed ill and hasn’t gotten out of bed since this morning after church service. I’m not surprised, but I should have suspected. Alexander carries his worries on his body before he does in his mind, and with all his turmoil, this collapse was inevitable.

I draw myself up the stairs without sparing a thought and reach the door before realizing I need something to say. We both see each other well enough to act without words, but I fear that’s a product of the expectation to do so- the requirement of living among others, incapable of communicating and angered by any confusion they cause. I want him to never expect anger from me.

I insisted he should trust me to speak for myself, so shouldn’t I have something to say?

“Come.” Alex’s voice is dry, calling through the door, and when I poke my head in, he’s sitting up in his bedclothes, propped against the headboard. “Oh…” he mutters, “I thought you were Billy with water.”

“…I can fetch him…”

He waves a hand dismissively, sinking into the blankets and turning his face into the bed, “No…’s just what I thought.”
I’m fortunate. He doesn’t seem interested in conversation. “May I come in anyway?”

He grunts his consent.

I close the door behind myself and take a seat at our desk, feigning busy with our copy of Plato for an excuse to think. He’s been desperate for a definition, and I claimed we are partners, but it doesn’t seem sufficient. I consider our earliest confusions, every definition we’ve tried to make for ourselves. He has been honest of his sentiments, laid bare his fears if I’d only taken the time to look.

In my experience, everything goes away. He had explained his hesitations and my persistence confounded him, something…extraneous of myself…they’ll take it when they leave, break it off and steal it, but with my earnestness, over time, he was susceptible to the offer. I’ve decided I want it…those things you detailed. A fall was inevitable, but he needed reassurance, that I would catch him as he would me- I need to know if you retract the offer, don’t be cruel or polite, so he dragged me where he wanted and stole to find anchor, I could take you…all the pieces you’re so... ashamed of- I could take those, and you know it. I moulded myself as he wanted, carved places so he might stay, but I could never find the words to invite him inside, and my hesitation sparked his insecurity and insecurity bred fear…

And, Alexander is not a coward.

I know what to say. Finding the page, I read- “‘Enslaved, he will make his bed as close as he can to his beloved who can be his only physician. This sickness…men call eros.’”

I’m met with silence. Then, back turned, Alex pulls the coverlet towards his chin. “Choose a better metaphor if you’re here to apologize.”

“Come to work if you deny your sickness,” I say, and he should, given how busy the office has been, but I’m glad he has brought it to this. Alex’s confrontation against Rumor seems like a plea for alliance. He slept with a stranger to make his fears unavoidable- to force himself to address them, subverting his own self-preserving nature as a way to preserve his identity. He is not a coward. This arranged confrontation is a plea as if to say ‘don’t scare me off now, I’m your only friend’.

“I have a fever,” he huffs, and as I pull back the blankets and crawl into bed in full-uniform, he repeats the warning and squirms away.

I push his head back to the pillow. “If I haven’t caught it yet, I don’t think I will, considering how well our mouths were acquainted this morning.”

He shivers and curls his limbs away as I stroke my hand through his loose hair down to his arm, seeking permission to hold him. He understandably doesn’t trust it, so I sit up.

Moving away, he stares like a predator watches a hunter, tense and waiting for my move. I don’t speak like this if I want serenity, and ever-aware of any vibrations on this tension, he responds quickly when I lean back, scooting away as well. I wait for him to settle, holding his gaze calmly, then take his legs, stretch them out and put my head in his lap. I realize the offer I’m making, taking Francis’s posture. Despite Alex’s recent skittishness, I trust him in my old position, lover and beloved. But, I’m the worst kind of poacher. The kind who sets himself up as a gamekeeper.

He doesn’t accept the posture, but before dread can set in, he’s repositioning, sliding down in the pillows and moving my head to lie comfortably against his chest. His heart is pounding under my ear, piqued and beating fast. He must know I hear. I see him now. Sliding my hand up to his ribs and closing my eyes, I agree- this is better. This creature in his chest that I’ve been so scared of, is just as frightened of me.
“I have been afraid,” I admit. “And you made yourself afraid of me…”

The hand that runs through my hair is slow as if to prevent trembling. “I’m not afraid of you,” he says. I’m demanding even ground, placing my head in his hands. I don’t mind if he approaches with caution, then he grants, “…I’m afraid that I’m not.”

I laugh through my nose and smile into his shirt. This is the response I’d expected months ago, giving warnings about disappointing him, but it’s coming too late. I’ve seen the determination in his eyes, primal and furious, a raw need to shape the world to survive. It’s his tether to reality, woven into his very existence, and I trust it- I trust him to see further than illusion. He fears being wrong about me because I’ve held up my own doubts, but he has always been right. I have the greatest gift to offer, and I made him take it by force. “I was a coward, trying to push you away, believing the lies of an even greater coward—”

We don’t speak the name, Francis, but it hangs in the air, striking a dissonant chord. “But, I’m sure you had a point,” he says. “I haven’t exactly been thrilled with you these past two weeks.” He’s had many reasons to be disappointed with me, but he’s still keeping me, so I don’t worry too much. “I was so quick to dismiss your warning that something like this might happen because…” he frowns, “all the world is darkness and monsters, but at least you had the decency to introduce yourself as one.”

That hadn’t been my intention- warning him not to trust me so that he would trust me more, so I say, “It was a warning, not an introduction.”

He makes a low, content noise as if he understands. “People don’t make the effort to see themselves unless they want to be seen. You wouldn’t have warned me about the monster I might find unless you were hoping I’d look.”

I laugh at his surety, “Or I was worried you wouldn’t see it.”

“You? You dear blundering creature, you couldn’t hide from me if you tried.” His voice rumbles in his chest when he talks, and I’m too content to protest anything right now. “I believe there’s nothing to be found, and yet…”

Yet I told him there was something awful. Yet I’m making him question himself. I’m glad he isn’t given to self-doubts. He believed my promises of friendship enough to keep knocking on these avaricious walls. I’ve been so afraid of taking them down, so ready to die within them, I hardly noticed him steal inside.

“What I said earlier…what I did,” kissing him to prove a point, I turn my head up to meet Alex’s eyes. “That’s not how a friend should behave.”

“You said we’re partners…”

“True, but I offered friendship and I want to give it to you…if you’ll keep it.” When he nods carefully, I grab his hand, “I want to give…” I move it under my chest to my heart and assume he understands. “This was…always what this was about.”

I know the satisfaction of feeling whole alone. I lost religion in my fascination with Francis, and in losing him as a friend, I existed without the two things that incentivise virtue: God and love. It’s easy to become attached to individual dignity, to enjoy being alone. It’s easy to fear losing that, but I don’t believe he’s afraid I will take anything from him as much as he fears how much he wants to give freely.
He holds still as I reach up towards his ribs. Emboldened, I knock gently and leave my fist there. “If
you feel the same, I promise...it’ll be alright.”

He doesn’t respond- can’t just now, and I don’t press the matter. The sound of someone visiting
headquarters echoes through the walls from downstairs and I think I should return to work, having
said all I can bear to be known right now. Before I move to get up, Alex is shifting under the covers,
pushing me on my side by the wall so I’m blocked-in with him curled over me. The assertion in his
posture is undercut by a dark blush. “By... alright, do you mean...?”

Shyness never suits him, but it’s understandable now. In answer, I pull him down into a kiss,
patiently drawing and nipping at his lips until he sighs and throws an arm around me. I press a thigh
firmly between his legs, rubbing up and back against the impression of his cock. He can’t help
moving against me, and the answering roll of my hips draws out a moan. “Every part of it…” I purr
against his mouth.

His breath is ragged when he pulls away and ducks his face into my chest, squirming to calm
himself. This can’t go anywhere now, but his heart is drumming again through his shirt and I’ve
made myself aroused. I should return to work soon, but his arm remains draped, limp and heavy over
me.

“I had a dream last night,” he says. “I was being chased by a pack of hounds, and I was able to
evade them, but there was one that kept on me. It didn’t even run to chase, no matter how I ran, he
closed in, but as it came closer, it wasn’t a hound at all. He was a wolf.”

I stroke my fingers through his hair, feeling at peace in this position. Alex is talking as he does
sometimes, as if he’s delivering a speech meant only for himself.

“I don’t mean to change you…” he says, and I’m not sure in which regard he refers.

But, “I don’t believe you would move me to do anything I don’t want.”

He’s always fed on my confidence, pleased and emboldened. So, when he shifts his eyes away
carelessly and doesn’t respond, a mask slips that I had not noticed, his face changing to a more subtle
expression that I’m powerless to understand. It seems to break the image of comfort we were creating
and I’m terrified to think of anything between us as an illusion.

But he had allowed it to fall. I take that for what it means- to ask. “What is it?”

“I told you once- we’re a pack of well-bred hounds, but you... you’re not like that.” While he speaks,
I reach up and tuck his hair behind his ear, stroke his face because I want to- because he’ll allow it.
I’m not sure what he’s talking about, but my touch is making him tremble. “I know what you were-
how you’ve changed and why. For what it counts, I’m glad that I wasn’t here for it.”

“You’re displeased...with how I’ve changed?” Become a spy, a killer, a cynic.

He shakes his head fervently, both hands gripping at my shirt, “No, no, my dear. I just I- You were
right to fear me. I can’t be the one to make you, destroy you. If that’s what will happen, don’t let it be
me.”

He’s shaking, so I kiss him- his lips, his temple, his hair, guiding his face into my neck so he doesn’t
see my bewildered smile, half-amused with his concern. “You once promised you wouldn’t let me
disappoint you,” I turn my mouth towards his ear, “I can promise I will not let you destroy me.”

He sobs then, shaking his head and when I pull him back enough to see his face, he looks pained-
won’t meet my eyes. “I already have.”
I laugh in confusion. “Alexander, I’m right here- intact.”

“And anything that happens, anything you’ve given up to be here, any way that this post harms you, that is all my fault.”

“You’re not making sense-”

“I brought you here,” he says. “I suggested you to His Excellency…”

I don’t understand why that should be such a problem- why he’s so torn to tell me this when I’m well-aware of his influence with Washington. It’s not particularly-surprising information. I would be grateful for the position, but there’s some reason he expects me not to be. I keep waiting for him to explain and he doesn’t. He’s leaning away as if he expects me to rage, and I hate it, but I have to suspect something I can’t fathom him keeping from me. I hesitate to ask, “...Why?”

He closes his eyes. “For your father’s support against Gates.”

Oh. I swallow tightly. It’s the only motion I can manage for several minutes.

“After Trenton, when rumors started moving through certain circles about General Gates's hesitancy to support Washington’s plan, I began to suspect that he would pull for political support. We knew that, if there came a time that our campaigns were stalling and Congress may not be so pleased with Washington anymore, Gates would not hesitate to retaliate, and Washington already knew he’d made an enemy of Mifflin. It made sense to find someone who might provide a connection to states which already favored him as a Commander- like South Carolina-”

I want him to stop talking, but when I speak, my voice croaks, “You said….” I cannot complete the thought. I had believed my place here was earned- he had allowed me to believe that-

“I would not have told you otherwise if that’s all you were worth to us,” he says, then quickly amends, “to me…”

“And…if I wasn’t?” I frown, stricken, completely unsure how I should feel about this. When I’d agreed to be a backdoor access to my father, it had felt like my own decision- it had felt like a decision that Alexander wasn’t happy about, but I don’t see that anymore- how he could’ve been displeased with my loyalty to Washington if that’s why he brought me here. My memories grow darker in this fog. “What would you have told me if I wasn’t valuable?”

“What does it matter?”

I don’t know how to explain my feelings, even to myself. I slide off the bed and rearrange my clothes. Alex makes a grab for me, catching my hand with a plea to stay, but these are difficult terms of his treaty, and I need time to consider. At least this time, it doesn’t feel like a retreat. At least now, he doesn’t want me to leave- but he touches his forehead to the back of my hand and releases me to do so.
The Model Company

Chapter Summary

Beta: denial and avoidance and john-laurens
As always, I did final edits so any mistakes are my own.
Warning for this chapter: mention of suicide attempt at the very end.

In the dark there is discovery. There is possibility. There is freedom in the dark, once someone has illuminated it.

... 

I FIND SILENCE in the General’s empty office, pretending to reread doctrine of drill until someone struggles loudly through the front door. I recognize Tilghman’s footsteps and poke my head into the hallway. It’s late for him to be returning with letters.

He comes into the office, dropping his bag, and explains, “Late express. I’ve been waiting on this.” He holds up an envelope and finds a leather chair by the fireplace, his coat is frosted but he carries an air of exhausted sociability. “...Howe has been requesting relief for weeks. He’s got it now.”

“Relief as in-”

“A change of command.” He grins and I realize I’m the recipient of his giddy need to tell someone his news despite its inconvenient hour. “General Clinton is to take the army and we know where he’s quartered in New York.”

That is news. I’m glad for it- a good distraction from the petty, conflicted thoughts Hamilton left me with. I push aside my books and turn around in my chair, “What are we doing about it?”

“Yet to be decided,” he says. “Though, knowing Sir Clinton’s location is a step towards a plan. Whether we can organize one and convince Washington to follow it is another story. It’s Ham’s informant that’s pulled the report, and he and Tallmadge can talk themselves in circles. Chances are, they’ll give two separate plans to the General and pit them against one another.”

I stare at Tench for a long moment, hearing in his tone- “You say this like you know their plans…”

He laughs through his nose. “I don’t presume that,” he says. “But, I have my guesses. They’re both itching to take the offensive, and they have very different ideas of what that means…”

I give him a deeply interested look which seems to amuse him.

But, “Why are you still awake anyway?” he says, changing the subject like he’s already told me too much. “Shouldn’t you be to bed by now?”

“I wasn’t aware I had a curfew.”

He gives a piercing look and, “You’re bothered,” he decides, and I turn away, feeling suddenly
aware of my breathing. But, when I’m too slow to respond, he guesses, “Something the Baron’s done- your work with him? The rumors?” He looks at me, and I quickly understand why he assumes this. My work with Steuben has become so prominent in my daily routine, it’s all the other aides think I do now. Then he says, “The drumming out?”

I startle. “What?”

“For Lieutenant Enslin. That’s all anyone in camp’s been talking about- if you’re worried about that, you should be trying to sleep,” he says. “The procession begins before daybreak.”

“I know when it begins.”

He catches my tone, and reaches out to clasp my shoulder. “And attending on no sleep will only make the ugly affair more wretched. Beware the Ides, my friend.” He squeezes my arm and pushes up from his seat, letting his own weariness frame his posture. “Tomorrow will be an unpleasant day for all of us, but surely you’ll feel it more than most.”

He doesn’t explain his meaning, just nods and bids me a good night.

I watch him go, mildly horrified.

TENCH WAS RIGHT that I should sleep, at least to be keen to the army’s reaction to the drumming. I’m supposed to be gauging the Baron’s reputation and the parade is his to conduct.

The house is quiet. Meade has been out on late rides for field reports and Harrison is attending a meeting with the committee of Congressmen regarding officers’ pay. As I come upstairs to the bedroom, part of me hopes that Alexander will have already fallen asleep to avoid being alone together in the room.

He’s up and reading.

It’s late enough that he’s using a single candle, and I undress without regard for privacy- though the dimness of the room provides plenty of it. He doesn’t look up to acknowledge me. He should be resting to recover from his ‘fever’, but I know why he’s awake. I had considered it while I studied in the General’s office, but now that confronting what he said is imminent, I idle, putting out my clothes for the morning and organizing my letters. I’m slow to pull back the covers and slide into bed beside him.

He turns on his side to face me, one hand tucked under his chin and looking down and away from my eyes.

I know I will have to initiate this conversation, and I would like to make it as short as possible, but my voice doesn’t sound sure. “You told me I was worth more than my father’s support.” And, I don’t believe he ever lied to me about that, but, “what was my other value?”

He puts a hand on my chest, gaze low as if he’s contemplating his own feelings, but I’m not interested in that right now. I need to know that I bring something to this family besides whatever charm he sees in me.

I take his hand off my body. “I mean to the General.”

“Besides being a good aide?” he says.
“Besides that.” We are both translators, both outspoken, young, capable, “What do I offer that you don’t if not my connections to-?”

“The French.”

I scoff at that, “A few letters to Franklin? Lafayette’s done far more to reach that court than-”

“And you gave us Lafayette.” Alex frowns at my confusion. “He already believed in our cause and in Washington, but you gave the Marquis reason to believe in us.”

I draw my legs up and frown.

So he explains, “The General knows there are others who might replace him as Commander in Chief - he knows that the ministers have gained some support in Paris by flaunting his name, but if Congress selects a new Commander and the French are committed only to Washington, all is lost. We cannot hope for an alliance and we cannot win this alone, but if a man such as Lafayette would stay and fight and rally his connections regardless of who stands as Commander in Chief, there’s still hope.”

I understand what he’s trying to say, but I don’t see how this can be something Washington values me for when, “the General didn’t seem very concerned when Gilbert threatened to resign over his expedition into Canada.”

“That was a bluff,” Alex says, which I know, but he assures me. “Congress wouldn’t risk losing Lafayette for Conway, so of course they agreed to his terms. I wouldn’t have told him to make that threat if I didn’t think it would frighten Mifflin’s faction-”

“It frightened them because they know how loyal he is to Washington, so they believed it…” I say, and it may have been a bluff but, “I don’t think that was an empty threat either. If he hadn’t had Washington behind him against that expedition he may well have left us. We know Washington and Gates were both using his reputation as leverage against each other and you decided we wouldn’t tell him about Washington’s direct feud with Gates. We’ve always made it a priority to support his loyalty to the General.”

“Yes, but the General has me for that. I’m sorry I brought you into it in that case, but my influence with Gilbert is purely professional.”

I can feel my brow scrunching, face twisting in doubt and distaste.

“The Marquis needed an American to be his friend,” he says. “Not a father to idolize and follow, but a brother to stand beside as an equal, to relate to and protect. From the first battle- hasn’t he always fought for you?”

I recall falling to the ground with a twisted ankle, resigned to die in some muddy field at Brandywine creek- then Lafayette’s sword striking the bayonet away from my chest. Some part of me had known I held the honor of being the Marquis’ first friend in this country. I’m not sure I’d gathered the strategic importance of that role...

“That- I’ll admit wasn’t part of the plan, but once I’d known the Marquis a few days, I did predict it as a possible necessity.” Alex is going on sanctimoniously. “Before you came, he was starved for a friend his own age.”

“You were here-”

“We were too different!” he scoffs, but in reality, I think he’s been a better friend to Lafayette than I
ever have and it’s frustrating that he pretends otherwise. “I couldn’t behave enough like a noble to fool him and there was too much of me he admired as a soldier. So, when you arrived and Washington assigned me to observe your progress…” he shrugs.

In hindsight, knowing the value he was placing in my relationship with the Marquis, “...Your interest in my friendship with him...your concern when we argued-” his plot to mend our differences before the Frenchman left camp, the ride to the Moore house that had rekindled his fever and nearly killed him in my arms, “-purely professional.”

He bites his lip and, “Nothing is purely professional with you...hasn’t been for months,” he says, wry as if things would be simpler if they were.

“When did it change?” I say, tempering my tone. I don’t like being angry with him, and he seems to understand how I’m struggling to grapple with this new context- it makes me question why he’d even bring this up- if only to hurt me. “It would help if I knew at what point I might mean more to you than the work.”

“I don’t know. You were my assignment who happened to be beautiful...who happened to think me beautiful. At first it was convenient, then terrifying...then it just...was. You were more important to me the moment you were something to worry about. But that doesn’t mean you weren’t still my assignment.”

“Am I your assignment now?”

“As much as I’m yours.” He’s bitter, and I know what he’s referring to- his sloppy drunkenness and Washington’s orders to watch over him. I don’t see him that way though.

“Just tell me one thing,” I say. “Are you saying all this to be cruel?” To purposefully sting me with all the ways these truths throw our past into ugly blinding light. I know how he pushes me away. How he tests how cruel he can be to see how far the boundaries will stretch.

“No,” he says, then continuing with careful slowness, “these manipulations surprise you, but they were never to hurt you. I don’t say this now to hurt you. I wouldn’t have said what I did if I hadn’t thought you already knew you are more important than your father’s connections. The only reason you didn’t prioritize Lafayette was, you were not supposed to and I’m good at my job.”

Good at the act- I’ve always had a vague sense he was performing one, but at the same time always believed myself to know him best. I’m seeing a way that both might be true. If not to hurt me, if he says this for the sake of trusting me with the truth, I can accept that. Though, I don’t believe my friend cares about truth for truth’s sake. There is...some other purpose.

“Good at your job…” I smile mordantly and shake my head. “Tell me one more thing. Would you take credit if I wasn’t succeeding at things Washington values?”

“What?”

“If Lafayette wasn’t my friend, if my father was unfazed by our letters, would I be your failure?”

He’s at a loss.

“Did Washington ever explicitly tell you to manipulate me to reach my father’s support- did he tell you to have Lafayette approach me- or did these things just happen, and you saw them and thought ‘that’s good’?”

“His Excellency commented more than once on your friendship-”
“And so he told you to bring me to the Moore house to make up with him?”

“No…”

“He told you to bring me when you wanted to charge into his office and defend the Marquis’ reputation?”

“No.”

“When I was losing his friendship, he told you to comfort the Marquis- become more of a brother to him than I ever was.”

“What are you trying to say?”

“I wasn’t your assignment. You wanted me to succeed,” I say. “So you looked for ways I did well-listened when the General was pleased, and you pushed me forward when I faltered.”

He won’t meet my eyes and, though he’s carefully holding still, something in him trembles. He wanted to be seen, but I don’t think he realized what I’d find- I don’t think he’d seen it yet himself.

“I’d say thank you, but we both know it wasn’t just for me,” I say, smirking. “I know it’s hard to accept that you like me, but it seems like such an ugly thing to think of yourself- manipulative…for Washington’s sake? All that talk about his well-bred hounds, you’d cast yourself as one of them?”

“Stop it.”

“Then why would you want to consider me an ‘assignment’?”

“I don’t- haven’t…”

“Don’t want to or haven’t considered me that way? You just said it hasn’t been purely professional for months, so why think of it that way now?” I consider all his recent impulses to run. This retreat through professionalism has caught me off guard, but it’s a tactic I should have expected from what Fish told me of his friendship with Mulligan.

He doesn’t answer, and the silence stretches uncomfortably until, abruptly- I see it.

As much as I am yours...

He wants me to be his assignment because he is mine. And, there is a difference in being told to mentor to a new boy at work...and being told to make sure your senior on staff doesn’t dishonor the command in a married “woman’s” sheets. I don’t know how to comfort embarrassment, especially when a bitter part of me feels it’s rightly deserved. But, I don’t want to hurt Alex over his own shame when he probably hasn’t recognized that’s why he’s retreating.

“Let’s take the swords out tomorrow morning,” I say instead. “We never finished our lessons, did we.”

WE OVERSLEEP. I manage to miss the call for the parade set-up detail where Steuben had requested I help him prepare the field for the drumming ceremony. The realization of that as Billy comes in to wake us has me fumbling out of bed so quickly I trip over the bedsheets and fall in a tangled heap that disturbs Meade and Harrison, though their nightly shifts should have given them the opportunity to sleep in. They don’t seem to mind waking in a fit of laughter at my expense.
The Baron’s brigade inspectors are leading exercises this morning, and as we make the walk to the Grand Parade, we pass the lines of soldiers performing sprints and stretches and movements with their weapons. Steuben usually leads these himself and I assist, but he will have more pressing matters on his mind today.

I take my place beside the Baron where he’s mounted beside the bridge over the Schuylkill to oversee the procession.

Mist hangs over the field, so the light of daybreak is stifled and the men who’ve removed their hats have grown sodden. Enslin’s whole regiment is gathered for the affair, nearly eight hundred men standing in cluttered lines. I can imagine how much effort had gone into moving these men onto the Parade, and I recognize the intention: to make a spectacle. To make an example of this.

It’s...disgusting.

The field commanders are stationed on a small incline atop horses they likely borrowed from other regiments to attend the specifications of the ceremony. A fife and drum beat out a somber and foreboding rhythm as the procession leads the prisoner out. The crowd opens a path for them.

Major Burr rides at the head of the procession, followed by several officers I don’t recognize from Colonel Malcolm’s regiment. They look like monsters in the Roman sense, stone-faced messengers of catastrophe, hybrid beasts of both destruction and warning. Riding among them, Hamilton’s face is the only one I recognize, eyes still reddened from his fever, though I can distinguish the prisoner by the guards around him and the irons on his hands.

The drums stop and the procession halts before the regiment’s commanders.

I realize that I’ve never seen Enslin’s face. The only time I’d been near him was during his sentencing yesterday morning and he’d had his back to me. He’s not a particularly attractive man, but with the coat and sash of a Continental, his average looks are enhanced to the dashing caricature of a soldier. That visage is torn away as the Lieutenant’s superiors grab his sleeves, ripping the seams at the shoulders so that the coat, even if mended, will never fit him again. All the honor and distinction—the costume of an officer falls away from him at once.

The force of the tearing tugs Enslin down so his knees buckle and it’s hard to tell whether it’s that or his shaking sobs that pull him to the ground. His commanders yank him upright and push him onto a cart to convey him through the crowd—an elevated position to elevate his shame. Right to left to center, Enslin is dragged through the crowd of his peers—his subordinates, his men—cart displaying him with the serenading of drums. It seems to last forever.

I glance at Steuben. The Baron’s mouth is set tight and his eyes hard, a dignified executioner of his fellow-man’s dignity. Rain is pelting on us now, tapping heavily on his trifold.

I wanted to see Enslin hang. I wanted his body to sway in the wind on some forgotten branch on the outskirts of camp for the way he had embarrassed us all, but this...eight hundred men, pulled from their work, woken at this early hour to stand in a soggy field and witness this. This is worse.

As the official party approaches the bridge, Colonel Malcolm bellows the sentencing from the general court martial, the banishment of Enslin from camp.

Alexander turns his horse to flank Steuben’s opposite side. His expression is even harder than the Baron’s, void of any soft feeling. I try to harden myself in the same way, but once the order is read, Burr draws the prisoner’s sword and raises it over Enslin’s head, holding the hilt in one gloved hand and the blade in the other.
I don’t want to watch.

But, when I turn away, Steuben growls, “Watch it.”

I glare at him until I hear the snap of the blade, and gauge by his expression, the shame has been made complete. He turns his eyes on me, cold, but I don’t care. “This was a mistake,” I say. “You have no idea what we’ve just unleashed.”

“I don’t?” the Baron says, but I expected that. All his experience in Europe has him assume that he understands how armies work- as if all armies are the same. But, he understands nothing about the discipline of Americans- how fickle their respect for their commanders can be.

I regret allowing him to speak with Washington outside my company, but I realize he could not have, not without- I look at Alexander, but he turns his eyes away. It appalls me that he’s put on the mask of apathy now. I don’t believe Alexander is nonplussed by what’s to come- “This will only justify everything the soldiers have been saying about men like us.”

Steuben is unmoved. “They will believe it does. They may even say so amongst themselves, but he is not ‘like us.’”

“What did-”

“Does not make him like us.” Steuben turns his attention back to the procession where Enslin is being conveyed across the bridge and away from camp, turning his nose up. “He has never known the sting of love both unrequited and unactionable. Men like us make superior officers because we have superior restraint. Enslin had none- and he will receive none.”

I look from Steuben to Alexander where my friend nods, wondering vaguely when they spoke about this. I can see why the perspective appeals to him; as if our army operates like Spartans, and sensual bonds, when practiced within the confines of good order and discipline, make more devoted warriors. I wonder if this was the validation that my friend needed to turn his desires elsewhere, if doing so was a means of showing that superior restraint with me. I know from his cutting sarcasm- would it mean something between friends - to him, it doesn’t matter what a simple fuck means. So long as he can keep his head up, keep my friendship intact, and condemn a man whose actions had external consequences, he can justify his own hedonism.

So long as the only ones we’re hurting are ourselves.

Alex directs his horse to follow the official party. Someone must collect records of the ceremony for General Washington, and I think he has always found it easier to stomach the company of monsters than I have. I hold at the Baron’s side and watch him leave before turning to Steuben, “What are you two not telling me?”

And, he chuffs at that. “It bothers you to think we speak without including you.”

I’m being read without invitation. “Don’t do that-”

“Because you don’t trust what I might say or because you don’t trust him.”

“I do trust him.”

He throws me a doubtful look that holds several assumptions I gave him no grounds for. It only draws me to suspect Alex has told him something which he has no right to know, and I don’t like to think that Alex has been going to him for advice, but I know that only proves the Baron correct in saying I don’t trust him.
“You believe this ceremony was a mistake,” he says. “It bothers you to think he supports the decision, but you told him to handle this case. Why should he have to tell you everything for you to trust his judgment?”

I frown as the Baron turns his horse and follows the dispersing crowd back into camp. Alex didn’t trust my judgment of him. Though I hadn’t explained it. I hadn’t thought it necessary, but perhaps…

I CANNOT SLEEP that night. I had delivered reports for Steuben, written a letter of invitation to my father for Count Casimir Pulaski who is leaving camp to raise a cavalry unit- as horses are not to be got near Valley Forge, and made two dozen copies of General Washington's letters to members of Congress. My body aches and I have been yawning all day, yet sleep evades me. Alexander was similarly exhausted and had no interest in discussing the drumming ceremony, though the topic had caused some tension in the office.

I still think about what Steuben said- how he seemed to know Alex’s thoughts on the sentencing better than I did- how Alex still didn’t want to speak of it. He’d crawled into the bed beside me and put his arm over my waist out of habit, but as time stretches on, the comfort I found in his embrace turns sweaty and confining.

I peel his arms away and put my mind to silence, but it doesn’t stick, sliding away to echoes of the things that the men will say, ghosts of the future condemnations, concerns that I will never escape. It feels so much worse to think myself alone in this anxiety.

The room is dead-silent when Alex grumbles, “go to sleep,” and rolls to brace his back against my side. “You’re thinking too loudly.”

I shift so my arm tucks beneath his neck, but that puts his hair in my face and the smell of his pomade is a new distraction. When I reach up and stroke his arm, he huffs, half-sigh and half-frustration. I know he wants to sleep, but, “When did you talk to Steuben about the drumming ceremony?”

“What’re you talking about?” he mutters, voice slurred with sleep.

“The way we shamed Enslin,” I say. I’m not trying to make accusations, but “I didn’t know you supported it.”

Alex’s shoulders are tense. “It’s what he deserved,” he says. He is cold and hard, like the eruption of anger had already flowed, molten, and cooled into barren stone. I try to understand it and recall my own fury over Enslin’s crime, over the thousand-eyed beast he unleashed into camp- how I’d wanted to kill him myself. I recall Alex’s anxiety upon opening the court martial case file, how his agitation grew until he had those nail marks down his back and came stumbling home to me drunk and doubtful.

Alexander is affected by this beast far more than he will admit, and he has his own nails in me. I think I may have judged too soon. I may agree- the disgrace was worse than death. It’s what Enslin deserved.

I don’t even feel ashamed of the thought. I’m cruel and honest. Too honest- more like Steuben than I’d thought… “Could I…kiss you for awhile?”

“What?”

“I can’t make my mind quiet. It’s like a beehive all pressing in from the back of my eyes,” I say, “but it stops...when we're...doing that.”
He sits up and looks at me, but I can’t see his expression. I’m sure it must display incredulity. The request is too needy. It implies that his kisses are boring, and they’re anything but. Yet Alex was able to make himself unbothered by the Enslin case- able to push away all the concern that we shared. I envy that- I admire him for it; it’s a strength that I lack, a tether that he alone holds...I don’t feel ashamed to cling to him for it. Then he rolls onto his stomach and lies against my chest, and I understand to forget the idea and focus on sleeping.

Then he shifts and touches my jaw, guides my mouth up to his and kisses me soft and tentative. He pulls himself higher against me into a more comfortable position and leaves his mouth there. I take the offering, bracing my hands on his waist and letting the feeling of his lips obliterate concerns. Whether we’re at odds about the things people will say, about the Baron, about Enslin- we’re still here, able to touch and soothe each other. He IS with me. It’s chaste and indulgent and lacking all the smoldering heat that had made previous kisses burn.

If not for his weight, pinning me into the bed, I’d feel I’m floating face-up on gentle waves. At the same time calming and exhilarating, I could never fall asleep in such a position or I may sink, but my mind and body appreciate the gentle rocking of the tide.

His mouth has all but gone slack against me when I begin the tumble into sleep, slow and steep.

I OVERSLEEP ONCE MORE, and Hamilton’s already dressed and left. I don’t have the energy to worry what the Baron’s response will be to my absence at training. I dress and check my cheeks for hair, but determine I don’t have the time to fix it.

When I come to the General’s desk, I think Washington notices my stubble, but he says nothing of it, instead distracted by a letter that had come in last night by Meade’s last ride for the post. He sets it at my desk and says, “Reply to your father. I want the Marquis de Lafayette and his staff to return to camp at once.”

I’m shocked and thrilled, looking down at the letter, a note from my father expressing Congress’s authorization for the Commander in Chief to order his troops to return from Canada. We’ve been waiting for this allowance since hearing that the expedition was cancelled- withholding our celebration. The Marquis has waited dutifully until his entire army has been dispersed to new stations, so now, after more than two weeks...he’s coming home.

THE GENERAL ACCOMPANIES me to the Baron’s house to hear the presentation of our plan for the army’s instruction in drill. We spend a few minutes exchanging pleasantries, discussing the Baron’s daily training exercises, and Washington makes the obligatory check that he has settled in ‘comfortably.’

The General follows Vogel into the Baron’s first-floor office, and before we begin, “Colonel Hamilton will be joining us to take dictation.” He takes a seat where the manservant has pulled out his chair, gracefully tossing back his coattails and leaning one arm against the table. “He should be here shortly-” then explains to me, “Mister Elias Boudinot will be joining us in headquarters for the next few weeks, so he is moving him into the guest room you boys have been sharing. I assume he knows of any sensitive documents that may need to be moved?”

“Sir, the sensitive documents are normally his…”

He gives a small chuckle and I explain the delay to the Baron who decides that, as we wait, we
should discuss the General’s famous invasion on Trenton. I translate all the Baron’s questions, and wonder why the Baron brings up memories of the General’s first offensive attack. The Baron rarely speaks without purpose.

When Hamilton arrives, Steuben is asking how he chose the position for his guns without a clear survey of the land. I begin translating, but as Alex walks in, the General holds up a hand to stop me. I raise a brow and glance at Alex meaningfully- he doesn’t seem to have heard the topic we were discussing, but if there is a reason the General doesn’t want him to discuss such subjects, I’m definitely bringing it up to him...

His Excellency agrees to order the formation of a model company for Steuben to train in drill. The plan is to select competent officers, hand-picked by the colonels of each regiment to learn all the movements that could be required of any foot soldier in the line. The Baron has distributed a warning order to the brigade inspectors, so their commanders should have men in mind for the role.

All that remains is the officiation of His Excellency’s pen.

For that, I’m prepared with the knowledge and I’m sure Hamilton has the verbiage to draft the order, but when I suggest we begin writing it, Washington stands gracefully and puts a hand on my shoulder. He turns to Hamilton, and my friend returns his attention and begins packing his things. The General meets my confusion frankly, “We have other matters we need to resolve today, but I’ll leave you to discuss the specifications of this model company and bring me your recommendations tonight.”

That said, he nods to Hamilton and they turn to leave.

I want to protest that we’ve already designed the plans. If he’d just take the time to review them now, we could have the company formed today. But, I understand how valuable the General’s time is and don’t question how he manages it. His guards flank him as he walks out, but I grab Alex’s arm before he can follow.

“Other matters…?”

“Howe has called for reinforcements,” he says shortly. “There is a possibility we may intercept them…”

“Intercept?” I say, confused. “Make an attack?” When he nods, I realize - this was why the Baron was so eager to speak of Washington’s performance at Trenton. After the last season of campaigning, the General is overdue for a victory. This would be a good sign that the Baron will support an opportunity to see His Excellency victorious, but- “When?” I say.

“It would need to be soon- before the end of the month.”

“The men haven’t been trained yet, there won’t be time for it before the end of the month, why would he want-?” I huff, frustrated. “The Baron supports this?”

“He encourages it.”

Steuben knows we must prove the value of training a professional army to fight in the European fashion. I believe he understands why- not just tactically, but strategically in the face of political doubts. If we win a decisive engagement without any of the skills the Baron is offering, it will only reinforce the idea that we don’t need that training. “So…he’s not interested in making the army professional…”

Alexander stares at me, trying to follow my mind, and then sighs. “It’s not about that. A call for
reinforcements indicates that Howe is either preparing for an attack or a retreat, and considering he’s awaiting his change of command...it’s almost certainly the latter. This is an opportunity we shouldn’t waste.”

An opportunity to attack an army in retreat at a time when Washington is under a great deal of pressure for a victory, but, “It’s also a risk to engage them as we are now…I mean, we’re half-dissolved, under-supplied, and we haven’t trained under the Baron’s instruction- as we’d planned…”

Alex’s brows crease and he shakes his head. “This is more important than proving a point about military discipline.”

“I’m only saying, if the attack fails, we may lose what army we have left. If it succeeds, it will only prove that our current tactics are sufficient.”

“Washington is aware of that- as are the Major Generals, which is why he has had to be neutral. Besides- even if it proves our current tactics are sufficient, so long as we make the attack before Lee returns to camp, it only proves that to be so under Washington’s leadership. The General’s position would be secure in either case.”

“So long as we succeed.”

He nods. “So long as we succeed.”

I let my head fall back in understanding. “That’s why Steuben wanted to discuss Trenton…” I say. “Washington can’t press the attack forward without support from his generals, and supporting the attack makes it look like Steuben isn’t interested in the fame he could have by training the army. It just doesn’t explain why His Excellency dropped the subject as soon as you came inside…”

Alex blinks at me, considering. “Yes, well...I asked him for a command and he thinks it a presumption, so-”

“Hamilton!” the General’s voice precedes him and he steps back into the room. “What are you doing? Do I wait for you now?”

“Coming, sir. My apologies.”

The General looks at me, and I expect my own share of chiding for detaining him. Instead, “Laurens-I cannot give you a lot of time on this...drill project,” he says. He doesn’t need to explain why. If he plans to convince his counselors that we are ready to make an attack on Howe’s retreat, he’ll need to demonstrate that the army can be quickly prepared. “Will seven days be enough?”

“We’ll be ready in six,” I say, “…once the order is signed.”

THE GENERAL’S STAFF always tries to sit down for supper after our work comes to a reasonable stop. We set everything aside to break bread as a family. When His Excellency finally emerges from his personal office, Hamilton in tow, he’s wearing his cloak. Even Harrison seems confused when they make for the front door. I raise a brow at Alex, but he returns my look with one that says he doesn’t have time to explain but that I probably know what this is about.

As Washington’s personal guards convey them out into the fading daylight I’m left to explain that the General was considering the possibility of making an attack on Howe’s retreat. Washington will probably be out all night, seeking the counsel of his subordinate generals. Tench is very interested in the news, but I’m too exhausted to entertain him with speculation.
I had hoped to have the orders for Steuben’s model company at least dispatched tonight but...it grows late and the General won’t see it tonight. In my impatience, I’ve written out the order when Martha Washington arrives at headquarters. She comes into the office with her coat and gloves still on and walks to my desk.

I stand politely.

“As my husband is occupied, would you accompany me to Lady Greene’s quarters in camp-” then as an afterthought, “have you eaten?”

“No, ma’am.”

“Perfect.” She holds out her arm for me, and I know not to refuse.

THE POLITICS OF WAR are dangerous and irritating. They turn familiar men- officers I have seen shrouded in honor on hazy battlefields- into monsters with faces I wouldn’t recognize on a clear day. I’ve seen political masks on my friends before, but on professionals like Joseph Reed, Nathaniel Folsom, and Francis Dana, the performance is dubious. I don’t trust the motive underneath, and Lady Greene’s dinners are always a masquerade. As a gentleman, I would shield the ladies of camp from interacting with politics, but as they seem deft at it and I have no desire to do the work myself, I stand back and observe.

As we walk, Martha talks about Caty- an ongoing ‘affair’ in which General Greene’s wife likes to flirt with Wayne and cause discord between the brother generals. Knowing Caty, I’m sure her ‘flirting’ has more to do with manipulating Wayne’s position than inciting actual jealousy.

Caty’s dinner holds all the normal conventions- the pleasantries, the proper dinner conversation, the wine and meat, and then dancing- as much dignity as camp can offer. There are more women in this one room than I’ve seen all winter, and as I pass around the room and give dances as requested, I gather the latest news. Caty is preparing her play: contacting a theater group. It seems that Washington has decided on Cato. Caty and Martha are promoting the plan to conduct drill among the wives, propping up Steuben’s capabilities to raise the men’s expectations of how professional the army can become so that they’ll support the effort to train them.

The rumors ongoing around me are even more boring than the Allemande.

“I’m told you’re General Washington’s new man,” a voice says by my shoulder as everyone claps politely for the musicians. I turn to a petite blonde woman with sharp eyes and a sort of tilt in her features. She offers up a hand for me to kiss, “Catherine Livingston,” she says. “Though my friends call me Kitty- as I hope you will.”

Her charming smile is almost enough to excuse her presumption- if I minded that sort of thing. It’s unusual for a woman to be so bold and introduce herself without a man to make the introduction. It breaks convention, but Kitty Livingston comes from a family that should’ve had no reason to pay attention to Alexander Hamilton. Convention may be optional for her.

She’s not as beautiful as I imagined when Alex gushed over her, but I suppose that never mattered. I ask her to dance and it becomes quickly apparent that she’s attempting to recruit me to write letters about the happenings in camp. I can appreciate her interest, and her flirtatious method is transparent enough to be forgiven, but I imagine after months correspondence, I might begin to believe her act, and I’m sure I would not be the first of her victims.
As we talk, I can see why Alex fell- the promise of unseen depths, the possibility of something in those depths matching his own. I also know why that promise was broken. With the hopeful looks being cast on our dance by the Livingston family- with my last name, I know why people stare…

The only eyes that surprise me are my friend’s- Caty Greene. She’s glaring daggers, so I bade Kitty a polite goodbye and make my way across the room to ask, “What’s wrong?”

She shrugs me away with a dismissive hand, but I catch it between my own.

I have two sisters and a wife. I recognize that look. “I have no interest in Kitty…” I say, restraining a laugh that she’d even believe such a thing.

But, she doesn’t seem to share my amusement, “Hamilton has a new lover, and she’s the ideal partner for your retaliation.”

I understand her concern, but I’m hurt she would think such a thing, “Alex is seeing a 'taken woman'. I'm not losing him to his new lover anytime soon.” I glance at the woman in question, and assure her, “Kitty is yours.”

But, Caty snorts at that. “Kitty is Kitty’s. It’s everyone else who belongs to her until she decides.”

Someone who demands a man prove his trust and loyalty in a dozen ways before extending their own. “I recognize the type,” I say.

But, “Even Alex,” Caty says, “for someone who guards his heart so jealously, he gave it away like a fool for her.”

I’m skeptical of that and I think she’s being unfairly cruel. “If he gave it away, there was a reason he believed doing so was safe.”

She nods at that, “Oh, I agree, but he’s messier than you give him credit for.”

I glance at her.

“Theirs was a relationship of necessity,” she says, seeing my interest. “Alex would come to her when he needed a dispensary of his problems and she relied on him for the same. They clung to one another in their crises, but that’s not love- love is that but...also the mundane. The good morning and ‘how was your day’. The inside-jokes and favorite books. Love is both- and it must be both.”

I try to imagine Alexander relying on the woman I just met to keep him. I’m not sure I believe he could. I don’t believe he would ever fully trust her, though he may have wanted to- and believed he did. As much as I love my friend, if I’ve gained anything from our disagreements over the Baron von Steuben, it’s the knowledge that Alex is easily taken in by the mask of charisma and the offer of understanding.

“Kitty left because they never truly became that most important thing,” Caty says, “friends.”

She’s giving me a small, knowing look, and I feel myself blush. I think- Alex is a master at the mundane forms of intimacy. If Kitty never had that with him, she must have refused when he offered. If they were never friends, she chose not to be.

ALEXANDER IS ALREADY ASLEEP as I come upstairs to the attic room where our things have been moved. He’s always preferred to sleep on the outside, but he’s left space for me, so I assume he
doesn’t want to be woken, and I move about carefully as I pull the covers back and climb into bed.

I keep myself up for nearly an hour with restless thoughts, and I’m somewhere in the ether below consciousness when a shifting on the bed rouses me. It takes effort to open my eyes, but when the mattress dips, I realize Alex is trying to crawl past me and I sit up, pulling in my legs.

He gives an apology and moves off the mattress to sit on the floor beside the pallet. He wipes at his face with his sleeves then stares into the darkness of the attic room. I consider rolling back over and giving him privacy for...whatever considerations he’s making, but his shoulders are hunched and I don’t like it. “Nightmare?”

He shakes away the haze and turns to me. “...You got in late,” he says. “Where were you?”

I frown at the deflection. “The General’s wife wanted an escort to Caty’s dinner tonight.”

“Caty’s dinner. You were back early then.”

I reach down and fix the blankets, scooting over to leave the outside of the pallet open for him. “I wasn’t interested in the conversation. Parties aren’t as much fun without you there to make a fool of yourself.”

It’s not as if he’d be in any mood for attending a party- as he’s been recently.

He turns and looks at me over his shoulder then, and as if he can see my thoughts, crawls up onto the bed like a demonstration that his withdrawn state does not include me. I lift his chin to put a small, comforting kiss on his mouth, but he pulls away hard.

“Kitty was there.”

I’m not sure why I say that, but it just draws him to laugh and push me down to the mattress. “If Kitty and Caty were both there, I assume you heard a lot about me…”

I huff, grabbing the arm against my chest. “Nothing surprising.” I lie, but he raises his brows, and I want to tell him. I’m not sure how I expected him to react to hearing Kitty’s name. He’s never blushed about his own heartbreak over her, but he’s disarmingly detached now.

“...Actually, Caty had an interesting theory of what went wrong,” but you mustn’t tell him- she knew I would. I tug him down to the mattress and prop myself up on one elbow. “Essentially, you burned too hot too fast and Kitty encouraged it...”

“Well, I promise I can burn slow,” he says. Too slow, I think, and he opens his arms in demonstration, letting his shirt come open and his hair fall loose over his shoulders, “here I am, a phoenix for you.”

“More like a peacock,” I say. He puts on an offended face and I laugh as I should, but Alex peacocks for the whole world and in reality, he’s totally stopped in the last few weeks. It’s unsettling. Whatever’s woken him up tonight- I know his mind is not easy. He should know he can seek comfort here, share the crisis with his friend, but he doesn’t seem to have the words. He closes his eyes and lets out a low breath.

Between us, he’s always been more inclined to action, so I reach for him, putting a gentle hand on his chest just to weigh him down. He turns his face towards me, and I kiss him softly, moving my lips to his neck. He shivers and reaches up, catching my jaw. He pushes me back gently and leans up to kiss my cheek. “Later,” he says.
I accept it as a promise.

Then, he pushes back up and sits on the edge of the mattress for another moment, rubbing his face. I put a hand on his hip and he allows it, then he stands and grabs his coat and boots.

I sit up, questioning.

He doesn’t answer.

_I CANNOT MOVE. A weight clings to my limbs, pinning me slow and sanguine to the floor. I don’t remember falling. I cannot even lift my eyes to see from what the light above me is emanating, but it’s bright, blinding and hot. It grows closer and a figure comes into my fixed line of sight- a human shape with broad shoulders._

_A man- on fire._

_His flesh doesn’t burn, but the heat seems to drain his posture, lowering him further into my vision. I want to reach for him, help him stand as he slumps further. The flames are consuming him and I should be afraid, but I want to prop him over my own shoulders and lift him up..._

A ROUGH HAND on my side jostles me awake. Alexander is pushing me towards the other side of the pallet and half-conscious, I oblige, falling back into the blankets.

“You left the candle lit,” he scolds lightly, settling himself warm against my side. “You’re forming the Baron’s model company tomorrow and you were trying to stay awake?”

I can’t form words to say that I’d been waiting for him to come back to bed- or to understand what he’s saying. He chuckles at my incoherence and his arm falls over my chest, hand sliding casually into my collar to touch bare skin. It feels nice- his hands are warm. I’m ready to fall asleep in a soft embrace, but then I recall why I’d been waiting... _later._

Nice suddenly feels...nicer.

There’s a gentle tightness in my chest and I let the thrill of his fingertips encourage my hand to fall on his hip, pulling him in close by the waist. I think he exudes some strange luck, snagging this opportunity for privacy in our new sleeping arrangements. “We could...”

“Go to sleep?” he says, cutting me off. “Yes, let’s.”

_THE STRANGE DREAM_ comes back to me in parts while I go about my morning routine, shaving and tying up my hair. Before I can forget the emotion, the awe and oddity, I find the poetry book that Alex gave me and scrawl out the word _Apollo_ inside the cover and tuck it into my pocket.

I’ll find better words for it later.

As I return from Steuben’s exercises, the Marquis de Fleury is making a visit to headquarters and Alex translates. I’m not sure what they’re talking about in the General’s office, but as soon as he leaves, I hear the muffled shouting, and the door bolts shut.

I know why.
Alexander’s voice drifts through, calm and comforting. All the rage which one man cannot carry alone must go somewhere, and Alex sees the weakness and the responsibility which Washington cannot shoulder alone. I know how he has wanted to take on that burden. Alex carries his own life and never asks for help from anyone, and when he finds someone struggling, he comes along beside them and lets out a flood of compassion and strength to lift them up. Even His Excellency, General Washington.

I’m proud of my friend, but I wonder how long it will be until the General recognizes it as pity. After the Paoli massacre, after news of Conway’s letter, Mifflin’s treachery and Gates’s role in the plot—pity was the one thing forbidden in headquarters. It emphasizes weakness, implies that weakness has been seen, and the General despises it, but Alexander’s compassion is never void of that perceptiveness. He’s incapable of hiding it. I’m not surprised when their bickering takes on a new pitch, and Alexander’s voice raises in response.

I think about the man on fire in my dream—Washington’s rage. I love the General, but part of me would fear the anger I can hear in the office. If Washington was yelling at me like that, I believe I would flinch away, and in my dream, I was not afraid of the man on fire. I was afraid of my own paralysis.

I think Alexander’s rage could kill a thousand men—Achilles filling rivers with corpses—and I would only worry tenderly. I would be afraid I could do nothing to soothe him—afraid of watching him burn himself to ash. I fish the poem book from my trousers and quickly scribble, *Apollo, beloved.*

Across the table, Meade is wincing. General Washington’s temper against the French officers is no secret, but when I overhear something about them *luring us into a war under the pretense we would not be fighting it alone,* I wonder if it’s just another delay in our hopes for an alliance or a more serious refusal. I think Meade is more concerned about our friend’s service as the General’s verbal punching bag.

I jab my thumb towards the door and raise my brow.

“Last night, you said the General was planning an attack,” Meade explains. He dips his quill as if to pretend his attention is on his transcriptions, “I would assume someone had to tell him that he cannot expect the French to support him until orders arrive with an official alliance.”

I glance at the door, “And, it’s not like he could yell at the Marquis de Fleury…” or anyone else on staff for the connections we all flaunt. *I’m an island to him.*

Alex is yelling some response that doesn’t make it through the door. The shouting goes on and we strain to understand the General’s words but the sound is too muffled.

“Do you think he’ll cancel the attack?” I say.

“Hammy would know but…”

“He won’t be in any mood to talk,” I drop my bags at the desk and throw my leg over the bench to sit. As I do, a paper at my station catches my eye and I stop. The order to form Steuben’s model company is edited in Alex’s handwriting—messy as if he had been struggling to stay awake, and signed.

...a memory itches at the edge of my mind…

Alexander is in the other room taking on a tremendous weight, and I hadn’t even noticed him lifting this from me. A crushing guilt pins my hands on the table and I cannot make myself lift my pen.
Meade seems to see the pain flicker over my face, “He’s better at this than he used to be,” he says, jabbing a thumb towards the door, “doesn’t bottle up his anger, and I think it does him good to have a friend to confide it in.”

It’s an idyllic idea- to think Alexander could trust someone to carry him. When he storms out of the office without sparing us more than a perfunctory glance, I wish Meade was right.

I wish I was that friend.

I SPEND THE DAY distributing the order for Steuben’s model company and gathering his hundred officers to march. I have known his energy for the few weeks he has been with us, but forming a company of men with specialized drilling ability from over a hundred brigades across all of camp is a heavy task.

I doubt anyone else could have accomplished it.

Whatever personal discord exists between us, I admire him as a soldier- as a leader. Like General Washington, he doesn’t retain excessive control over his subordinates and the tempo of our work benefits. But unlike the General, he forgives quickly, and I never feel ashamed of small mistakes.

As we distribute the orders to form the Baron’s model company and make arrangements for their first period of instruction, the work is laborious and physically demanding. But, the Baron’s staff regularly attends his conditioning drills, so their bodies are accustomed to the exercise. They are dear fellows to one another, devoted like sons to the Baron, and under his tutelage, they thrive- often smiling while working, no matter what the task entails. They dote on each other and on him. No matter what concern I have about that, I cannot deny that the Baron is good at what he does...at what I want to do. If I should be entirely a soldier, I must accept- at least in this way, I should inevitably become more like him.

By the end of the day, one-hundred and fifty men have packed their belongings and massed outside the Potts house. They make a noisy din in the field behind our headquarters, digging makeshift campsites under the instruction of Steuben’s brigade inspectors and the frustrated direction of Gibbs’ guards. Their fires litter the yard as the sun goes down, and I catch a glimpse of General Washington in the second story window, watching our operation.

He says nothing about it at supper.

I’m in bed early when Alexander comes to our attic bedroom. His shoulders are low and eyes turned down, so I let him wash and unpack his bag in silence. He sits to write, so I try to busy myself with reading, but he isn’t focusing. His hand hasn’t moved for several minutes when I throw the covers back and press in behind him. I knead my hands into the crease of his neck where he’s tense, leaning to rest my lips in his hair. “You’re bothered...” I say.

He lifts his shoulders, half-heartedly trying to shrug away my affection.

I don’t let go, but it is enough for me to protest, “You find it so simple to say things you know will hurt me, but you cannot tell me when you are hurting?” I am, first and foremost, his friend. I want to help, and it’s not my own guilt that makes me say- “You should not have to put up with the General’s anger alone.”

He lets his shoulders sag slowly, so I’m sure I’ve hit the mark, but he says nothing. I continue my massaging and let him sit in silence, and slowly, he relaxes into my touch. I’m sure it’s nothing he’s
ready to say. But, I wouldn’t be foolish enough to expect otherwise, and as always, I forgive him for keeping his walls. They always come down when he’s ready. Just as mine do.

So, as he did for me when I couldn’t articulate my buzzing thoughts, I lean down to kiss at his jaw, seeking his mouth. It is a new feature of our friendship, a prominent piece of the terrain to navigate by. I can help him steer true, at least with me- find some anchor. He turns and allows it lazily, leaning back against me and letting my lips work over his, pulling gently.

I slide my hands down over his shoulders and into the wide collar of his shirt that always seems to be open. The planes of his chest aren’t forbidden territory anymore, so I trace over his skin until the shirt becomes restrictive, then lean back and grab the hem to pull it off. The stories Alex tells about his sexual exploits echo through me like a fantasy I never indulged, the nail marks on his back from his last lover, his skill in bed. I want a demonstration.

But, he grabs my wrist. “John…” he says, part-breathless and part-admonishing. “Just...not now.”

“We don’t have to do anything,” I say gently, then pull at the shirt again. When he glares, I explain, “You’re not dressed down to sleep.”

“Is there a reason you’re so eager for me to be?” He’s huffing, and I’m sure he’s just being petulant, but I’m not sure if we will fight nonetheless. It seems very possible until he pushes back from the desk, and tugs the shirt over his head, throwing me a look that says there, you win.

But, I don’t win because he has an obvious red mark inside his shoulder that mocks me, and I’m barely containing my bitterness, half-lying to say, “I don’t have some sort of motive for wanting you to rest.” He gives me a doubtful look, and I cannot restrain myself from saying. “But, it would certainly be better if you stayed through the night.”

He narrows his eyes, satisfied as if that’s all he’d wanted- my anger.

I decide he can have it. I’m frustrated, and he should know it. “Last night, you said ‘later,’ and then you woke me so purposefully when you returned, I thought that you wanted…” I stop myself, stumbling. “But you didn’t. It seems like now that I…” It’s too difficult to say I feel unwanted- that it tears me open in places I had finally healed. “I fear you’ve just made me a fool...for wanting this from you.”

“That’s...what you thought last night...” He understands quickly, but, “John, with how long I chased you-”

“You’re making it feel like that’s all this was! The chase.” It feels foolish to say and strange to complain. Alexander is using the same tactic that I had used to keep his attention for so long- drawing out my attack and keeping me invested in pursuing him long enough to exhaust me. But, I’ve already submitted to the alliance he wanted- I’m ready.

“You wanted me to-”

“I wanted you to come to me,” I say before he can take the words. “Not...whoever made that.” I touch his shoulder, pushing my thumb against the mark with distaste and he winces as if he’d forgotten about it. I don’t believe the act. I don’t believe he was oblivious last night either. He knew what I wanted and willfully withheld it and I don’t understand. “We are partners- you and I. We share our work and our bed...our books, our mornings, we eat together and I tie your hair for you and you help me shave...” I can hear my own voice cracking in muddled hurt. He is usually perceptive enough to draw out my thoughts clearly, but these insecurities aren’t clear to him, so I’ll have to paint the picture myself. “You don’t do that with him, and yet you do this?”
He's quiet, all his poetry and profundity are absent- shocked slow and accessible. He can probably feel my hand shaking against his collar, holding too tight, and I know he doesn’t think of the way he occupies his body in the same way as I do. He doesn’t care so much what he does with it, but he should know that I care and that he’s hurt me. Now, as if to make up for it, he leans in and kisses me softly. “I know it can be jarring,” he breathes, “the change in my pace. I’m adjusting too-”

I grab his wrist where his hand is touching my cheek. “I’m saying you don’t have to- I don’t need you to.”

A flicker of confusion crosses his face, and I realize his hesitation may not be for my sake. But, he seems to see that realization strike me and the idea of confirming it unnerves him. He has cultivated a reputation as a man who is ready for anything, especially this, and I think it may damage him to say ‘wait.’ So, he doesn’t.

He touches me.

His hands are rough and gentle, sliding behind my waist to pull me close. But, I put a hand to his chest and, “You said not now-”

“Several minutes ago.”

His hands find the bottom of my shirt and draw it up my back, and I squirm. “But what I said shouldn’t change-”

Alex’s face is impatient and angry, and he doesn’t wait for me to protest further, pulling my shirt over my head and pushing me down into the sheets, mouth over mine. He tries to crush my warnings with speed and force before they can crush him. And then- there’s no more space for words.

He moves like an overwhelming tide, and my skin burns in every place his fingers graze, scalding. I don’t think often about the body I inhabit. I notice hurt or hunger, the pains of exercise, but now- I’m infinitely aware of every place at which our bodies meet, bare skin and sweat.

When his hand finds its path into my breeches and closes around me, it’s not the first time I’ve been touched like this, but it’s also not clumsy like those times. He is fast but not rushing. Pushing me forward, my face falls into his throat and my hands clench for purchase at the skin of his back. Alex is urgent without the brutality I expect, quick and coordinated and compassionate, determined to witness my unraveling. I hold him like an anchor, hold him with me here at the point where all paths meet, where every choice is the same. Here. Always back to here.

He gentles me to a crest I’ve only ever associated with roughness or panic, and I clutch at him with nails digging in to make marks I can take satisfaction in. Cloaked over it all is a warm security as if not even the stars need to know our secret. Not even heaven can touch us here. It’s the shock of that which sweeps me over.

He pushes up onto an elbow and moves away.

I breathe in silence, alone.

It’s funny how simple desire can make a dark, dusty attic bedroom as warm and luxurious as a curtained alcove in a perfumed bath hall, pristine marble columns and steam hanging in the air. How simple and primitive, the tatters honest lust draws upon itself into a garment of assurance. I think how many generations have hidden their sins in rooms so very much like this. And as I stroke my fingertips up and down Alexander’s arm, I decide it’s a shame that such simple pleasure can cause so much grief outside these walls.
I should be satisfied, but I’m not sure I feel anything yet. I’m willing to wait, stretching out my limbs and feeling languid until Alex shifts beside me and gets up. Half of my protest had been that he doesn’t come to me for his satisfaction yet I’d done nothing for him.

He comes back with a washrag and I have to touch him, stroking over his arm as he wipes my stomach clean. “Do you want anything?” I say softly, letting my hands excite as much as they soothe. He is still hard and the skin under his naval is soft on my fingertips-

He hisses and pulls away, jittery as if I’d caught him in something embarrassing. “No, I’m fine…” he says and picks up his shirt, throwing it back on. He pulls back the chair he’d been writing at and sits with his back turned to me. I hadn’t seen the expression on his face, and I think that was intentional.

I let him have space, but I have a sense that it’s not space he needs but occupation, so I don’t let the silence last long. “We should go for a walk,” I say instead. “We can check the rotations of Gibbs’ patrols around headquarters.”

IN HINDSIGHT, THE NIGHT raised more questions than anything, but I don’t regret it. It is worse to not know what you do not know and I feel closer to understanding Alexander’s fears. As we walked through the forest along the Potts’ property, I assured him that he could talk to me about the General. It would have felt foolish not to press for Alexander’s trust with his scent all over me.

He stopped, looked at me honestly, and said something I will not soon forget. “He makes me doubt that it’s possible.” I had assumed he meant the war— the battles that we are fighting every day to keep the army together through our ill-supply and politics. But then he said, “To kill your demons without becoming one of them.”

Camp likes to joke about General Washington’s lack of progeny and the way that he treats our staff like the sons he doesn’t have. No one is subjected to more of that gossip than Alexander. I think Washington fears being unworthy as a father, and every time they fight, it only confirms that fear. Alexander is aware of it. I wish that I could do more to help Alex carry that burden, but I understand why I can’t.

General Washington must manage his relationship with me in a very particular way— just as he does with Lafayette. I don’t mind that he keeps a distance. For all my education in history and tactics, I never received formal training in military conduct, so all that I know about how to be a soldier comes from observation and imitation. In that sense, I am fortunate to have the General as an example to emulate. But, General Washington is not the sort of man one would ask for instruction— because he would give it and he should not. He doesn’t have time for such things.

The Baron von Steuben gives instruction whether he’s asked or not.

It’s March nineteenth, four days since Enslin’s drumming.

It’s the first meeting of Baron von Steuben’s model drill company.

I stand in the treeline between the Baron’s staff and General Washington’s, feeling like a bridge between two worlds. Most of the aides had too many tasks to make the hike up Gulph Road onto the parade hill, but I had insisted to Harrison that the event was important and we should make a proper show of our interest in it. My attendance barely counts for anything at this point. Where the Baron goes, I go.

So, Fitz and Hamilton have joined me and I’m glad for my friends’ company, but Alexander has
brought his letter box and papers to work on, and he’s removed himself from our viewing party to sit at the base of the treeline. I’m not sure whether it’s an indication that he doesn’t expect the Baron to need his services or that he is electing not to provide them, but I don’t like when he makes himself unsociable.

I don’t like the nagging feeling that it correlates to last night.

But, Alexander is not Francis. I will not lose him after such simple intimacy.

I try to focus instead on Fitzgerald as he talks about his most recent frustration with Conway. We passed by the Brigadier’s former headquarters as we walked to the parade grounds and he recalled a letter that he’d filed from Conway in Albany, complaining about his new desk job. I’m glad to hear about any of our former Inspector General’s unhappiness, but I understand why Fitz takes offense to the things people say about Irish officers because of Conway.

“The world will forget about Conway after the Baron’s appointment is made official,” I say. “The post of Inspector General may actually have some purpose.”

Fitz gives me a skeptical look, but claps a hand against my shoulder. He turns his attention to the mass of men standing around in a gaggle and awaiting the Baron’s arrival. As Steuben rides up the hill with Vogel and Duponceau at his sides, Major Fish draws them up into two ranks, and they crane their necks to catch a glimpse of the portly Prussian. Most saw him as we made rounds around camp, not entirely sure as to who he was or what he wanted from them.

They will find out today.

For his own part, the Baron dressed up. It makes a stark juxtaposition- the Old World against the New. The immaculately-dressed, well-fed, and bejewelled German nobleman looks as one would expect of a professional soldier, a hat of black beaver, a bicorn over queued and powdered hair, dark blue cloak, knee riding boots and exerzierstock gripped in his hand. Opposite him, representing nearly every state in our union, dressed in a hodgepodge of tattered clothing, hats and coats of every description, and gaunt from a winter of ill-supply, our men look like they’ve travelled far and seen a lot.

As the Baron dismounts and observes them, he turns to Duponceau. I cannot hear what they’re discussing, but it’s immediately clear that language will be an issue...

“How do you expect this to go?” Fitz says, leaving his hand at my shoulder as if for support.

The intent of our operation was to instill a sense of responsibility in the officer corps. It’s why we had selected junior officers rather than sergeants to learn the *New Regulations*. The Baron explained it best that, “When a commander can trust his subordinates to manage the training and conduct of their own men, he can confidently focus on strategy,” I say. “It’s the reason we have been holding our exercises. We will learn here whether it is possible- to teach any volunteer to be a soldier.” I have many reasons to be interested in the question.

Fitz stuffs his hands in his pockets and pulls out a tin of tobacco he’s been saving for several days. “And, you’re putting your money on a man who was born into it?”

He’s casual and dismissive and I understand why- making officers drill like infantrymen seems strange, and my distrust of the Baron was well-known among the family, but “He knows the most efficient way to simulate professional battle- seeing as he’s conducted it as no one else in this army.” I recall the Baron’s stories of Kuersdorf, Hülsen, Liegnitz and Torgau- of columns of men wheeling into position and cutting down regiments in neat lines.
“So, you believe his stories now?” Fitz smirks, sounding more curious than smug.

I don’t answer that. Instead, “Experience under fire lessens the mystique of combat,” I say. “And our men have plenty of experience with fire, but to teach them a new form of maneuver, we need him. We’re asking them to do something they’re not fit enough for, something they should fear— stand firm and march into their guns. We’ve done it before because strong leadership can assuage fear, and the unwillingness of the individual soldier to violate the respect and trust of his peers can overcome fatigue. But coordinated maneuver requires discipline— practice.”

Steuben’s party has joined us, and I can feel the Baron’s approval on my back and find it flattering in an unfamiliar way. He doesn’t necessarily understand everything I’m saying, but I could hear Duponceau translating while I spoke, and the Baron is always ready to interject his own eloquence, “We are training men to kill with honor. A soldier must be prepared for that ultimate test with pride and a readiness to obey orders instantly. He must know how to keep his weapons in pristine condition and do so reflexively— they must be serviceable at a moment’s notice. His uniform must be neat and well-fitting. He must be able to move in it easily, and must look the part of a leader in it, must always instill confidence in his men by his own appearance. When he looks in a mirror, he should see a soldier— a being radically different from the civilian he’d once been.”

“If that’s the goal, you’ve picked the most difficult class to teach... officers.”

I’m glad to hear Alex join the conversation, but I’m distracted by the voices of the men gathered to drill. Duponceau was attempting to translate what the Baron had just said to Fitz and Alex, but patches of the men are holding their own conversations and ignoring him. They’re discussing the drumming ceremony as the first place they’d seen the Baron in person, laughing at the desperation that must have driven Enslin to prey on Monhort. Someone jokes that he must have gotten the idea from Steuben when his staff paraded into camp. I think they assume, because the Baron doesn’t understand English, he doesn’t know what a “fop” is.

It strikes me then, an invasive thought I had ignored and repressed. What am I doing here? What is the Baron doing here? Why are we working so hard to serve an army that hates us?

Then, “Did any of you read the orders which summoned you here?” Alex’s voice is loud and cutting.

Duponceau steps aside, and I turn to his attention— as do the officers who had gathered to gossip. As they understand his question, they all nod and confirm that they had.

Then he says, “So, step forward if you are wearing your insignia or brought your rifle.”

The order had specified not to, and a few faces blanch as if the men understand the scolding they are about to receive. As they step forward, they either draw themselves up in defiance of a young Lieutenant Colonel or shrink in front of a superior officer, and I appreciate Alexander’s initiative, but I do wonder— if I had stepped forward to make the correction, would anyone see me as an authority? A few of them are Captains, but desertions over the winter mean many are Lieutenants, and though my rank is far above theirs, they are officers of the Line. I’m a ‘Lieutenant Colonel’ who has never had a command. To them, I’m a glorified secretary— if they knew me as a sodomite too, they’d line up to break my sword over my head. They’d do it with glee and talk about me and my family name for generations...

Alex had grabbed the closest Captain that stepped forward with a smug complacency, and he’s holding him by the collar towards his peers. “You think you’re different from any of these men because you’re a Captain? You’re better than everyone here?”
“No- but we all agree, they were already attached to our uniforms and-”

“And you chose not to remove them.” Alexander is not allowing argument, and I can only smirk at how the hand that’s gripping his collar was around my cock last night. “You chose that- woke up and consciously made the decision to ignore a very clear instruction because it was inconvenient. Did we muster too early for you to remove them?”

“No, I-”

“So, here’s my understanding: you knew to come without ranks. You knew the uniform and the muster time and you chose to ignore the order because it didn’t seem important to arrive in the uniform you were requested in.”

“No, sir, I-”

Alex doesn’t give the man the chance to speak. “If you cannot obey instruction, how can you expect to give it? Drill is precision- instant obedience. If you cannot wear a uniform as ordered, you’re not fit to be a soldier- much less lead them.”

He looks out over the line of men who had stepped forward. Each of them had gone rigid in their posture, falling into perfect positions of attention, but I’ve heard Alex rage like this and I know what’s coming when he says, “Leave! You will not waste the Baron’s time.”

As the men begin fumbling backwards into the crowd, Duponceau is quickly translating what’s happened to the Baron and he tells me to make the order for those men to send their First Sergeants for the instruction. I agree with his judgment and obey, shouting the order after the dismissed Captains.

As they leave, I realize how tactful the decision was from Steuben, reinforcing Alexander’s authority and agreeing with his judgment while salvaging the plan of instruction. I know the Baron prefers that officers manage the conduct of drill, but he would not dismiss Alexander’s judgment and the enlisted men will benefit from seeing men of their own ranks elevated to a place beside Lieutenants and Captains.

I follow Alexander as he turns on his heel and huffs his way back to his tree. It becomes quickly apparent that his anger was not a production and the officers’ disobedience truly has him enraged. He’s gathering up his papers when I put a hand on his back, leaning close over his ear to lower my voice, “It’s always enthralling to see you like that.”

A small, satisfying tremor goes through his fingers as he squares away his papers and stands. I think he’s affected by my flirtation, but my pleasure is sapped away as he packs his letterbox.

“You’re leaving?”

He doesn’t say anything, looking out over the Baron’s staff as they begin trying to translate basic commands. It would be comedic if the men who remained to drill were not so desperate to perform the Baron’s commands. It makes their struggles pitiable, and Alex is susceptible to that emotion as ever. He frowns. “Good luck,” he says. “With...whatever this is.”

He extricates himself as if his part in this operation is complete, setting off down the hill towards headquarters.

I wish he wouldn’t leave.
THAT NIGHT, I give my report to General Washington and explain our plan of instruction for the
next six days. The Baron has compressed a basic form of maneuver to teach, stripped of every
nonessential movement, every element that does not have a practical purpose, and complete with
ditties to assist the men in memorization. Once the model company has mastered each step, they will
disband and become the drill sergeants of their own companies. The Baron will give inspections
throughout the following weeks as they teach his Regulations.

When I’ve finished my report, perhaps as a show of his support- or more likely, to remind me of my
time constraint, Washington writes an order. Without making a single reference to Conway, he
announces the imminent appointment of a new inspector general. That news will travel, and the
political ramifications of acting with that much authority will be upon us quickly. We will need
something to show for it before any judgments can be made of the decision.

But, I believe in it. I believe in the Baron’s skill.

Just as Alex had taught me, the Baron pulled aside a squad of twenty men to demonstrate each
movement, starting at the most basic “position of a soldier”, teaching them how to hold their hands at
their sides, push their shoulders back, and press their chests out. His staff moved through their ranks
and corrected each man, Duponceau and his slim boyishness, Vogel and his delicate graceful
movements, Ternant and Ponthiers, all adjusting small details until our gruff soldiers stood in perfect
posture. The Baron moved on to aligning their ranks by the backs of their heels. Then, he had them
marching and increased the speed of our common step from sixty to seventy steps per minute- a
practice which will exploit our stamina.

By noon, our model company was performing wheels, and though that was a struggle and the Baron
had shouted his face red with commands, countermands, and curses, the men camped outside are
already bragging about it to a crowd of interested spectators. As all soldiers are, they’re connoisseurs
of cursing and the Baron’s outbursts only color their stories more vibrantly.

A grand parade of the whole army will be ready by spring, and our officer corps will be stronger
than ever...

I retire to the attic room and go to bed, exhausted and morose despite the hopeful attitude outside. I
shouldn’t have expected Alex to stay through the conduct of drill: he has tasks of his own, a prisoner
exchange for one of the most highly-respected generals in our army, concerns about Howe’s retreat
and quartermaster work to assist General Greene with. It wouldn’t have made sense for him to hear
my report about our drill company.

I...suppose I had wanted him to be interested. But, he doesn’t even come to bed. I never see the
marks I made on him- whatever claim I had imagined. It’s a low, searing hole in my chest, and I
strain to ignore it. Rationally, I know I have been scalded before, and the burn has yet to set in. Alex
hasn’t said anything cruel- hasn’t said anything at all.

But, silence stings just as much.

I FEEL RAW AND FOCUSED. Assisting Steuben with his model company leaves me no time to
dwell on the coiled knots, constricting my heart. I rise early to brief the Baron while he’s dressing.
As Vogel buttons his coat and fixes his hair, I clarify our plan for the day.

I ride to the field at his side and it is a stark contrast to the way I felt, working beneath Conway.
Despite our initial coldness, with the Baron, I’m respected. It’s the same for anyone under his
command. His staff proceed us to get accountability before we arrive. Our American officers banter
amongst themselves or make jeers at the ‘foppish foreigners’, and Steuben’s presence stifles that immediately. One look is enough to remind them that this is the man who leads our exercises.

Who has them sprinting to the treeline every time they misstep- then sprinting back again when they don’t move quickly enough for his liking.

I happily place myself at his side as if I can absorb some of that presence. I know his is a task General Washington is wholly interested in. You should assume, at any point in time, he wants stricter discipline. And, with muskets, discipline of movement is more essential than individual discipline.

It’s not the individual weapon that tears the enemy apart. It’s the volley of lead that hurdles across the field when all men maneuver into position and fire in tandem. But, the mere act of forming a line-of-battle involves a complex series of motions, moving to the deployment point in a column, then the battalions or regiments deploying in two lines, two or three ranks deep, alongside each other. The process can take hours to perform. And, that’s only initial deployment- changing positions to account for an attack on the flank or the rear- only an army that does precisely as it’s told without hesitation can execute such tactics.

With a large, untrained force such as ours, it’s impossible.

Worse- we are faced with a corps of officers who doubt the necessity of such tactics- or simply don’t want to use them. I can tell the Baron is convinced of our need for a true victory. He knows that we must win this war with an army that fights as the British do. But, most officers would disagree- either by distrust of foreign tactics or simply the responsibility it demands of them.

But, that’s why it’s so vital that they must command drill. When musket fire cuts down lines of the enemy, it’s impossible to know if your bullet hit. Only the man who gave the order to fire can truly know that his action caused any of those deaths- because his action caused all of those deaths. The formation itself is the weapon and the officer is the man who wields it.

It’s true that becoming soldiers should make men into radically different beings than who they were before, but to officers, that’s not necessarily a good thing- they were gentlemen before.

Now they will be killers.

LANGUAGE REMAINS AN ISSUE. It doesn’t help that Steuben’s temper runs thinner each day and leads to bouts of incomprehensible yelling- strings of German and Russian that I can’t translate. Every morning as the men arrive on the parade ground, they grouse about the cold and the dark, early hours. I don’t translate it, but the Baron has enough experience with soldiers to recognize their tone. He resents their attitude against attention to detail, hard work and precision, and I feel ashamed on behalf of our army. These men are the best we have to offer. And, of course they can drill. It was why they were selected. But what they learned under their brigade commanders varies, and how much they learned varies- some commanders like Wayne enforced training and others barely cared. Over half the men have used the Regulations of ’64, the rest know movements separate local militia outfits, and they all carry habits from whatever they used before. Repetition has driven those habits deep.

If the best drillers in our army struggle to learn new movements, the variation of what the men are drilling will delay our instruction. We can not afford that, and I can tell the worry weighs heavy on the Baron- just as it does on me. I can feel him losing confidence every day. For our company’s part,
I am glad they take his raging obscenities in stride, but when his fits of frustration finally dissolve into hysters after three days of struggling through basic formations, I can see him nearing a precipice.

I step towards the line, but a hand stops me, grabbing my sleeve.

It’s Major Fish, eyes turned and watching the Baron. I follow his gaze where a young Captain has stepped to Steuben’s side and removed his hat to bow. I don’t recognize him from our model company, but it’s not unusual for men from the ranks to sit spectator in the treeline to observe our foreign visitor’s work.

He’s making a scene. Though he looks like the sort of man who regularly tries to. Hair tied immaculately and powdered despite the shortages in camp, coat tailored tight to accentuate every line of his body. He walks as if he knows all eyes are on him and he’s reveling in that fact. He is attractive, and I know the Baron is not blind to those charms, but it’s the words the man is saying that seem to enthrall him the most.

He’s speaking German.

Steuben’s reaction to that does nothing to dissuade the amusement of the company. He grabs up the young Captain by the shoulders as if he’d like to kiss him on the spot, and he exclaims to me in French- he’s found his assistant for drill.

I’m not sure how to reply, caught between relief to be replaced in that role and concern about this stranger. He doesn’t know the Baron as I do- and I don’t know him. He seems like a character of concern in his own right, and I fear placing him and Steuben on the same task. They already have a certain gravity about themselves, a thread between them that seems to recognize its match- two men wandering in the woods and finding themselves on familiar a riverbank, caught and directed by the golden string of Fate. It’s strange to observe it from the outside.

The Baron isn’t intimidated in the least, pulling the boy into an embrace, and young captain has no compunctions, laughing gaily.

I wince and mutter to Fish, “He’s humiliating himself.”

But, Alex’s old friend doesn’t seem so concerned, hands sitting casually on his hips and leaning back to observe the ranks of our drill sergeants. “He’s endearing himself.”

CAPTAIN WALKER SPEAKS French and German. He’s trained with the militia units of New York and is familiar with four manuals of drill. It doesn’t take me long to perform a turnover with him, explaining the duties I had performed for the last three days. I give him my copy of the Baron’s Regulations, including all my personal notes in the margins, and I invite him to bring me any questions he has. I’ll continue to attend the training sessions with the model company until the men are prepared to teach their own companies, but from here on, my work will be watching over Walker, and I’m content in that.

As we talk, that there is something about his nature that puts me off, but I find it strange. Walker is a fine man- a gentleman. He is polite and attentive, smiles kindly and expresses gratitude freely. I have no reason to dislike him.

As he packs his bag with his new books, the Baron’s letter to his brigade commander, and all of my notes, I catch myself staring at his back and the way his coat stretches over his shoulderblades as he moves. Pushed-back and confident. He leaves the office, comfortable and pleased with this
opportunity—obviously aware of the connection he’d just made. I think he’s too young to have such posture and I suddenly understand my distaste. A familiar form of jealousy. The same reason I had thought I disliked Alexander at first. A feeling only recognizable now that it’s given a name—like learning where an accent is from and hearing it everywhere.

He is self-possessed.

Self-possessed in a way that makes me painfully aware of the barren pit in my chest where I should be. I wonder what it’s like to look down into oneself and to be confident you can see all you need to, to be sure that what you find will be good. It’s what Caty has been warning me of, encouraging me of, and offering her help with. The light needed to illuminate truth—the light within.

As if summoned by these thoughts, Steuben steps into his office, already wearing his travelling cloak, and riding boots. He stops when he sees me as if he’s found what he was looking for, and beckons me to follow as if I should know where we’re going.

I follow.

It’s not until we’re saddled and riding, halfway to headquarters that he explains, “You told me when I arrived here that General Washington respects men who speak candidly and report to him directly. I am going to do both and I hope you will give me your support.”

I nod.

It’s not until I find myself translating the Baron’s requests that I realize how far my faith has just taken me. The General expects me to represent him to the Baron and sift through what he hears about in the Inspector General department. Yet, here I am at Steuben’s discretion, translating, “The Baron implores you to prohibit the brigade commanders from conducting their own drills.”

And, it’s not the first time I’ve been direct with His Excellency—far from it. It’s not the wildest demand I’ve ever made, but these are not my demands and it is the coldest the General’s gaze has ever felt. Like needles of ice piercing and searching me.

I can’t tell if Washington wants my opinion on this matter or if it would even matter right now, but I agree. The Baron asked for my support, but he would not have needed to. I agree. “Until the new regulations are put in place and our drill sergeants are finished with training, allowing individual companies to conduct drill in their own way only reinforces methods we won’t be using. It takes us longer to train men who already know a manual with the wrong movements than it does to train men who don’t know any,” I say.

Washington says nothing to me, turning his eyes directly to the Baron, lips pressed into the thin line that means he’s considering it. The Baron nods grimly, a small assurance that he would not ask this if it was not absolutely necessary—that he is aware of how much he’s asking. We don’t speak of it with foreigners, but as he’s to be our Inspector General, the Baron knows how we have struggled to retain officers without pay for them—he knows their discontent and how poorly they will receive more restrictions on how they train their companies.

Washington reaches for his pen. He writes an order that I already know I’ll be up late copying, and all I feel is relief.

I expect the Baron to want my company for a debrief, but as we make for the door, the General calls out to me, “Laurens. Stay.”

I turn on my heel and the door clicks shut behind me. The General keeps his eyes down on the order
he writes, so quiet the sound echoes, uncomfortable.

“You have two days,” he says, “and I’ll be inspecting your company. The committee from Congress will want to attend- but I’m sure you’re accustomed to an audience.” He meets my eyes hard and holds the page out to me. A dozen orders are implicit, but most importantly, “Don’t waste our time.”

It’s a new sort of strictness from him- like I’ve seen him use when addressing my brothers on staff on matters of strategic importance.

I’m flattered as I take the page from his hand, the sharp thrill of being deemed capable.

I DECIDE THE ORDER will be distributed through Steuben’s brigade inspectors first thing tomorrow morning, and they will be charged with enforcing it. Once the Baron has a copy of the order, I retire to the attic room to transcribe the rest as the office is too noisy and I will be expected to attend our family dinner if I remain downstairs.

Thirteen copies for the brigades still stationed in camp during Lafayette and de Kalb’s absence, and beneath those orders, sixty-one fragmentary orders to distribute to their companies. It’s grueling work, but it always is, and it becomes increasingly easy with repetition.

I’m not sure how late it is when I hear my brothers’ feet stomping up the stairs and loud chatter on the floor below. Mister Boudinot has been a quiet guest during his preparations for Lee’s prisoner exchange, and he’s made my brothers quieter. But tonight, they’re noisy. Between that and the tactless discussions drifting up from the hallway, I assume our guest is out for the night- complaints of smells, jokes about Fitz’s most recent ill-luck, belching and a short scuffle that ends in Gibbs’ howling laughter and Harrison’s deep drawl chastising them all. The usual antics we indulge in the privacy of one another’s company.

I think the conversation is missing a few voices until- “I thought he’d be excited…” Tench says, voice hushed at the bottom of the stairway, “if he succeeds, he’ll be famous- all the glory of shifting the war in our favor.”

“If he succeeds,” Meade’s response is wary and gruff as if he doubts Tench’s choice of words. They’re talking by the door, probably not knowing that I’m inside. “And even then, I agree with his point. We already know how Clinton fights. It’s better if they appoint him than someone with a nose for blood like Grey…”

Tench is quiet for a long moment and I can hear speculation in his voice, “You’re upset we won’t make an attack.”

“…I feel bad for him. He’s been chafing here for months and he worked so hard to get reports about Howe’s retreat. If we make any attack, he should have a place in it-”

“But, it’s too late for that in any case- the General won’t be willing to argue with Lee over who has what command, and there won’t be time to coordinate anything before he arrives.”

“True…” Meade agrees, “if we did try to rush an attack, he’d be offended by our haste.”

I think they’re speaking of Alexander and his assignment to Lee’s exchange, so it feels wrong to listen without my presence being known. I stand and the floorboards creak under my feet. The voices outside stop. I open the door before they can investigate. “You’re talking about General Lee?” I say, leaning over the rail to the floor below.
They’re startled but unsurprised.

And, before either of them can answer, Alexander stomps up the stairs and he sees them on the second landing.

Meade turns his eyes down and quickly pivots past Tench into his bedroom. The motion is guilty and revealing but Alex doesn’t wait for explanation, glancing between our faces and trudging on, aggressively disinterested. His shoulder bumps mine as he passes me and pushes through our door.

I hold in the hallway, staring at the door, then turn and jog down the steps, confused and looking for answers, “You were talking about the exchange…”

“Mister Boudinot announced at dinner- his contact is arranging the meeting for April,” Tench says, and he frowns almost apologetic.

I understand before he needs to explain- Lee will not approve of our new tactics, convinced that our army will never be capable of drilling as the British regulars he commanded. The committee from Congress will see the Baron’s model company perform drill in two days, and Mister Reed will no doubt color General Lee’s expectations before he ever arrives in camp.

Tench drops his voice, ‘Of course, it means he will act as His Excellency’s second in any attack we can coordinate on Howe’s retreat, and he’ll have to share a big portion of his authority. We’re changing our plans accordingly,” he nods towards the room I share with Alex as if it’s a topic that I should discuss with him.

As he turns into his own room, I agree it is something Alex should confide in me. But, I fear he will press down all his disappointments until he finds himself at the bottom of a bottle again. I step into our room, ready to confront him, but...

He’s packing.

“Alex…” I say.

He grabs a shirt and a pair of trousers and folds them.

“Alexander.”

He isn’t ignoring me, glances over his shoulder to show his attention, but continues stuffing his bag.

“Where are you going?”

“Mission for the General,” he says simply. “An ambush on Clinton- should take about two weeks.”

I’m glad he’s actually telling me before he leaves, but it’s not enough. “That’s what they were talking about,” I say, stepping further into the room and stopping just behind him. “Something about appointing Clinton over General Grey?”

“Washington wasn’t interested in that argument,” he says dismissively, and his tone warns me not to probe. “I am leaving tonight.”

His tone confuses me, “I didn’t say you weren’t, but-” when I grab his shoulder and turn him around to face me, a dark bruise is splotched over his left eye as if he’s recently been punched. It had been too dark to see it in the hall, but my reading lamp makes it stand out like an ink stain on marble.

He throws off my hand and turns as if I might not see it. Another crisis he refuses to share with his
friend. But, how many times have I fought by his side? What battle could he possibly want to exclude from me?

“What happened?” I snap.

He shrugs and resumes packing as if only to have some occupation for his hands. It’s avoidant until—

“Just...a lovers’ spat. ‘s not important.”

But it is. It’s a battle I’m intimately invested in because- *I’m your lover*. I bite it back. It hurts too much to confirm how he’s scalding me, so I don’t. I won’t let him have that too.

He resumes his tempo, only giving a moment’s notice to my seething silence, and finishes packing quickly. When he pauses at the door and tries to meet my eyes, I’m interested in his excuses but I’m too upset to hear them and he seems to sense that. He slips out the door and it clicks shut quietly.

I hold in place for a moment, then drop onto the pallet we’ve shared. My eyes are hot with tears and I won’t allow myself to think about why. The room is just a dark and dusty attic. It always has been.

I WAS ALWAYS STUDIOUS as a boy- rather, I think I gave that impression because I often turned into the pages of books when the world around me was too loud.

Now, the silence smothers, and filling my head with words would be a good distraction. Unfortunately, I gifted my books to Alexander, and the only one I still claim for myself is a gift from him.

The first page of my Greek poetry still has my handwriting, “*Apollo, beloved…*” but beside my words Alex’s angular scrawl is uncharacteristically messy- as if he’d written over my verse when he was exhausted, as if he cannot help but insert himself into my thoughts even now- “*Apollo, beloved, is this glory? To shine for everyone but yourself.*”

I throw the booklet at the empty fireplace and hear it skid through the gritty ash. I curse it. The words still echoing. They’ll haunt me- two weeks away and I cannot avoid him.

I resign to it and consider the last week- the weeks to come. What Tench said, what Caty said...what Steuben’s said...

Alex has been distancing himself from sharing crises with me despite our friendship. I realize...he’s been distancing himself *because* of our friendship- the inside jokes and shared books, the work we share and way we rely on each other. It’s something he fears- a partnership he cannot relinquish, that could turn into love...into madness. *I’m not afraid of you...I’m afraid that I’m not.*

It seems so obvious, but I’ve been missing it- because it’s not what presently concerns him. There’s something else, and the fact that he isn’t confiding it in me should not be my concern.

He is conducting an ambush on General Clinton, but he’d worked hard to gather intelligence about Howe’s retreat then made the argument that General Clinton was preferable over General Grey…

He doesn’t want to make this attack….I believe I know why. I believe I know how to find him.

I RIDE OUT OF CAMP without thinking- without telling Harrison or Gibbs that I’m going. The route to General Greene’s camp is not well-marked and leaving Valley Forge at this hour sees me
moving through several patrol gates. I navigate around them. There isn’t time to waste if Alex has
already set out.

All the times that he had been busy, working with General Greene on our supply and finance
matters- there’s one man he would have been working with. Our paymaster and my spy- Major
Clark. I had nearly forgotten that he serves as an aide to General Greene, but as I pull up to Greene’s
headquarters, I’m sure he’s here.

It doesn’t take much searching, asking direction and pulling rank to find his cabin.

When he answers the door, I’d prepared a dozen questions about his reconnaissance surrounding
Howe’s retreat from Philadelphia. I’ve crafted them all to find Alexander’s involvement in
supporting a hasty ambush on their rear. I forget them all at once.

Clark’s shirt is unbuttoned down a chest that’s covered in bruises and scratches and I recognize
exactly what I’m looking at.

“So he told you…” he says.

He didn’t have to. A ‘lovers spat’. I don’t think. I grab his collar, throwing him sideways and
pursuing, pinning him into the log walls and pushing my elbow in deep. He wheezes for breath and I
feel my own come thin and short, heart pounding.

“No…” he huffs, “I just did, didn’t I?” I don’t need to confirm that. He knows his own trick and
when someone else uses it. I lift my elbow to get a better grip on his shirt and he closes his eyes.
“Are you here to hit me too?” His voice is wary as if the emotional blows hurt more than the
physical.

And I pause. It hadn’t occurred to me that Alexander may have started this, but I can recognize that
hurt… “What did he do?” I say.

Clark laughs, more of a wince. “This? He chose this a long time ago.”

But, the bruises are new and the match the fresh ones Alex had been wearing, so I’m confused.
“What do you mean?”

“ALEC THINKS HE’S MOST USEFUL when he can operate in the shadows,” Clark says. “And,
he pulled me in with him because I was useful to him…or, that’s what I figured when we started, but
maybe it was just for company. Hard to tell the difference.”

He’s resumed cleaning his scratches while I pick up his scattered papers, books and maps. I haven’t
apologized for attacking him- and I won’t, but helping him clean this mess feels like the right thing to
do as he talks. It feels like a story he’s been needing to tell- and I’m someone who’s needed to hear
it.

“It’s dirty work,” he says. “I could tell you thought so when we first met. It’s not the stuff for
gentlemen. Spywork,” he sends me a small wry smirk. “But, neither is war, and war requires it. Alec
taught me to see beauty in that necessity- in the shadows.” I think he can see how it unsettles me to
hear diminutive names for my friend on his tongue, but I don’t think he’s taking any cruel satisfaction
from it. “Because we have freedom, urgency, leniency. We make shit happen. Men like Greene and
Washington- they can command fires where they like and shed light to shape their stories, but us- we
have secrecy. We make the spark. Alec knows that. He taught me that. He use to respect that.”
There’s a tone of accusation in his voice and I’m not sure I like it, but I recognize Clark’s way of speaking. It’s not like his normal, straightforward drawl. He’s waxing poetic like Alex would- as if he’s trying to invoke some side of my friend that he knows better than I do.

I don’t think anyone knows Alex better than I do.

“Start at the beginning,” I say.

JOHN CLARK NEVER ASKED to be a spy. He’d been a typical lieutenant in the Line, commissioned into the same Pennsylvania rifle regiment where Mister McHenry had been serving as a surgeon. In the summer of ’76, as ink was drying in Congress and independence was becoming the name of our cause, I had been writing to my uncle for passage to America and trying to stifle all thoughts of Francis in Miss Manning’s arms. John Clark had been hurtling irrevocably into his Fate- into the shadows.

An inclination for gambling had left him tight on money and a talent for spotting details had left him suspicious when one of the officers of General Washington’s life guard, Thomas Hickey, had paid him with counterfeit bills. He hadn’t known anything about an assassination plot. He hadn’t known that Alexander Hamilton was tasked with interrogating anyone who held Thomas Hickey’s debts for any causes they might have against Washington’s life. He hadn’t known that trying to get his money back would place him on a list of suspects.

It turned out, the Sons of Liberty had direct contact with the counterfeiter, a prisoner by the name of Isaac Ketchem who, in exchange for a lighter sentence, had helped Alexander mark the locations from which those counterfeit bills were distributed. He couldn’t, however, recognize those bills or the paths they had taken from those supply points. To clear his own name, Clark offered to assist, helping Alex recognize the scents and textures of counterfeit bills where they’d spread throughout the city. Working together, the trail led them to the house of William Leary, a prominent merchant whose employee, James Mason, confirmed his involvement in the scheme against Washington’s life...under ‘intense’ interrogation.

I know what that means, and it’s difficult to imagine Alexander placing a knife against skin in exchange for words. *We will fight with honor and defend our position as professionals*…

It makes me wonder how long my friend has considered himself that. A professional.

Clark’s story reaches its culmination as he recollects Hickey’s death. Thousands of people turned out of their houses to see the spectacle, torches and gunfire like regiments of soldiers moving onto the Parade to witness an officer’s shame. After the hanging and James Mason’s imprisonment, Clark had received an invitation from General Washington’s staff to attend a party where he was offered a position as General Greene’s right hand. Alexander was there and he insisted that Clark accept the position, adamant that he wanted nothing to do with General Washington’s clout. He just wanted to lead his cannon platoon, set fire to lead and defend columns of soldiers in the field. A more exciting task than managing paperwork. As the party went on, our Commander in Chief arrived and gave a speech, crediting Clark with exposing the assassination plot and implicating the town Mayor, David Matthews- which he had known nothing about.

Alex never explained. He never spoke a word about Mayor Matthews. Mobs descended on Matthews’ hilltop estate, and Alexander was once again shadowed by the flames of torches.

Clark was promoted to Major. His work became complicated, missions of reconnaissance and intelligence-collection, requiring stealth and concealment, disguise and deception. He learned on the
job, made spy networks, wove webs of his own influence, and Alexander was always willing to help. Clark sent letters to General Greene from inside New York after it was captured, information to assist Washington’s campaign, and when he heard that Alexander had accepted the position as Washington’s aide, he sent letters to Alex at headquarters. He sought him out in Philadelphia and offered to create a spy ring there.

He embraced the role Fate had assigned him. He believed Alexander had embraced it too.

He believed Alexander when he’d sought out an intimate embrace.

He believes the story ends there.

And, I think perhaps it does, but the story doesn’t mean anything to me. I know Alex better—well enough to see why he hadn’t told me any of this. I can’t be the one to make you, destroy you. If that’s what will happen, don’t let it be me. I had been quiet to listen to Clark’s story, and I’d taken a seat on his bed, but now I stand. “Alex didn’t tell you about the ambush against Clinton, did he?” I say.

Clark’s brow knits, but I can see he knows what I’m referring to—he’s familiar with the mission Alex has been assigned.

“Who told you about it then?” I say. “Tallmadge?”

His confusion confirms it, “Why do you ask—”

“Because I think you want what’s best for him, and there’s a reason Alex didn’t tell you to find leads on Clinton.”

ALEXANDER IS ALREADY IN A BOAT, crossing the Schuylkill when Clark finds the place he claims they’d reconnoited a week prior. Our lover is a speck on the moon’s choppy reflection, a reflection of a reflection where the light breaks and shifts away like it doesn’t want to touch the water. I could curse the river for giving him a way to leave—how many times it’s killed him. Our very own Styx, he would come back to me immortal and damned, a permanent shade.

I run into the water, tripping clumsily until I’m up to my chest in the ice and my breath seizes.

Clark is in the woods, somewhere behind me, but I cannot hear his protests over my splashing—Alex’s voice is the only one I care about. “What the hell are you doing?” he shouts.

“I need to talk to you!”

“This isn’t a good time, John—”

“It can’t wait!”

I swim as the river deepens, feet kicking and occasionally finding large rocks that scrape my boots. They lift me briefly, but slide away as the current catches me. The melting snow raised the waterline into a flood, inky black in the dark, and I’m in it. Quickly, the rocks are too deep, too far away to stand. My cloak drags me down. Kicking more desperately tangles my feet. I realize I’m sinking only after I realize I’m out of breath.

I grab blindly at air—then at water…
Then a hand.

It’s not the first time Alex’s caught me like this, chest flat to wood and pulling me up to safety, but this time, I’m not at a dead hang dangling out of a tree, and I kick and struggle into the boat beside him, coughing and sputtering. It’s too dark to see his expression, but I can tell his mouth is open as he huffs for breath and says nothing- incredulous. I imagine he isn’t sure whether or not to be angry. I see him turn his face towards the woods where Clark is yelling, and that probably decides it.

“You’re not going to New York,” I say quickly, shivering.

“You’ve lost your mind!” he says, then, grabbing the oars because we’re moving quickly downstream- “What makes you think you can decide that?”

I struggle onto my knees and he has to brace against the side of the boat to keep it from tipping and dumping us both into the water. “I can’t,” I say, “but you can.” He’s already pushed the oars back into the water to slow the boat, shaking his head at me like I’m being ridiculous. But, I’m serious, “You can choose not to go-”

“I was ordered,” he says and starts paddling towards camp. “I told you I was going.”

“But you’re turning around- see?”

“To take you back,” he clips.

“I won’t get off without you.”

“Yes you will.”

“I won’t. I’ll drag you off.”

It’s a warning and a promise and he chuffs at it like he doubts me. It’s enough to spark all the frustration I’ve had with him for the last few weeks- him and all his secrets and silence, and I’m already soaked. I don’t care if the boat tips. I jump at him, quickly wrapping my arms around his shoulders so he can’t paddle and the boat shakes violently. I know how he fights- all his advantages are in getting low and going for his opponent’s legs, but he can’t do that in the boat and he’s too occupied with trying not to tip us to break my hold and throw me like he could. I want him to. “You said you weren’t afraid of me so c’mon!”

“I’m not!” he growls like he knows goading him and he won’t rise to it, and as if to make a show of matching my violence, “I’m not afraid to hurt you!”

“Then do it!”

He grits and squirms, furious that I called his bluff and half-defeated already. “We can’t make the attack- you know this!” he cries, “It’s either make the attack or capture Clinton!”

“Those are not the only options!” I wonder if that’s how the General presented the circumstances. He wanted the ambush on Clinton to go forward, and Alex would be susceptible to believing that lie. I know he hates to wait- hates inaction nearly as much as I hate silence. But, “We won’t be doing nothing,” I say, dropping my voice. He needs to see this isn’t a fight any of us should lose- least of all him. “We’ll be planning- training, preparing…” all things he loves to do- if he’s being honest with himself. “You don’t have to do this.”
He goes limp and breathes loudly. When it comes out as a heaving sigh, I take it as surrender and release his arms. After he doesn’t make a move to reach for the oars, I grab them, and he’s unnervingly quiet as I row us to shore where Clark is waiting and concerned.

“We know how Clinton fights and we have the opportunity to anticipate his tactics,” I say, reassuring. The bottom of the boat hits sand and Clark grabs the bow to tug us ashore. “They don’t know that we know he’s taking command and that will be vital when the weather thaws and we can make battle. Washington would be making a mistake to send you out and ruin that.”

“And if you don’t go- no one will,” Clark says behind my shoulder. It sounds more like a promise than reassurance, and I trust Clark will keep it. I know how he manages his sources and his intelligence is not without a bias. For all that he stands in the shadows, he has his strings to pull. With two trusted spymasters insisting that it will be more beneficial to keep Clinton in place, Washington will listen.

I hold out my hand to him and present the choice as clearly as I can. “So the question becomes- is this the glory you want…”

Alex’s brows are drawn up in some kind of agonized indecision.

I had gushed at the prospect of the fame he could have had if he’d ended the war by stealing the paymasters treasury in New Brunswick, but the subject had not been one he wanted to discuss. I understand it now. It’s not fame to be remembered for only our worst deeds- its infamy. Now, if he takes this mission, he will be immortal in the worst way. A spy or a thief. “You don’t…have to be the man whose reputation is dispensable…”

In the dark, I can see Alex swallow hard, and slowly, he takes my hand.

THERE’S A CELLAR UNDER the Pott’s house with ice, and I wrap a chunk of it in a towel and hold it to Alex’s bruised cheek while Clark speaks to Washington about a patrol he had been tracking in the vicinity of the Kennedy house. Their voices are muffled in the next room over, but I can hear that the General isn’t happy he wasn’t informed of this obstacle earlier.

“It was on my initial plan for the ambush…” Alex says quietly. “I dismissed it as avoidable, but...it would’ve been difficult.”

I smile and shake my head. Of course he’d devalue his own effort. He’s been pushing his knee against my thigh in a way I find ridiculously endearing- as if only to touch me, or perhaps in solidarity as I shiver in my soaked clothes. I nudge him back. “Is this glory...to shine for everyone but yourself…”

He blinks at his own words on my tongue- then teeters forward as if holding himself from launching at me in passion. He doesn’t have to anymore. I lean in kiss his lips quick and hard, and he breathes against my cheek as if he’s surprised by it. He shouldn’t be, and I’d like to show him that. We’re too exposed in the downstairs study, but once we’re in our room...

“He’s Excellency agreed to hold off on the-” Clark’s voice stops, and he stands frozen in the door, “...ambush.”

I jolt away, but there’s really no reason for it. Clark already knows as much as I know about him, and Alex sits unbothered, in fact- “That’s good news,” he says. “Though I guess I’m scrapping two weeks of planning. We should get started on arranging patrols for Howe’s retreat.”
To his credit, Clark recovers quickly. “Agreed,” he says, rigidly professional, “the more we know before Lee’s exchange, the more authority we can claim to direct our tactics.”

KISSING ALEXANDER seems to steal all the bones from his body. He’s so soft and languid in the sheets beneath me, it’s hard to tell if he’s just exhausted from a long day or indifferent to what I’m doing. He sighs breathlessly and gives moans and nuzzles that seem to show interest, but for all that I push, he gives. I want to touch him and feel him move under my hands, feel his pleasure under my fingertips, but while he’s impassive like this, it’s impossible to enjoy.

It calls on old ghosts- the feeling of being polluted, repulsive and needy. I know I have walls up around these scars, but the more I think about the effort of taking them down, the more exhausted I make myself. The whole matter has become so over-complicated, I’ve almost lost sight of why I enjoy his company and it’s my own fault.

I break the silence and complain- “You’re always talking about your prowess in bed, but whenever you are in mine, you want nothing- what am I supposed to think?” I say. Here, with our arms entwined, this has always been the place to say something honest, at once vulnerable and protected- “It's hard not to think this has to do with me.”

“The does!” he says. “Maybe I don’t want to be like that with you!” His hands frame my face, pushing my hair back from my eyes so he can see me. But, I don’t know what, if anything, I see in his face. It doesn’t matter. He sees my hurt and rears on himself, “I don’t mean it like that.”

“It’s fine,” I say. “Really, we don’t have to… I’m just-” I guess I’d assumed that Alex was restraining himself because of how I’d hesitated. It explained why he was so tidy when he stroked me off…but now… I doubt it was ever restraint. “I just thought you wanted me-”

“So much!” he says. “But, you’ve been right that I’ve been under a great deal of stress and… it makes me…” He looks down at himself as if ashamed of how his body is aroused- how he has been since the moment I laid next to him. I had thought it was his reaction to knowing we can be close. I try not to be disappointed that it isn’t. “When I’m restless like this, any intimacy will suffice and I don’t want just that…” he pushes his hands through my hair restlessly, and his nails feel unfairly nice on my scalp. “You’re not just for release.”

I let out a breath and drop my head to laugh at myself. For all that I worry, it can be so simple to soothe me.

I’ve always known he was sentimental, but he would deny it if I said so. Instead, I kiss his cheek and down his jaw to lay my head in the curve of his neck. It would be sufficient to say nothing, but I want him to know, “You wouldn’t. Even if you’re restless, you wouldn’t make me some toy you’d used and discarded.” He’s tense and breathing very slow and controlled, but it’s because it unnerves him to be seen. “People like you and me- we know we’re not right inside, so we pretend that we’re just…empty. When you spend so long trying to convince the world of something, the safest thing to do is convince yourself of it. But, you’re not empty. I’ve known empty people- really known one, and you’re not.”

I gave Francis my youth, my blind innocence, and it has not been easy to trust without that. So, I’m glad that Alex wants to be sure- to trust himself so I can trust him. I can wait for him to know his desire is genuine- that it has nothing to do with whatever urges he’s accustomed to. I’m content, tracing my fingers over his chest and finding the ridges of his ribs softening as he recovers his health.

He’s quiet for a long time, lying rigid and staring up at the ceiling. His protest comes weak, tight and
caged. “There’s too much- it...it would drown you.”

“Then you’ll pull me up,” I nuzzle my nose in the crease under his jaw. “Besides, I’ve given you my breath before. I don’t mind if you take the rest of it.”

He’s shaking so softly I don’t realize he’s crying until his tears hit my temple.

MAJOR CLARK IS IN THE OFFICE early the next morning as I come downstairs. He’s brought a couple of soldiers in red coats- that are definitely not British. From the way he and Alex are pushing them about and checking their clothes, I assume they’re prospective agents we’re about to send on a dangerous mission- dangerous and dishonorable.

“Is this the only coat you have?” Clark says to one of the boys, pushing a finger through a bullet hole in the collar and raising a brow at him.

“We didn’t have time to patch up the coats we took off the field,” the spy says.

“Take off the sash and find a cover without trim,” Alex says simply. “A sergeant wouldn’t be caught wearing his own musket holes- but maybe a private would.” He reaches down to untie the cloth himself while Clark takes the trifold and inspects it for whether he can remove the trim.

In the brief moment I watch them working together, it’s clear that this was what Clark had meant in saying Alex chose this. They are efficient, sending their agents out with red coats stuffed into travelling bags and orders in hand, and I would envy their partnership if Alex were not so rigid. When he works with me, our hands brush whenever possible, our words mingle and no task is our own. Alex has made his choice of how he will serve the army- a soldier rather than a spy.

But, he has also made another choice…

I’m standing in the doorway to the office for too long, and Alex’s eyes catch me staring. He leaves Clark’s side to stride over to me, standing a few inches too close and lifting his chin. Whatever crisis I caused last night seems to have passed, but I’m sure the storm is lingering. For now, he seems pleased to renew his reputation for gall, and I know that look. I know why he’s here and something warm and possessive in me growls in satisfaction. He holds there and I know he’ll never ask it from me with Clark in the room.

He’ll make it my choice.

So, I grin and poke at his cheek, teasing. He pretends to be annoyed, and tilts his face to me as if he’s obliging. I close the distance with a chuckle, giving him a dry kiss to answer his question.

Clark makes a gagging noise that’s just exaggerated enough to draw a laugh, and reassure me. We’ll be alright.

THE BARON’S MODEL DRILL COMPANY will perform it’s routine tomorrow, and that demand keeps our officers focused. Despite the crowd that’s gathered to watch, the Baron keeps his own theatrics subdued, and we move efficiently through their wheels, obliques, and shooting maneuvers.

I thank the Baron personally after the company has been dismissed, but he seems distracted. I raise my brows in concern but he claps a thick hand on my shoulder and says nothing, stepping away with
his back straight and cane in hand, Azor at his heels.

At my right, Captain Walker is standing with his arms folded over his chest protectively, scrutinizing. “He’s been like that all day,” he says. “Ever since this morning.”

Since Walker had taken up my duties as the Baron’s assistant and translator, he’s given the Baron his early morning briefs. He would have seen Steuben in his bedchamber, at his most vulnerable. “What do you think it is?” I say.

Walker shrugs his slender shoulders and pinches his lips together. “Ponceau and Vogel were talking about last night’s court-martial all morning, so perhaps that?”

“Court-martial?” I hadn’t been following any proceedings after Enslin’s drumming.

“Private Monhort,” Walker says. “The case turned up no fault against him, but it was…” he shakes his head, jaw clenched and clicking, “It was difficult to watch.”

I can imagine the show. For all the men had been whispering and jeering, they’ve all been itching for another spectacle and Caty’s play is too far away. Monhort must have been another sodomite on their stage.

I HAVE BECOME a familiar face to the Line, having walked at the Baron’s side during his inspections. The men are tense when I pass, prepared to have their faults reported if I spot them.

When I come to Colonel Malcolm’s regiment and dismount, the sergeants standing guard already know where I’m going and they point down the neat line of cabins. I stride towards Monhort’s dwelling- a small six-man structure, like any foot soldier’s. I had been assured that he was already inside, but when I knock, there’s no answer. I give time and knock again, and when on a third-louder attempt, I hear fumbling inside, I wave over the sergeant of the guard and he helps me dislodge the door.

The scene inside is enough to stagger me.

I recognize Lieutenant Fairclough as Enslin’s friend- the man that Alex and Major Burr had interviewed regarding Enslin’s testimony. Caty had told me she pitied this man, and I hadn’t understood why. Until now.

Lying sprawled on the floor, Fairclough is wheezing for air with a bright red friction mark around his neck. His eyes are wide and caught. Coiled in his lap is a rope- a noose, looped and conspicuous. I glance up at the ceiling and find one of the support beams that holds up the thrash roof has snapped in his haste.

We’d broken through the door too quickly for him to finish the job and, “It wasn’t just Enslin, was it?” I say, glancing around the cabin, one of the bunks has been cleaned out, all personal effects of Private Monhort are gone. I think Fairclough’s stunt may have been more of a distraction for Monhort’s desertion than the lament of a heartbroken man.

Fairclough doesn’t speak.

That’s his right, but the sergeants step past me and lift him by the arms. They look at me for instruction, and my mind is buzzing. I say the first thing that makes sense, “Take him to the Baron.” He’s the man who feels this most- a one-man performance under a thousand eyes. He knows how people talk, how that can drive a man to desperation, to destruction. He will understand the weight of
what’s happened and he will not crumble under it. The sergeants escort Fairclough to the edge of their regiment where they’ll wait for the roving patrol to pick him up.

I turn on my heel and step off for the Potts house, ignoring the trails and pushing through the trees. Briars and twigs scratch holes in my stockings. I pull off my cravat and coat as I walk, possibly losing them in the forest.

Madness is not for everyone, but for me, it’s the thunderbolt that dispells the clouds. And, it isn’t to the brilliancy of day that the sky opens but a clear and star-filled night. A boundless view to the heavens above.

Alexander is not at headquarters, but Meade says he will be at the Schuylkill bridge and that’s where I find him, collecting a report of the construction team’s progress. He drops his notes in surprise as I grab his arm and pull him into the forest. He stumbles along behind me, confused and questioning until I stop and turn into him, corralling him back until he collides softly with a tree. “John- what?”

I kiss him hard and he kisses back as if not to be outdone. It’s a rope releasing a sail out into the wind, the exhilarating drop of gaining speed.

Kissing him has always been reckless, sickly and sharp, drunk or devastating, but here, in the open, nothing but trees and the rustling of dead leaves to cover our action and sounds, I kiss him like he’s poison. His lips are hemlock and this philosophy might be just as ruinous but God can damn me, we are not wrong.

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