Love Never to be Forsworn

by Thevina

Summary

A young second lieutenant, Hector Mumford is quite adept at keeping his personal life — and preferences for his own sex — out of his life in the army. When the young Lord John Grey is brought into the regiment, Hector must decide whether or not to risk his commission, or risk missing out on having an intimate brother in arms.

Notes

Written for the 2010 lgbtfest. Prompt: Lord John Grey series, John/Hector, When John met Hector, anything about how their relationship started (including coming out scenarios if you wish), or the issues surrounding the need for secrecy - finding love and being gay in the 18th C British army. From either's POV.

I. Introductions

"What do you mean, you don't have the rations detail? Isn't that what you went to retrieve?"

Hector wasn't truly agitated, but he thought he'd heard Colonel Melton's voice coming down the corridor, and he wanted to appear the part.

"It is, but the quartermaster didn't have it prepared. Jones-Hodges is to blame."

Hector sighed. "If only that were a surprise."

"I'll have it to you by mid-morning tomorrow. Marfleet swore it would be ready."
There was a brisk rapping on the door, which stood ajar.

"Lieutenant? I'd like a word."

It was the Colonel.

"Of course, sir." Out of habit, he tugged down on his coat and gave the ensign a look of dismissal. The other gave him the briefest of sympathetic looks, saluted Melton, and then was gone. Hector stood behind his small desk, curiosity burning as he saw not just the colonel but also another very young man enter the office. The young man wasn't in uniform. Pride gleamed in his light eyes, framed by lashes any London woman would covet—as well as any of the more flamboyant denizens whose company Hector occasionally sought out near Billingsgate.

"Lieutenant, this is my brother, Lord John Grey. He's joining the regiment."

Hector tried mightily to suppress his surprise. John had crested puberty and then some, but he was only in the first blush of adulthood. Hector came around his desk to approach the brothers and shook John's proffered hand.

"Second Lieutenant Hector Mumford. Welcome to the forty-sixth," he said, valiantly ignoring the thrill of heat at their contact. Did John Grey have even the slightest cognizance of his own beauty? Presumably he was similar to his brother in one critical manner, and his youthful appetites would never include another man. "Have you a commission, then?" he asked, though John seemed too young.

"God, no," interjected Melton before John could reply. "The dowager countess would never permit such a thing until he's at least seventeen."

"I shall perform all duties allowed to me without hesitation," said John decisively, releasing Hector's hand.

"And I'll ensure that you're not sent out in front of a mad Scotsman with broadsword or rifle. Lieutenant, may I trouble you to show John around the compound? Take him under your wing, as it were? The men will doubtless assume I'll give him special treatment—"

"Which is absurd," muttered John under his breath, earning a brief scowl from his older brother.

"It would be a pleasure and an honour, sir," said Hector without a shred of insincerity. There was something in the proud carriage of the younger Grey and the way his glance had flickered over him that gave Hector pause. Might he? ... No. Surely that was wishful thinking on his part. He would need to keep his libidinous thoughts to himself and remain perfectly above board with the newest addition to the regiment. "Are you free now?" he continued.

"Yes, but I don't wish to interrupt you."

John's words were clipped, the accent as refined as his family's name. And yet, there was something softer about him; he wasn't as private and reserved as his older brother. Hector waved his arms expansively at the ramshackle desk and its piles of papers.

"What's there to interrupt?" he said, smiling widely at first John and then Colonel Melton. "Apparently there's been a foul up with the Quartermaster and I have it on good authority that the detail won't be rectified until tomorrow. The weather is fine, albeit brisk. Shall I return him to your office, sir?"

"That would be splendid. No later than five o'clock. Johnny—"
"I'll behave with absolute decorum," interrupted John, obviously indignant.

"Of that I have no doubt. Familiarise yourself with everything. We'll depart for the Highlands in just over a month."

John's expression was lively and inviting. God have mercy on him, but Hector wanted nothing more than to cradle the youth's head in his hands and smell the skin of his long neck.

"Lieutenant, I'm at your service," said John.

*If only you were…*

The afternoon passed by too quickly for Hector's liking. The younger Grey was far savvier about how the regiment functioned than any other new commissioned man he'd met. He was articulate, observant, cheerful, and to Hector's surprise, quite knowledgeable about the situation in the Highlands.

"Well done!" exclaimed Hector, overseeing John's brief practise at the artillery range. John only nodded his acknowledgement, but from the way he held Hector's gaze, his pride shone, muted like a winter sunrise. "You seem to know a lot about Scotland. Have you travelled there?" he hazarded, instantly regretful when John's expression hardened.

"Yes. I was sent— I lived in Glasgow for two years after my father's death."

"Oh. I am so sorry."

John stiffly nodded, busying himself with readying his rifle for another shot. "I'm glad that winter will be nearly over at the start of the campaign."

"As am I." Hector followed the less personal path of conversation like a hound loosed to spoor. "Parts of the countryside are quite beautiful, especially in the summer months. It's not all frigid winds, pissing rain and mud."

"Not exclusively."

A smile crept hesitantly to John's lips, and remained. Once again, Hector's breeches felt uncomfortably tight. He gestured to the rifle to turn John's attentions away from him and to snuff out his own inappropriate desires.

After escorting his charge to Colonel Melton at the appointed hour, Hector took his leave as quickly as possible without being rude and walked to his small room.

"Hector, Hector," he said to his reflection in the tiny looking glass above his washbasin. "You are absurd. Not only is he young, but he's your Colonel's younger brother. They *both* would consider you depraved for the thoughts you've had. Pull yourself together, man."

He engaged in some light callisthenics, hoping it would clear his mind. The exercises failed him in that regard. His next avenue was food, which ended up consisting of a disappointing fish pie and warm ale. There was nothing for it; only one environment existed where he could truly be himself, society's condemnation for his affections be damned. Soon enough he would be in the barbaric wilds of Scotland with only his own hand for sexual relief. Resigned, but allowing himself to anticipate an engaging evening, he cautiously made his way along Thames Street to the Pale Bloom.

The sound of men's laughter and tang of musk enveloped him as he was seen through the door. He breathed deeply and exhaled, smiling at the familiar scents. Once again, he was home. Buoyed by
the freedom granted in shedding the mask he constantly wore, he walked with a spring in his step to a table where several jugs of wine stood. Hector poured himself a generous helping, sampling it first. It was a fruity claret, quite pleasant and rich on his tongue.

"And who are you?" a coquettish brunette simpered at his elbow.

"Someone in search of a blond."

His would-be paramour pursed his lips, scowled, and then shrugged.

"Suit yourself. I'm Lady Sapphire if you change your mind. Oooooh!"

Long, warm fingers danced across the surface of Hector's ring, which had caught the light of a nearby lamp. "I think you were meant to spend time with me," Lady Sapphire went on, his voice lower in register than before. "Why stop with a sapphire on your finger when you could also have me—" he paused for effect, "on your arm?"

Hector arched an eyebrow and took another swallow of wine, more carefully evaluating his tempter. As though reading his mind, Lady Sapphire's demeanour shifted, his stance and air losing some of its femininity. The 'lady' had large dark eyes, glinting with promise, and as Hector continued to weigh his options, he sensed his own sea change. It probably was quite perverse to go in search of someone who looked like young John Grey. Lady Sapphire basked in Hector's attentive silence, standing in front of him in deliciously tight breeches and a well-fashioned shirt and jabot.

"Well, madam, you have quite convinced me to join your company." He held out his arm and Lady Sapphire took it by the elbow, a smug yet thankful look on his angular features.

"Let's sit in the parlour. It's getting too crowded here and I want to be close to you."

The latter was murmured as Lady Sapphire caressed Hector's jaw with soft fingertips.

"Your servant, madam."

Heat bloomed in the sloe-eyes and then Hector was swept away into the night.

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II. Innuendo

The regiment had been on the march for over a fortnight. There had been only three brawls, one man accused of stealing, and Hector had managed to lose his favourite pair of socks. All in all, not a bad start, though for a foot soldier, the value of a good pair of socks simply could not be overestimated.

"You're thinking about them again! Bloody hell, Mumford!"

"Piss off!" Hector made a rude gesture to Jones-Hodges. "I'll wallow in my grief until we get to a village of decent enough size to buy another pair."

"Another pair of what?"

John Grey had stopped by their campfire, looking quizzically at Hector. "If I may ask, sir."

"Sir indeed," Jones-Hodges scoffed, only an ensign himself. "Were I you I'd not encourage his airs."

"What airs?"

"Oh, you know." The stocky ensign turned his attentions away from Hector and patted the log he sat
"C'mere, Grey. Take yerself a seat here with we common folk of the forty-sixth."

"Common or no, I'd rather be closer to the fire. Sir?"

Hector saw John eyeing the spot nearer to him. "Of course!"

He poked at the fire as John accepted a proffered cup of whiskey from the ensign. Hector was always glad for John's company even though it stirred up discomfiting pleasures he tried to will away with only minimal success. It didn't help that young Grey seemed to find all kinds of legitimate ways to be near him, and that he cared about Hector's thoughts, his life as a soldier, even his personal likes and dislikes. John's lips pressed into a grimace as the alcohol went down.

"You'll need this to deal with Mumford's wailings about his socks." Jones-Hodges grinned, the dimple in his cheek offsetting the ugliness of a mouth missing several teeth.

"Your socks, sir?" John asked with a straight face.

"Yes, dear Grey, my favourite pair of woollen socks has vanished."

"Well, the perpetrator of such a crime as stealing socks must be brought to court-martial!

"Well said!" chortled Jones-Hodges. "And soon, because I've bloody well heard enough bellyaching about it."

"Still," John belched, excused himself, and continued on, "every good soldier ought to know how to knit, and how to darn his socks. Or uniform. So Hal said."

"A wise man, your brother," Hector acknowledged.

"Aye." Jones-Hodges lifted his flask in salute before another swig went down his gullet. "I've been under him two years and I'm still alive. I'm a piss-poor soldier, though, as I don't knit or anything requiring a needle. That's what a surgeon's for."

Hector watched John's face as he contemplated a reply, but was spared a response as the ensign went on.

"I seem to have left two and a kick with one of Wolcott's lads," he said, struggling to his feet. "I'll leave you two to discuss soldiering. I've cards to play."

Hector cheered him away. As soon as he was out of sight, John poured the rest of his cup's contents on the ground.

"That's vile," he stated emphatically.

"It gets the job done. If you find you're having to patch yourself together, you'll be grateful for anything to ease the pain." He could see John was seconds away from asking about his war wounds, so he quickly said, "But for most soldiers it's illness that will do you in. Not that you should be worrying about any of it. It is, however, all the more reason to have socks without holes."

"Indeed."

John moved his hand as though to pat him on the knee, then put it self-consciously back on his own thigh. Hector felt as though he were sliding down a slick gravel path, his feet unsteady and his crashing surrender inevitable. _If you're not to go mad, you must encourage John to spend time with another part of the regiment_, he berated himself.
"You've really taken to soldiering," Hector said, grateful for the cover of darkness and hubbub of men about their camp business around them.

"Sir?"

"Please— Grey, the only reason you're not an ensign, or even a lieutenant is your age. We're sitting around talking about my silly socks. At least call me by my surname. But feel free simply to call me Hector, as other men of my rank do, at least when at ease."

John seemed troubled, but then accepted Hector's suggestion.

"As you wish, sir— Hector."

"I am most definitely not Sir Hector."

Laughing softly, John asked, "Well, not Sir Hector, do you happen to have the makings for tea?"

"Of course!"

Hector busied himself at the task while John explained that since both his older brother and father had been career soldiers, he'd honestly never considered anything else.

"I see," mused Hector, who in rummaging through his duffel had discovered a not entirely stale tin of shortbreads, which he shared.

A few moments later, in a more intimate tone, John said, "Do you have someone… special to you in London? Or elsewhere? And please forgive me if I'm being impertinent."

"No, not at all. I should have said something earlier."

Hector berated himself for the unintended ambiguity of his response as he felt a subtle stiffness in John's demeanour. With the sudden bold clarity of a fireworks display he realised that John Grey was fishing for potentially quite sensitive information. He'd not asked if Hector had a woman, but someone.

"By that I mean that I should have said that you're free to speak with me about anything. My men will tell you, I'm an open book."

And you're a liar! he thought to himself, but Grey did somewhat ease his composure. If only this minuet of question and answer revealed that young Grey might welcome his advances… He railed at the injustice of being unable to speak plainly. Until he was certain beyond shred of doubt about John's true nature, he must advance with uttermost caution.

"To answer your question, no, I don't. I will admit that when I was seventeen, I had my heart broken for the first time." He gave only a fleeting thought to Gerald's wide fingers and how they felt gripping his own. John made a sympathetic noise and Hector trudged on. "I've had a few lovers since then, and one with whom my infatuation lasted several months, though that was two summers ago. To my tremendous surprise my state of affairs has changed of late. The situation is… delicate."

"Ah." John feigned comprehension, dunking his biscuit into the cup.

"And you?" Hector asked politely, as though the answer didn't have the potential to profoundly change his life in this moment.

The tea-soaked biscuit went into John's mouth and he rubbed the crumbs from his fingertips onto his
"Grey! There you are! Pritchard sent me to fetch you. He needs you to come make dressing-bandages."

John startled at the summons but quickly regained his composure.

"I'm sorry, si— Mumford. Sounds as though I'm needed at the surgeon's."

He scrambled to his feet, thanking Hector profusely for the tea and biscuits, saluted him, and jogged off after another of the camp boys. Hector was left alone with his unsettled thoughts. That night he slept fitfully, plagued by dreams of Gerald's merry eyes and clever mouth.

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He was both relieved and disappointed when he didn't see as much of John over the next week of the march. They were near Scotland now and the views were stunning or would have been, if Hector hadn't been running a fever. And vomiting up most of what little he kept down, excreting the remainder in an equally unpleasant manner. John found him in his tent with some others under Colonel Melton, though Hector had been quarantined, in a manner of speaking.

"Lieutenant!" John said, snapping a salute before he dropped his brisk deportment. "Hector, why don't you go see the surgeon? Get bled, perhaps?"

"It's just ague," Hector croaked. "It'll pass. Better to have it now than when we meet the rebels."

"Let me at least get you some tea with honey and brandy."

Through the haze of his discomfort and fever, Hector could tell John wanted to touch him, to care for him. He was moved by his concern, but was too exhausted from his thrice-damned illness on the march to properly acknowledge the gesture.

"I doubt there's any brandy about, or honey. I think I can stomach tea, with a bit of sugar. Maybe Barrowman has some flatbreads. He might take pity on me and share one I could soak in water."

John squatted and wrung out a cloth in a water basin near Hector's bedroll. Tenderly he wiped at Hector's heated face and along his throat, holding Hector's gaze throughout.

"Are you in any other discomfort? Do you have anything " John paused, and leaned closer. Hector could smell damp wool and a mingling of musk and rosewater. God, why had he come down with this now? "Anything… soiled? I'll have them washed for you," John continued.

Hector reached out and took John's hand. It was his declaration of intent, as forward as he dared be in their environment.

"In my pack there's two pair of under drawers. If you would be so kind… I'll find a way to repay "

"You won't make anything up to me," declared John in a hushed voice. His fingers subtly stroked Hector's, the pact now complete. But you will be my lover, his eyes said.

*Not until I'm well*, Hector vowed in silence.

"So! I'll fetch tea, and I know Hal has brandy." John was fully in his role of general regiment minion. He straightened out the blanket covering Hector and fixed his pale eyes on him. "You must get well
as soon as possible. For all concerned."

"Yes sir," said Hector, and then coughed.

The soft smile that flitted onto John's lips was enough to feebly rally Hector's desire. He was on the other side of his inconvenient malady, and now he had even more reason to be back to full health.

Two days later Hector felt like himself again, a welcome change. The air was bracing and the skies a crisp blue, rare and uplifting. With the surgeon's approval, he took a walk out into the countryside, his thoughts one-third on their approach to the Jacobites and two-thirds on John Grey. It wasn't an appropriate ratio, hence why he'd wanted to get away from the camp, even if only for part of the afternoon. John had made himself scarce since their unspoken admission, and to his own discredit, Hector had begun to wonder if the young man had changed his mind, or decided there was too much risk. Perhaps his expressive face had betrayed him. If only they were back in London, he could far more easily arrange for them to go out as friends did, to hear music, or go to the theatre. He could escort John to places where he would be among other men like him.

*He's only sixteen,* he reminded himself. *And yet deemed old enough to join the regiment, potentially get wounded and die,* a logical voice chimed in.

A vague noise caught his attention and he glanced around, his hand automatically going to his pistol. From the direction of the camp a figure was jogging toward him and his heart sank. He'd really hoped for a few more blessed moments of solitude. He saw the glint of fair hair and realised it was John. Uncertain of how their meeting would transpire, he stopped walking and allowed young Grey to continue at his fast pace. Hector could see the cannons off in the distance, taking their place at the end of the company, a good fifteen minutes' walk away. Here, at least, they would have privacy.

His heart began to pound in his chest, though whether out of anticipation or fear of a sudden cessation in John's affections, he couldn't begin to guess. John slowed his jog to a brisk walk as he completed his approach, his cheeks flushed from his run. Hector's heart soared when he saw John's expression, free and unassailable as a hawk swooping landward.

"Mumford," he said, breathing heavily. "Wolcott requests your presence for the four o'clock drill."

Hector felt his eyebrows rise. "Thank you for coming all the way out here to remind me, John— but I'd already planned to be there. You've taken unnecessary exercise to come and retrieve me."

John stood up straighter, collected himself, and took a deep breath.

"Wolcott did send me, but I must admit I had my own agenda." His eyes shone, a bright reflection of the brittle sky overhead. "Hector, I must ask you plain, and forgive my caution, or perhaps cowardice, of speaking with you so far away from camp."

*So here it comes,* Hector thought, and he licked his lips, a nervous trait.

"This person who broke your heart. Was it a woman?"

John had tried to keep his tone and face neutral, but Hector felt the depth of yearning reined in as taut as a readied bowstring. He knew well how risky that question was to ask, and gave his answer quickly.

"No." He paused for a moment to gauge John's reaction. He seemed relieved but still wary. "That is what you'd hoped to hear, isn't it?"

John nodded, his fingers fidgeting with a small tear in his coat. "And this delicate situation?"
He stepped closer so that they were only a foot or so apart. Hector had had enough of the dance; it was time to act decisively on instinct, to behave fearlessly like the soldier he was.

"It's you, John, who has so thoroughly captured my affection."

He reached out and took one of John's hands, clasping it in his own before placing the palm against his lips. When John didn't recoil, he knew that Grey felt the same. John's eyes grew wide, then heavy as Hector kissed across the narrow terrain of calluses and lines, breathing hotly on the fingers as he pulled them down to take the tip of an index finger into his mouth. John's moan caused Hector to be all too aware of his prick, swelling and heavy between his legs.

"I would share everything with you," he said, voice raspy with his desire, forcibly held in check.

"Would?" John's eyes had glazed over. He trailed his damp fingertips across Hector's cheek to his jaw.

"I will."

Hector roughly pulled John to him, pressing his mouth to the lips he'd obsessed over for weeks now. Their noses bumped and John laughed, allowing Hector to send his tongue into the wet heat of his mouth. John's kiss was awkward, but Hector didn't care. His tongue slid along John's, then he sucked on his lower lip, every action fuelled by the gasps and whimpering sounds escaping from John, now rutting against him.

"If only we were in London," Hector groaned at last, his fingers finally having found sweet skin under layers of wool and linen. "You could come to my room. I would bring you such pleasure. John, you have no idea how badly I want to know every inch of you."

"You will," said John through a gasp. "Hector, you must. I'll die if you don't!"

As Hector pressed against the tantalising steely bulge at John's groin, he had to agree.

"Before we're off in the wilds, we'll have a few days in Glasgow."

"Yes!" John's fair eyes lit up, his quick mind following Hector's train of thought as close as shadow. "We'll replenish supplies— I've heard Hal speak about it. But how can we… there's no privacy." His voice trailed off, intensity in his expression.

"I'll find a room for us. John, I promise I will." He kissed him soundly, sealing their illicit, desperate union with a hint of things to come.

A distant roll of drums brought them both back to the reality of their present situation. Hector let the tips of his fingers fan down to press against the swell of John's buttocks, nuzzling against the side of his neck.

"We must go back," he said.

"I know." John's voice was threaded with resignation. "It will seem like forever until I can do this again." Eyes blazing, he pressed his lips firmly to Hector's, then stepped away.

"But we will, and I'll make it memorable for you. I promise you that." He felt as though he'd run for leagues; Hector's heart beat an erratic tattoo in his chest. It was torture, but he forced himself to keep a modicum of distance, resting his hands on John's shoulders. "I'll find a way to get details to you. And while I hate having to hide my desire, men talk. Men on the march gossip, especially those who are malcontent even in the best of times. No one can know about your feelings."
"I know, dear Hector. I know." John's elegant face was troubled, but cleared as he shook his head, eyes cast downward. He lifted his head almost immediately, his expression and words determined. "Though you won't see it in my face, know how fiercely I want you."

Responsibility tugged at Hector, but he grasped at the remaining precious moments. He stepped close once more to kiss John, the foreknowledge that he would be able to know him intimately making the kiss sweeter.

"My dear," he said, brushing some golden strands that had escaped John's ribbon, "you know I'll have to treat you just as before. But you have my word that we'll be able to spend one glorious night together, alone and without causing suspicion."

The drumming had grown more insistent, so Hector caressed John's jaw with his thumb, kissed his cheek and drew away.

"Back to it, Grey. I'll be there as soon as I'm able at a fast walk."

"Yes, sir."

John saluted, fixed him with a look that could have melted iron, turned and began to sprint back to camp. As he watched John dash off, Hector tried to shake off his state of arousal. At least he could return at a slower pace. While he walked, he struck an agreement with himself that if he kept his thoughts firmly locked on his men and the logistics to do with their approach to Glasgow until bedtime, then and only then he would let his mind wander where it most wanted to roam: imagining John's naked body spread out before him like the carnal banquet he knew it would be.

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III. Intimates

Hector paced, his growing anticipating making him all the more nervous. For all of his planning, so many things could go wrong. If John was simply a scout and not the Colonel's younger brother, arranging their rendezvous would have been far easier than this. But even John had seemed surprised when he told Hector that Melton had stated they would take dinner together. Not just the two of them, but in the company of two Majors as well. This meant there were all kinds of ways in which his attempts to get away without question could go awry. For a moment Hector wished he were religious and could ask for assistance, for a safe and timely escape for John Grey so they could at last be together, skin to skin.

He went over to the bedside table and checked for the fourteenth or so time that his oil was there, as well as a flask of quality spirits. Being up north he'd paid for a strong Scottish whisky that would help John relax. Hector vividly remembered his first sexual encounter with another man. He hoped not to cause John too much pain, but the initial few moments of being penetrated had burned Hector like fire. It had changed eventually to pleasure, but discomfort and awkwardness had plagued that night. He desperately wanted to lead John straight to the places of sublime passion, though that seemed unrealistic.

Someone rapped on the door four times, and then jiggled the door handle.

"It's me! John!" came the frustrated voice as Hector fumbled with the key.

"You need to be more cautious," Hector chastised, letting John in before glancing into the empty, dark corridor behind him. He locked the door again and as soon as he turned around, John clung to him, his arms encircling his ribs.
"Kiss me," he demanded.

Hector did, plundering John's mouth to discover every flavour, every taste that John had. Amid nipping and sucking, John let out whimpers and needy noises that caused Hector's prick to strain against his breeches. He could feel a similar mound pressing against his own, causing him to kiss John all the more fiercely. Hector had lain awake many nights, imagining how John would look, his lips kiss-swollen, and his face flushed with passion.

"Let me taste you," he said into John's eager mouth.

"Aren't you doing so now?"

Hector moved a hand down John's abdomen to cup his erection. "Yes, but that's not what taste I meant."

"Oh, God."

Smiling to himself, Hector sank to his knees, unbuttoning John's breeches as hastily as he could. Moments later he'd freed him, the warm skin soft over an iron hardness. He was overwhelmed by musk as he rubbed his face in damp, golden curls, at last licking up the salty length to its rosy crown.

"Hector, oh, oh," John groaned, his hands convulsing in Hector's hair.

"You can be as loud as you want," murmured Hector after sucking on the top of his prick, sensing that John might actually lose the ability to stand if he tried to keep control of himself. "I plan to undo you, to make you unable to think about anything except how you feel, to bring you such pleasures you perhaps never knew two men could have."

A whimper and short, weak-voiced curse sounded above him, and with that Hector re-engaged his task. He didn't doubt that he could bring John to completion in short order with his cock in his mouth, but he tried to make it last, varying suction and speed. When he heard John's breathing change to panting cries, he held firmly to his narrow hips, swallowing his seed as John bucked and swore. John tasted faintly of vinegar, but wasn't overly bitter or salty. He'd expect to enjoy this privilege several times to decide what flavour his most intimate fluid reminded him of. A few wayward drops appeared at the slit and he lapped at them like a cat.

"No more, please, it's too much," groaned John. "I never thought I'd say that, but I never thought... you're utterly amazing," he went on, pulling Hector to his feet and kissing along his neck. "I'd like to taste you, too, though I won't be nearly as skilled. I've only—"

"Yes, what do you know of other men's bodies, beautiful John?" Hector asked, moving John's hands to his own breeches as he began to unbutton his shirt.

"I've— I've groped a bit. In the dark. Strangers," said John, his tone apologetic. "I didn't want to risk anything else. Oh, God." John's hands had closed around Hector's prick, almost painful in its hardness. "You're... immense!"

Hector felt his cheeks flush. "I'm quite fortunate," he agreed. "But I won't hurt you. If my having your arse is too much, just say so."

John's touches were agonisingly light, but the reverential expression on his face helped Hector to hold his tongue for precious moments.

"No. I want you to take me." He tightened his grip, moving his thumb around the white drops that eased from the dome of his shaft. "I know I'll be sore, but you'll make it all worth it, won't you?"
Hector stirred up the fire, feeling the weight of John's stare. He wasn't at all self-conscious now. Their lamp had since burned out, but during the first part of the night, their sex had taken place without the shroud of darkness and secrecy. That had been Hector's decision. He wasn't at all proud to be a lover of men, but he'd long ago accepted it as who he was, and felt no shame in his own appetites. He'd wanted young John to be able to see all, if he wished.

As he returned to bed, John pulled back the covers and then draped his long, silken body at Hector's side. Wordlessly his fingers made soft patterns in the hair at Hector's chest as he nosed against his neck. After a time he settled his head in the hollow above his shoulder.

"So, my dear," Hector began, his voice low and tender. "Was it indeed worth it?"

He sensed John clenching his buttocks and felt his mouth twitch against his neck.

"Oh, yes. But were I in the cavalry, I'd be miserable tomorrow. As it is, I suspect I'll be standing most of the day."

"You're not sounding all that certain about the price paid."

"I am, Hector, believe me." He pulled back so Hector could see his face, his long fair hair a tousled mess. "Surely you can see so in my eyes. I never thought— I'd hoped, but…"

He fell silent and Hector turned on his side, entwining their hands together. John ran his finger over Hector's ring. He never took it off, and so he barely noticed its presence. A thought, bright and unexpected as a clear rainbow arching proudly across the sky, came to him, shining in its rightness.

"I should like for you to have this," he said, removing his hand and reaching over John's nubile form for the oil.

"No, Hector, it's too dear to you. It would rouse suspicion, don't you think? About us?"

As Hector rubbed a few drops of oil at the base of his finger joint, he considered who would even notice. Melton would, and perhaps the other lieutenants and those higher in rank. However, it wasn't at all unheard-of for soldiers to entrust items of affection to one another, especially when battle was imminent.

"It might," he replied, "though I think it's the hawk eyes of your brother would be keenest on you. If he were gross enough to ask, you could tell him I forced it on you as a dear friend. Here, try it on."

"I… I can't," John spluttered, his cheeks crimson with embarrassment Hector had been grateful not to see even once during their intimate tumbling.

"You can! I don't doubt that you have all sorts of finery that dwarf the value of this small stone." He held John's wrist and slid the cabochon ring down his middle finger. "There. It suits you and your blue eyes."

"It's that it's from you that gives it its value," John whispered, glancing up at Hector before returning his gaze to the gift. Perhaps he thought it was a guerdon rather than a symbol of pure affection.

"John, even if we'd not been able to have this night together, I would have wanted to give you something. I'm so, so fond of you." He leaned over and kissed one eyelid, then, as John's eyes fluttered closed, kissed the other. "We may not get another opportunity for this kind of comfortable privacy until we return to London, but the Highlands offer lots of places where we can disappear."

* * * * *
unnoticed for a time."

"Well, I am a scout. Surely I can find such locations."

John's voice was husky. He draped a leg over Hector's thigh, pulling the eiderdown up over their shoulders. The feel of his flaccid prick against his own caused a stirring in his blood. It wasn't even two o'clock yet, from the chiming of the church bells.

"I may wear it on a chain," John said quietly. "Close to my heart. Hector, I…"

He expressed his devotion and gratitude through the eloquence of kisses and greedy touch, and Hector relished it to the fullest.

Later, after Hector had offered up his body a second time, John lay on his side in a light sleep. Hector gazed at John, all immediate hungers satisfied, at last able to articulate the deepest vow of his heart.

"My dear, young brother in arms, Scottish rebels be damned, but I'll teach you to love me."

* * * *

IV. Inimitable

He could see Hector still, in his mind's eye. Dark-haired and blue-eyed, tender-mouthed, always smiling. It had been ten years since Hector had died at Culloden, hacked to pieces by a Highland broadsword, and still John woke in the dawn sometimes, body arched in a clutching spasm, feeling Hector's touch.

~from Voyager, Diana Gabaldon

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