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HighGround by Jaine Fenn

On the second day they brought me food, and I realised I might yet survive.

When they'd first captured me, they had taken me to an interrogator. He wore a good suit and rested his elbows on the edge of a scratched wooden table. He asked my name and rank, which I provided. He did not react to finding a noble serving as a common soldier. He moved onto questions I could not answer about orders, troop movements, plans, intentions. Occasionally he looked away from my face to catch the eye of one of the guards behind me.

Though I had resolved to be brave, fear beat at my temples. I recalled barracks-room tales of pulled nails, bruised bodies, peeled skin. Soon he would summon a guard or reach down for the black case containing the instruments of his trade.

Except, nothing happened. He just paused after asking each question, giving me time to answer. I began to relax and notice details: how my interrogator usually looked at the right-hand guard; the way the shadows wavered as the light above us moved in the breeze; how the scratches on the tables all went one way, reminding me of fingernails dragged over the wood. I found myself impressed that my interrogator remembered so many questions without referring to notes. Eventually my stomach began to rumble; I had not eaten since the previous afternoon when my unit set off for its ill-fated mission.

When he reached the end of the questions the guards marched me to a cell. Here, I fell into a trance, becoming a numb speck in a stone box. I drunk from the jug and relived myself in the bucket but I felt nothing. As good as dead. Sometimes I thought dully of how my death would be received: my mother's tears, my father's fury. My

beautiful Angia, elegant in her mourning robes, accepting condolences from strangers.

Eventually I drifted into uneasy sleep. I woke with the panic of a recollected nightmare, yet on discovering my dream was true, slid back into numbness. I accepted my fate. Our unit had failed in its mission. I should embrace my inevitable death with courage and dignity. Still, it irritated me that I must endure stomach cramps for what remained of my life.

When the door opened I assumed the guards had come to take me to my execution and was confused when they moved to flank the door. A man entered with an empty bucket to replace my full one. Another man followed him and put down a tray in the centre of the room. On the tray I saw a new jug of water, a lump of dark bread and a bowl of something pale, lumpy and steaming. I wondered how something that looked so unappetizing could smell so good. I was still wondering when the door slammed. Then I threw myself at the food.

Only after I had eaten did it occur to me that if they were feeding me they wanted to keep me alive.

My first thought was that they thought I did know the answers to the questions I had failed to answer the day before. The food turned to ash in my mouth as I imagined an interrogator who was not be so pleasant as the gentleman with the good memory.

Time passed. The fear faded. The door remained closed. Perhaps they thought that making me wait would break my resolve. I determined to prove them wrong.

Determination faded. Boredom set in. I realized they would not interrogate me again. We interrogated all prisoners on capture and there was no reason to think the enemy did otherwise. Only if I'd shown any sign of possessing useful information would they waste time on further questioning. I had never been so grateful to be ignorant.

So why keep me alive? I wondered if they had recognized me and were loathe to kill a poet, then decided that I credited them with too much taste. Perhaps my nobility held the key. For generations the conflict that shaped all our lives had included the taking and ransoming of hostages. I remembered lines from an epic poem called 'The Dream of Five Princes':

To the land's only hill
Where no blood can be shed
The enemy came

Beneath snapping pennants
The Princes made truce
For sons thought lost

Did such practices still have a place in this age of machines? Could that be why I was being kept alive?

Speculation was pointless. However, recalling the poem gave me an idea. I would exercise my memory in honour of my patient interrogator. My literature tutor had made me learn 'The Dream of Five Princes' for Harvest-tide. I had hated the poem, thinking it a stark, colourless piece full of heavy-handed moral warnings. I wondered how much I could remember. Ah, yes ...

In the Season of War

The son of a noble house

Left to seek glory

Though my attempts at recall were imperfect and frustrating my efforts passed a few hours. By the time darkness fell hunger had returned. I attempted to meditate, without success.

Sleep came slowly and brought dreams. In the only one I could recall, I stood on a barren, wasted plain. The clouds above me flickered and rumbled. Somehow I knew that only my presence held back the storm. I raised my hands and shouted at the sky.

I awoke excited and elated, only to have the grey reality of my cell dispel my elation. Already this place was familiar enough not to surprise me, though it depressed me beyond words.

I waited while the door opened and the morning procession entered. This time I left half the bread for later, soaking it in the slops left in the bowl to soften it.

I decided to catalogue my prison. After my release, when I wrote about my ordeal, I would need to be able to recall details and, as yesterday's exercise had proven, my memory had become flabby with disuse.

Though I'd been brought here blindfolded I guessed the room was part of a partially buried bunker. The bottom half was hewn from rock, the top built from well-matched stone blocks. Sunlight came from a high, barred slit, no doubt originally used to poke out a weapon. The bunker faced west, so it had been one of ours originally, and I must still be near the front. The fact that it was behind their lines at all was testament to how much ground we had lost this century.

I shared the room with a lumpy mattress, a rough blanket sporting stains I chose not to examine, a tray, and a slops bucket. Hardly the accommodation I was used to. The young man who had joined up so eagerly six months ago would be appalled, but the army had toughened me. I had the necessities. I would make do.

I decided to complete my meal when the rectangle of daylight reached the point where the wall went from rock to stone. I would need such routines. I must organize myself to fight boredom and fear. It was my duty.

I recalled more of 'The Dream of Five Princes', getting the lines straight in my head before

reciting them. As a reward I let myself think about Angia. If hostilities had been resumed she would have gone with my mother and sisters to the hill outside the city, the high ground where the truce always held.

By then the golden bar on the far wall had reached the position I had designated as second meal, so I ate. The bread was not improved by its soaking.

After my meal I exercised, combining elements of the army fitness regime with the gentler stretches my tutors had taught me. Just as I must not let my mind fall into despair, so I must not neglect my body.

That night I slept easily, hardly noticing the lumps in my bed, and did not dream.

The next morning my the same four people came in but they seemed more tense than before. Part of me was glad to see my foes discomforted, though I would have given half my family's fortune to know why. Another part felt regret; I had harboured hopes of striking up a conversion. One of my narrative poems dealt with a gaoler and doomed convict who become friends. Though this was different, I longed for human contact, even with the enemy.

Such irony. When I had enlisted my father had called me a naïve fool, saying I was so sure of my own worth that I sold myself short of it. He didn't understand. In this new age, with its airships and guns and moving pictures, we nobles must set a good example. We can no longer trade on our past. I spent my time in the army trying not to be treated differently for my heritage and talent, enduring mockery and jokes in the barracks. But now I wanted to be seen as more than a common soldier. I yearned for some acknowledgement that I was special, not just another ordinary soldier.

After my morning visitors left I warded off boredom by completing my assessment of my prison. I paced the walls toe to heel and discovered that my cell was not, as it had appeared, square. The walls themselves held little interest. The gaps where they met the floor had an infestation of green-brown slime currently dried to a crust. In the rains this place would be most unpleasant. I spotted a tiny pallid beetle crawling across the film of dried algae. I was trying to coax it out with a crumb from my loaf when I remembered that today Angia would go for her first scan. I felt sure it would confirm what I had hoped for. Today she would find out that she carried our firstborn. A son, I was certain. Whatever happened to me here, I would have a son and he would carry on the family name and avenge me. I shouted 'You can't kill us all', and then, when the door remained closed, the sky unclouded and the beetle unimpressed, started singing some of the cruder soldiers' songs, the ones about the personal habits and parentage of our foes.

After a while it occurred to me that this was not the behaviour of a hero staying sane for the sake of his country, his wife and his unborn son.

I spent the rest of the afternoon exercising. In the evening I recited the whole of 'The Dream of Five Princes'. One triplet kept coming back to me:

Do not weep, oh women
For the men you have lost

Honour their sacrifice

Had I made such a sacrifice? I had set out to make a difference but in the end I had not behaved nobly.

In the night I heard thunder in the distance and woke to see distant flashes on my cell wall.

The next morning I decided to ask my gaolers if I might have a pen and paper. I suspected the answer would be no, a pen being a possible weapon, but perhaps the act of asking would break the ice. They were only doing their jobs, after all.

I didn't get the chance. When they came in they refused to look at me. Instead they exchanged gazes of chilling complicity, until one of the guards crossed the room in three quick strides, said 'This is for my sister,' and brought the butt of his rifle down on my groin.

The blow condensed my world to an instant of agony. I sprung closed around the pain, part of me terrified more blows might come, part of me incredulous this one had.

He did not hit me again and by the time I managed to open my eyes they had gone. I considered what he could mean. I had never hurt or dishonoured this man's sister, nor any man's. Had they mistaken me for someone else in my unit? Possibly: my unit had contained a couple of seasoned soldiers who had told tales of conduct they found amusing and I found disturbing. But everyone else in my unit was dead.

As should I be.

We had crossed into land currently claimed by the enemy, a daring and foolish move by my commanding officer in a time of truce. I remembered the last time I saw him, half his face gone, the rest looking faintly affronted. As a common soldier I had not been party to the reasons for the incursion. That was why I had surrendered while the others fought on and died. I had told myself that I would not die without knowing the reason. Told myself I was too important to die without a good enough cause.

'The Dream of Five Princes' has much to say about honour.

Is your pride so great

That you hold your small life

Above honour and trust?

I had done just that. My tears of pain turned to tears of shame.

My father says only fools and cowards cry. I now knew myself to be both. A fool for retaining that secret joy at being above my fellows, thinking of my service as a way to experience the

extremes of life the better to turn them into art. And a coward for not dying when duty demanded it.

When the tears were spent I crawled over to the tray, which they had left in its usual place. My left testicle still ached and I felt weak and nauseous but I forced myself to eat and to complete my exercise regime.

Only when my limbs quivered and the sweat ran into my eyes did I stop. I tried to console myself with thoughts of Angia but though I wanted to recall her laugh, her mannerisms, I could only think of the pale silk of her body. In my frustration I punched the wall. The pain brought me back to my senses and I sat on the cold floor nursing bleeding knuckles.

Even if I'd had the means to end my life, I lacked the courage.

I slept uneasily and was already half awake when they came for me.

At first I thought I was dreaming the dark shapes who swarmed into my cell. Then they pulled me from my bed and forced a hood over my head. The heavy fabric smelt of vomit and mould.

I bit down on my desire to cry out, letting them cuff my hands behind me and march me from the cell. I heard shouts, dull booms, the sound of distant machinery, all muffled by the hood.

The voices fell away and the other noises grew louder. I felt chill air, smelled smoke and rotten meat. Someone murmured in my ear, 'This is all for you, poet. How does that make you feel?' Before I could work out what he meant my shins hit a step. A gun prodded my back and I stepped up onto something that shifted under my weight. I was half pushed, half thrown onto a seat. A door slammed and we started to move. A lorry, I was in a lorry. Something screamed overhead and I heard a dull concussion away to the left. The hood amplified the change in pressure, making my ears ring, while at the same time partially cutting me off from the horror I should have been feeling.

Having no idea about the incoming rocket, I did not tense up like the others. This saved my life.

Someone shouted, we swerved, then an explosion threw me into the air. I landed like a sack of grain, too confused to react. When I smelled fuel and flame I panicked. My arm hit something warm and damp that groaned. I flailed away. My legs hit metal. I tried to make sense of the world, to be calm and think, and not to lose control of my guts.

The truck was on its side. The metal I'd hit was the tailgate.

I pulled my legs up and rolled again. My ankle hit something, then I was free. I rolled out onto a hard dusty surface. The ground sloped down and the roll became a tumble. Something close by made a noise like a stick whacking a table. Pain exploded in my left knee. Dust had got into my hood, into my mouth. Attempting to breath resulted in a mouthful of vomit and dust-laden cloth. I had failed in my resolve not to shit myself.

Then everything went bright and loud, just for a moment.

They do not allow news in the ward. I remember my father saying last year that the ministers had decided that when the conflict next erupted into open war, hospitals, schools and other vulnerable places should not be permitted access to sources of news. For the sake of moral, they said. The staff project brittle cheerfulness but will not talk about the outside world. If I ask a direct question they look away. From the bustle that passes the door and the exhaustion in the nurses' eyes, I suspect the hospital is overfull. However, I have my own room, brighter and larger than my old cell. They have not allowed me knowledge of the outside world, but they have allowed me paper and pen, making this an improvement on my last prison.

Yesterday, three days after I regained consciousness, and the day after I wrote up my imprisonment, my father came to see me.

He swept in with a gaggle of journalists. Poses were struck, cameras whirred, statements made. Sedatives must have been included in my morning medication, as the whole scene felt unreal. I lay on my bed like a prize pig at a country show.

When the journalists left, he stayed. A nurse brought a wheelchair and lifted me into it. By now I had broken out of my daze and I managed to speak, 'What is it? Are we at war again?'

He regarded me with pity and something else I couldn't identify at once. He did not answer my question. Instead he muttered something to the nurse, who pushed the chair from the room. My cell had smelled of shit over disinfectant. The corridor smelled of disinfectant over shit.

Those who passed us gave small bows of respect. I recalled the chain of office round my father's neck, heavier and more ornate than the one he had worn as a member of the Lords' Chambers. More like those worn by the Inner Cabal.

We reached the lift and he dismissed the nurse. When we were alone he said, 'Yes, we are at war,' finally answering my question with the same calm, toneless certainty he had used with the reporters. 'Our requests for your release went unanswered, so we retaliated.'

'You mean the truce was broken because of me?' I felt appalled, honoured, unworthy, proud. Whatever drugs they had given me to keep me calm for the cameras had worn off.

The lift lurched and my father grabbed my wheelchair. 'Do not flatter yourself. You could have been anyone. What mattered is that they had captured one of our soldiers, stopped him from taking the honourable path of suicide and—'

'—that's not—'

He hit me. A short tap on the wrist, as though I was a child. Not painful, but shocking. Saying: this is the truth because I say it is, and you will accept that.

The lift doors opened. We came out into the hospital's roof garden. A red-brick path lead between a twin row of glossy-leaved clove trees, their hot scent dispelling the hospital stink. Though the sky was a disappointing shade of grey I felt my heart leap at being outside again. But I also still felt the sting of my father's blow.

As he pushed the chair down the path he said, 'You once tried to convince me that we lived in a new age where the old rules no longer held – where a man's worth would be judged not by how high he was born but by how far up he could rise. It seems you were correct. The age of noble hostages is over. These days we value all our soldiers enough to fight for them.'

Unsure what my father wanted me to say, I said nothing.

We turned a corner. Tubs had been planted here, shrubs and ground cover. A jewel-green lizard darted across a cushion of pink flowers. I thought I caught the faint trill of birdsong, though as we approached the edge of the building I heard only the sounds of the city below, the thrum of motor-carts and the cries of the street-sellers. The scent of the flowers mingled with dust and exhaust fumes. As he pushed me towards the sturdy fence running along the edge of the roof, my father said, 'We were morally justified in our retaliatory mortar attack. We could not know that the Raja and his family were visiting the border town we hit.'

I opened my mouth to say that this was an unfortunate accident but he ignored me and continued.

'In response, they loaded up their largest airship with bombs and flew a suicide mission deep into our territory. We had assumed they meant to hit the city. We were wrong.' He stopped the chair in front of the fence. 'Do you see, now, how wrong?' For the first time he came into my eye line, bending down to point over the roofs to where the farmland outside the city sloped up to a lone hill. The high ground, location of the country homes of the nobility. A place of truce throughout history. At this distance I could see only that the colour was wrong: brown and grey instead of green and gold. Then I saw the thin tendrils of smoke running up from the ruins into the leaden sky.

Finally I spoke. 'Is Angia all right?'

'No. The summer house took a direct hit. Your wife, your mother, your sisters, they're all dead.' Finally my father's voice showed some emotion: the weariness of a man who has gone beyond grief.

'No, they can't—'

'They did,' he spat. 'Afterwards, the enemy realized they'd gone too far. Within twelve hours they had offered to return you.'

The numbness that had eaten at me in my cell began to creep back. Dead. All dead. I tried to concentrate on the miracle of my own life. 'So that's where the lorry was going. That's how I got out. But someone shot at the lorry. I was lucky to survive.'

'Very. We intended to destroy the lorry and everyone on it.'

'What? You mean you – we – shot at me?'

'Since the enemy bombed the high ground our forces have been infused with righteous energy. We have taken back territory lost before you were born. To have our hostage returned would give the moral initiative back to them. An artillery unit was told that the convoy contained enemy commandos and must be destroyed. Somehow you escaped. When you were found, shit-stained in a ditch, you were recognized as the son of a newly promoted minister and evacuated. As you say, you were lucky.'

'You would have had me killed? Why? Because I'm a coward? Because of what happened to the family?' I looked up at him as he stared blankly at the smoking ruins of our home.

He shook his head but did not look at me. 'Selfish as ever. As it turns out your survival serves just us as well. Our country needs heroes. What better figurehead than a noble who resisted his captors and then escaped?'

My father's thought processes were as alien to me as the enemy's: I had never once thought about trying to escape my cell. And surviving a prison is not the same as escaping it.

Finally he looked at me and said, 'What, my son, has the poet no words?'

I held his gaze, despite the contempt I saw there and said, 'I'm ... sorry. For everything.'

'We are all sorry. When you leave hospital the press will want your story. I am sure you can satisfy them.' He jerked the chair round and began pushing me back along the path. 'I will return you to your bed now, to rest.'

He was right. I would find the words they wanted. It was my duty, after all.