



Traitor

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Dramatis Personae

THE KING'S WAR COUNCIL

Sir Geoffrey Allcot	ambassador for the Royal Adventurers
Sir William Calde	recently returned from America
Sir Stephen Herrick	advisor on matters that pertain to the Fleet
Sir Peter Shaw	advisor on matters diplomatic and general

THE WOMEN WHO COULD BE VIRGO

Lady Grace Allcot	Sir Geoffrey's wife, often absent from Whitehall
Lady Helen Cartwright	Sir Geoffrey's mistress, enjoys her entourage
Lady Anne Herrick	Sir Stephen's wife, protective of her husband
Mrs Cornelia Howe	Sir Stephen's niece, likes her clothing bright
Miss Lavinia Whent	Sir Peter's mistress, raised in the Barbados

PRINCIPAL ACTORS

Mercia Blakewood	transatlantic adventurer
Nicholas Wildmoor	her manservant; one-time sailor & farrier
Sir Francis Simmonds	her uncle; usurper of her manor house
Lady Margaret Simmonds	her aunt, Sir Francis's wife
Daniel Blakewood	her son
Julien Bellecour	envoy of the French
Lady Castlemaine	otherwise Barbara Palmer, the King's chief mistress
Thomas Howe	Cornelia Howe's husband; owns a trading concern
Giles Malvern	barber surgeon with other talents
Henry Raff	courtier, serves the Earl of Clarendon
One-Eye Wilkins	entrepreneur
Phibae	maidservant
Tacitus	in Lady Cartwright's service

THE ROYAL HOUSE OF STUART in order of succession

King Charles II	His Majesty the King
James, Duke of York	his brother, heir to the throne
James, Duke of Cambridge	infant son of the Duke of York
Her Highness the Lady Mary	infant daughter of the Duke of York
Her Highness the Lady Anne	baby daughter of the Duke of York

NAMED SENIOR MEMBERS OF THE COURT

The Earl of Clarendon	King's Chief Minister
The Earl of Arlington	senior Secretary of State

Chapter One

‘Watch out!’ came a sharp voice from above.

Mercia pulled back as the tallest wave yet dashed itself to nothing against the ship’s weary hull. Fine droplets of mist soared into the air, the ring of gulls circling the mast shrieking their soaked disapproval. Clutching a sealed envelope against the splintered rail, she craned her neck towards the faint shoreline as another, smaller wave played out its lively welcome. Spray speckled her wet cheek anew, and she swayed on the warped deck, its planks damaged as much of the hardy ship had suffered in the storm on the long voyage home.

Home.

Briefly, she closed her eyes.

Home, after all.

‘Don’t you think you should open it now?’

A familiar presence approached from behind; she knew someone had been watching, but she had wanted to bear witness to the coalescing cliffs, the first glimpse of grass atop the jagged morass. The first glimpse for nigh on a year.

It had been a long year, these past twelve months.

‘Mercia?’

The man was as persistent as the waves. She paused a moment more, breathing in the saltiness of the ocean that seemed somehow . . . English, and traced the pattern of a cleft in the bluffs, listening to the pervading caw of the gulls as they scoured the sodden deck for a sailor's charity. Finally she turned, grasping at her hat at a tug of the sharp Channel wind.

'Careful,' her companion warned. 'You've been waiting three months to read that letter. You don't want the sea to take it now.'

'No, Nicholas,' she said. 'But I promised I would only open it when we arrived home.'

'And you've been as patient as you vowed. Now break the seal.'

'Why I allow you to—' She shook her head. 'No matter. Suffice that I do.'

His green eyes flashed, the glimmering edge of the sun's unsure circle peeking from behind a ragged cloud. 'You've always said I should speak as I think.'

'Still.' She thrust the letter into the pockets beneath her dress as a boy ran to take her hand, nimble despite the rocking deck. 'My, Danny.' She staggered slightly as she reached to scoop him up. 'You are getting heavy.'

'It was my birthday last month, Mamma,' said the boy. 'Don't you remember? I'm growing up.'

His innocence charmed her. 'That you are. Past time I brought you back home.'

The ship continued on, edging through the Channel, heading for its long-sought destination: the busy port of Southampton on the English south coast. Mercia felt a twinge of agitation as the harbour of Plymouth passed by to the north, but nine weeks had passed since they had embarked in New York; she could wait a few hours more. Besides, her impatience was mingled with excitement; the thrill of seeing her homeland again after such a long journey abroad. But finally the westernmost cliffs of the Isle of Wight roved into view, and passing along the narrow Solent, the wharves and inns of the Southampton docks began to give up their features until individual sailors and dockhands could be seen roaming

the jetties or leaping through the rigging of the many-moored ships.

The industry of the docks could be heard from afar, even as the ship was still some way out, awaiting the tug boat that was rowing towards them. Positioning itself at the battered bow, the tug's crew of two swore in jocund ribaldry at the sailors leaning down from the bowsprit, waiting to be thrown a sturdy rope to use to steady the ship into dock. Then as they manoeuvred into the harbour, a glint of sudden sunlight made Mercia wince. Arm shielding her eyes, she squinted to starboard to wonder at a floating behemoth, larger than any vessel she had seen. Its army of cannon sparkled in the bright spring day.

'God's truth!' swore Nicholas, coming alongside once more as she laid a restraining hand on Daniel, the young boy leaning too far over the railing for her liking. 'Never seen a ship that big before.'

'Not even when you were serving yourself?' she asked.

'Not that I remember. And look at that paintwork all along the side, that figurehead at the bow . . . 'tis brand new. I'd say about ready for launch.'

Daniel squirmed under his mother's grasp. 'The . . . *Royal Charles*,' he announced, reading the nameplate stretched across the expansive stern. He turned his eyes up to her. 'Like the King!'

'Yes,' said Mercia, taking in the golden ostentation that peppered the length of the magnificent ship. The red, the yellow, the blue; the gleaming ironmongery; the furled white sails towering high above. 'You are right, Danny. 'Tis just like him.'

It was the first step back on land after an arduous crossing. All around, Mercia could hear the sounds of home, breathe in the . . . stench, but it vanished from notice as her legs began to buckle, and at her side, Daniel fell to the ground with a bump.

'It will pass,' grinned Nicholas. 'This always happens after a long voyage. People not used to it get land-sick.'

As the uncomfortable sensation dissipated, Mercia was taken by an overwhelming emotion. The events of the past months had been

hard, and to be back home, surrounded by a certain familiarity—

‘England!’ she cried, sinking to her knees in the middle of the docks. ‘England, after all!’

As though unbelieving, she reached out a palm to the dirty ground, wavering her hand above the earth until with a sudden movement she drove it firm against the hard surface, compacted by so many boots. For a blissful moment she cast down her joyful gaze, then retracting her hand she drew herself up and took in her surroundings. The English people, the English port – the English frowns at the unexpected behaviour of this woman in her weather-worn brown dress.

‘Perhaps get up now?’ offered Nicholas, reaching out his own hand to help her rise.

She seized his wrist. ‘No matter what people think. We are home. And no sense in waiting.’

‘You still want to take the first coach I can find? No rest?’

‘Yes, Nicholas. I must know if the King will do as he promised.’ She looked at him, her travelling companion of many months’ standing. Now the time was near, she realised she was more saddened that soon they would part than even she would have thought. ‘Do you . . . still want to journey with us? You have fulfilled your obligations to me. I have no call on your service now.’

‘I’ve come this far, haven’t I?’ He smiled. ‘There and back again. I need to know how this ends.’

‘And then? You cannot defer it any longer.’

‘I don’t know.’ Looking away, he ran a hand through his blonde hair, ruffling it beyond its usual disarray. ‘Shall I see to our luggage?’

‘Thank you.’ She caught sight of a stone bench at the end of the dock, its only current occupants a pair of fighting pigeons. ‘We will wait there.’

As Daniel ran ahead, copying another boy by chasing the pigeons around the bench, Mercia watched Nicholas force his way into the crowd at the side of their abandoned ship, where a horde of grubby, disembarked passengers were clamouring with the one sailor overseeing the removal of

their belongings from the water-sodden hold. Keen that Daniel exercise his legs after so many weeks at sea, nonetheless she ordered him to remain close. Then she took a deep breath and felt inside her pockets for the makeshift envelope, a sealed piece of paper folded around the letter inside.

She studied the writing on the front: just two words, her name. The initials, M and B, were written in a flourish, the whole beautifully copied out, each letter drawn with meticulous care. There had been no need for an address, the rider bringing the letter from Hartford well instructed as to who she was and where she had wintered. Beneath the words, a thick black stroke underlined the esteem of the writer in adorning the paper with her name.

She flicked the thin packet over. Now was the time, she supposed. But as she eased her finger beneath the flap, drawing her cracked nail towards the small blue seal, she paused. On the back, she looked again at the request that she not open the letter until she arrived home in England, but despite this injunction, why had she waited until now? True, she had promised herself she would comply with the writer's entreaty, but could she really not have broken that vow in her cabin as she broke the waxen seal now?

She withdrew a sheet of pale grey paper, folded in half along an immaculate crease. Had she been scared to read what was inside? Not dared take in the words while trapped on a ship at sea, nowhere to hide if they upset her as she suspected they might?

Or had she, as she thought was her correspondent's intent, merely wanted to wait until she was an ocean's distance from the hurt of her recent past? Whatever the reason, now, here in England, there was no longer any excuse.

She unfolded the letter and began to read.

My dearest Mercia, my friend, my love,

She stopped before she had barely begun. Already her breathing had quickened. Should she continue to read here in the open, or wait a while

longer until she could be alone indoors? But now she had started, his writing drew her to the page as surely as if he were beside her speaking the words.

When you left Meltwater, you—

She broke off once more as a shadow fell over the page, and she looked up, startled, half expecting, half hoping, to see the man who had written the letter standing before her. Certainly she did not expect to be confronted by a soldier, armed with a halberd-like partisan and a grimmer expression.

‘Mrs Blakewood?’ he asked, his voice equally gruff. Over his shoulder, a fellow pair of guardsmen stood watching.

‘Yes?’ she said.

‘Mrs Mercia Blakewood, of Halescott in Oxfordshire? Returned this day from America?’

A prickling anxiety teased her insides. ‘That is me.’

‘Then you are to come with us.’

‘Why?’ She looked from soldier to soldier, but their impassive faces told no story.

Their captain stood to one side. ‘On the orders of the King, you are under arrest.’

The room was light, surprisingly. Fearing a small, dark space, she was taken to the top floor of a sizeable house that overhung a broad street in the middle of town. Three windows in the street-facing side flooded the floor with the sundered rays of the sun; the bed, although small, appeared comfortable, and the truckle in the corner was a sufficient resting place for Daniel.

And yet, the door remained as locked as the soldiers’ mouths had been closed when she had pressed to know the reasons they had led her away. There had been no time to alert Nicholas; she had tried to shout over, but he had long since disappeared into the melee surrounding the ship. And

so here she was, trapped in another chill room, at the behest of the King whom she thought she had served well.

‘Why are we here, Mamma?’ asked Daniel, no longer as subdued as before. ‘I thought . . . aren’t we going home any more? I wanted to see James. I wanted to play with him.’

‘We are going home, Danny, I promise you that. I have come too far to be denied now.’ She forced a smile. ‘Come here, on the bed.’

She sat on the sheets – as comfortable as they looked – and waited until he dragged himself over to join her. She put an arm around his young shoulders and began to stroke his hair.

‘Do not be afraid. Mamma will put this right.’ She sighed. ‘Whatever this is.’

His lower lip trembled. ‘Is it because of grandfather again?’

‘No, Danny. You must not think that.’

As she stroked his hair, she pondered the reasons for her arrest. People had died during her mission for the King in New York – was that it? Had she spoken to someone she shouldn’t have? Or had her uncle, more recently returned than she, made insinuations about her conduct that the King wanted to investigate? Despite her reassurances to her son, her father had still been condemned a traitor the year before: one of Parliament’s staunchest advocates in the civil war, he had served in Cromwell’s long-gone Protectorate, unlike her uncle who had sided with the Royalists. But surely, she thought, her recent actions were proof of her family’s loyalty?

The afternoon faded into dusk, then into gloaming; lanterns were lit outside, dotting the fronts of shops and houses with the swinging shadow of their quivering light. The prison-house stood not far from the dock, and constant shouting drifted through the thinly paned windows, lined with diagonal lead that had warped in places, allowing the cool breeze in. The port was crawling with sailors; Southampton had a great number of drinking dens, none of them nearly as restrained as those in the Puritan colonies of New England she had most recently known. And so she teased

Daniel to bed, wincing every time a bawdy group swore its slow way past, until she realised one of the passing men was calling her name.

She eased open the window, wincing as it ground out a low squeak.

‘Nicholas!’ she said, leaning out. ‘Thank the Lord.’

‘What’s going on?’ he called up. ‘I came back and you’d gone. It took hours to find out where you were.’

‘I am not certain.’ She squeezed her head through the narrow opening as far as she could; somewhat tricky with the topknot she had taken pride in maintaining throughout their long voyage home. ‘Did you secure our belongings?’

‘I’ve paid a fellow by the dock to look after them. The sailors say he does it for people all the time, while they wait to move on.’

‘Can you trust him?’

‘He can trust me to take against him if anything goes astray.’

She tried to lean out further, but all she managed was a sore shoulder. ‘Nicholas, ’tis the King. He has had me placed in confinement.’

‘I got that much out of the guards downstairs. But they won’t let me see you, not even for coin, and I had to wait for dark to – hey!’ For a moment he disappeared, but he quickly returned. ‘Sorry,’ he said. ‘Some cloyer was trying to rob me. Listen, I don’t know how long ’til the guards chase me off. I want to know what I should do.’

‘I . . . do not know. If the King has changed his mind, I could be in trouble, despite all that I have done. Perhaps the best course is to wait.’

‘Damn it, if I were Nathan, I could speak to someone, but you’re lumbered with me. At least I know where you are now. Maybe I can find Sir William and get his help. He deigned to talk to me on the ship, but now we’re back . . .’

She nodded, but sucked in through her teeth as her neck caught on the frame. ‘I asked the guards if I could speak with him myself, but they refused. Can you get him a message? If you say it concerns me, he will listen.’

‘I’ll try. Stay calm. I’ll come back when I can.’

* * *

She pulled shut the window, feeling more hopeful than before. If Sir William could help, she knew that he would, unless the threat of the King's retribution prevented even his noble person from acting. She nibbled at the remnants of the plentiful food and ale an untalkative woman had brought in, and persuaded herself to relieve her discomfort in the pisspot she found under the bed: a difficult operation in all her heavy clothes. Then she listened again at the door, hoping for any sign that Sir William had arrived, or that the guards were ascending the stairs, but all she could hear was the rolling of dice and the chinking of beakers.

A fire was burning in an alcove in the wall, lit by the untalkative woman, and she took a candle from a holder at her side, setting it down once lit. Now she was alone, and Daniel asleep, there was no reason to postpone a second attempt at the letter. She retrieved the crumpled sheet and glanced down.

My dearest Mercia, my friend, my love,

No. No reason.

When you left Meltwater, you took some of me with you. And so here, take some more, a piece of my heart waiting for you to unwrap as you arrive home. I hope you did wait to read this, for it is now that I think you will need it, but no matter if you did not. I know how you can be impetuous.

She smiled, remembering the man who had written those words. The man she had left behind.

After what happened in America, I know you are still in pain. The murders here have affected all our souls, but yours especially, I know. I hope in time you will learn to accept that none of this was your fault, and that your grief can start to lessen as once you helped me vanquish mine. For now, do as I asked when last we spoke – let yourself live,

and let me into your heart, for I will find you when you need me. And if ever you change your mind to the question I asked, I shall swim the very ocean to be with you. But until that day, I shall remain in America to help the town through these still-dark days.

Now you are returned to England, you will face new trials. A merchant from New York told me how your uncle had sailed before you, and I know he will not let the matter of your manor house rest, for having once seized your family's lands he will desire to keep them. But believe in what you accomplished when the King sent you here, and in his promise that he would restore to you your home. For yourself and for Daniel, I hope my love will add its light to God's to keep you strong, and that we will see each other once more.

I am always yours.

Always.

Nathan

She sat back. Nathan, her friend, now so far away. At one time she had thought . . . but no. Lying down to rest, she plumped up the pillow, and passed into restful sleep.

A bang on the door forced her awake. As she opened her heavy eyes, a key turned in the lock, and the guards appeared in the threshold.

‘Well,’ she yawned, the grey light of dawn falling through the windows. ‘Are you speaking with me now?’

‘Not us, my lady. Someone much more important.’ The guard’s captain took a step forward, yesterday’s long partisan replaced with a shorter, less brutal sword. ‘Rouse your boy. You depart for London this morning. You are expected tomorrow at the palace.’