

Jasper could remember when his face had been whole. He could remember feeling the breeze on his skin instead of the sticky silk of the mask plastered to his raw, irritated flesh. He could remember when ladies' heads had turned as he walked by. Now the ladies, and even the females who couldn't rightly be called ladies, turned away.

The sun was hot as Jasper made his way through the village of Penbury on the southern coast of England. The breeze off the English Channel would have cooled him if he'd removed his mask, but it was bad enough being out in daylight. He'd send the people already staring at him running and screaming if he revealed his burn scars. As it was, the black silk covering his hair, forehead, and the upper half of his face attracted enough unwanted attention. He tried to ignore the whispers and furtive looks and followed the directions he'd secured from the local he'd treated to ale the night before in exchange for information.

Fewer and fewer people were about as he left the village behind and neared the rocky shoreline. Only then did Jasper realize he should have set out earlier. The trek would involve more climbing than he expected, which was his own fault. The Duke of Withernsea had warned him the woman was elusive. She'd managed to evade the other investigators Withernsea had hired.

But she wouldn't escape Jasper. He hadn't come on behalf of Withernsea. Even if the duke hadn't been a miser too cheap to pay Jasper's rates, Jasper wouldn't have worked for the man. Jasper had no desire to drag women into matrimony with men they didn't fancy, especially not to a man with Withernsea's vices. Jasper would never understand why the girls' parents had promised her to such a monster, but now that the mother, Viscountess Carlisle, was ill, and her dying wish was to see her daughter again, he didn't think it appropriate to ask. The pleas of the viscount and his wife had moved Jasper. And surely Miss Carlisle would want to know that her mother was on her deathbed.

If not, well, Jasper didn't exactly need the money. He could have used it, but as a retired member of The Survivors and the son of the Marquess of Strathern, Jasper had other means available to him.

Sweat streaked down his face, burning the sensitive tissue around his scar, and making Jasper wish, for the thousandth time, he could remove the mask. He'd gone far enough that the beach was mostly empty. Squinting into the distance, he spotted the large rock the informant had described. Jasper just had to climb up the narrow path marked by the boulder, and the cottage

would be at the top. It was a clever arrangement. The cottage could not be seen from below, and there was enough soil on the outcropping that a dozen or more trees had grown there, giving the cottage additional shade and cover.

If the cottage was indeed up there. Only one way to find out.

Jasper started up, but halfway he paused to shake out his boots. The rocks stabbed the bottom of his feet, and he needed a drink. He sat on a small patch of leaves and dirt, pulled out his flask and drank deeply. The water was warm now, but it eased his thirst, wetting what felt like a desert in the back of his throat.

He took hold of one boot and struggled to yank it off. The effort almost caused him to fall back, but the boot came loose unexpectedly and shot out and into the path. "Damn it," Jasper cursed under his breath. He moved to rise and retrieve the boot, then froze.

The stab in his ribs was all too familiar. He knew the feel of a knife pressed to his side, and he knew whoever held it was serious. The trickle of blood running down his skin was serious as hell.

"What do you want?" Jasper muttered, barely moving his lips. His instinct was to leap away, but he'd fallen on his arse when the boot came free and jumping up was out of the question.

"Your blunt," came the hoarse reply. "And anything else of value."

The accent was indistinguishable from any other, not lower class but not of the higher ranks either. Jasper couldn't even determine whether it was from the north or south of England. He rather doubted this was purely by chance. His assailant did not want to be identified. A professional then? Surely not simply someone who happened upon him. Someone who'd known he'd come this way and who lay in wait.

"I have a wallet in my coat pocket," Jasper answered.

"Get it out." The man's voice hitched slightly, indicating excitement.

"I have to reach for it."

"No sudden moves," the knife-holder cautioned.

Jasper blew out his breath. Sudden moves or not, the man with the knife at his flank would use it. Jasper didn't care much about the money he'd lose. But he sure as hell didn't intend to bleed to death on the side of a sea cliff with one boot on and one boot off. "I'm reaching for my pocket," he said, moving his right arm slowly. The wallet was in his left inside pocket and

the knife rested against his left side. Jasper's hand slid inside his greatcoat then inside his tailcoat. But instead of reaching for the wallet, he lunged for the knife, gripping it with the fabric as his shield.

It was a risky move, but it took the assailant by surprise. He sprang back. Unfortunately, the knife went with him, and Jasper couldn't keep hold of it through the fabric. Jasper lunged to his feet, but his awkward position hampered him, and the attacker came at him with the knife. Jasper raised a hand to deflect the blow, but he was off-balance and aimed too high. Instead of the weapon grazing his arm, he gave his foe an opening. The sharp prick of the knife took Jasper's breath away as it slid through the fabric of his coat and into his skin.

The dull pain ratcheted up to a shrill scream of agony as the assailant yanked the knife back out. Ignoring the pain, Jasper threw a punch at the man with the knife, hitting him on the side of the jaw. The man went down, but so did Jasper. He fell hard, and when he tried to rise again, he saw black spots dancing in front of his eyes. His entire left side felt as though he had fallen into a pond. Blood was gushing from the wound. He struggled, but the attacker rose first. Jasper knew this because the man used his booted feet to land a hard kick to Jasper's uninjured side. Jasper huffed out a curse and reached for the man, who landed another kick, this one to Jasper's jaw.

That was when the spots grew too big for Jasper to blink away. That was when the light faded, and the last thing he knew was the feel of the man's rough hands rummaging through his coat pockets.