

The Mine

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Brief Candle
Press

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Chapter I

Alec Tinsworth looked up, bidding the sun farewell. He didn't know how long it would be before he saw its light again, how long he would instead live by the flickering light of torches and candles — or less.

The man at the top of the mine shaft looked down at him without pity, and Alec returned his baleful glare, his feet questing one after the other for the next step on the unsteady ladder. At last, he came to a point where there was no next step, and the guard shouted down at him, “Just drop on down. It's not so far as you will fall into the hereafter.”

A coarse bark of laughter echoed down the shaft to Alec's ears, and he lowered himself by his arms alone, the chain between his manacles limiting his ability to ease down. He grimly felt for the floor that he expected to find, his foot describing wider and wider arcs through open air, until he lost his grip on the ladder and fell with a grunt in a jumbled pile of limbs. He rolled along the floor, which he was relieved to discover was strewn with straw. Without that, his fall might have done more than merely knocked his breath out for a moment.

As he lay catching his breath, he heard another guffaw from overhead, followed by the echoing boom of the door closing. The dim light that reached the bottom of the pit winked out, and Alec stayed very still, his eyes adjusting to the incredible darkness in

which he now found himself.

As he waited for his eyes to find enough light to let him see his way deeper into the living quarters he'd been told to expect in the abandoned mine, he thought about the bitter road that had brought him here.



The light of the waning moon glinted through the bare branches of the woods, and Alec walked as silently as he could, desperately trying to find his way back to his patrol. He heard the snap of a twig stepped upon by a less cautious foot than his own, followed by a challenge in a low, urgent voice.

“King and country,” the stranger called out, and Alec felt a wave of relief wash over him like the morning’s first splash of water from a springtime stream.

He answered wearily, “King and country,” and stepped out into a small clearing, where the wan light of the slender moon shone clearly on him.

The other voice called out more confidently now. “Got ourselves another Tory straggler, John.”

Alec felt a different sort of chill wash over him, and the stranger now addressed him, his tone not unkind, but firm.

“If you be armed, you’d best drop down your weapon, good sir. We’ll be delivering you up for parole, if you be an officer, and for prisonment otherwise.”

“I’ve no weapon, save my knife,” Alec called back resignedly.

He raised his hands where anyone could see them in the moonlight, and the stranger stepped into the clearing with him, soon followed by his companion.

The one who had to be John stepped around behind Alec, his hands questing along his prisoner's waist, and up to his raised hand, which he pulled down behind Alec's back, reaching up to bring the other beside it. "Where's this knife, friend? I don't feel a belt or bag upon you."

"Nay, I've neither. 'Tis in my boot, this one." He slowly raised his left foot, balancing carefully on the right.

"Stand steady, Tory. I'll retrieve it while Jim binds your hands."

Jim's hands took the place of John's, and Alec could feel the rough texture of hempen rope being wrapped securely around his wrists, as John pushed his raised foot to the ground and reached into Alec's boot top to retrieve the knife.

John stepped back, and Alec could see him testing the blade's edge with his thumb in the half-light. Shaking his head in disappointment, John tossed the knife off into the darkness.

"Smart of you not to run or resist, Tory." Jim's voice sounded calm in Alec's ear. "John's not afraid to shoot into the darkness when he is confident that no friendly forces lie before us."

"That knife would have done you no good against any man, either," said John. "Have you a name, Tory?"

"Aye," Alec said glumly. "I am Alexander Tinsworth, of His Majesty's Loyal Connecticut Militia, a private soldier."

Jim asked, his voice astonished, "Alec? Why, your father and mine worked together in town, before the troubles started. I'm Jim Hudgins, and my old Pa was always suggesting that I'd do well to emulate your good example, in all the things your father used to tell him about you."

He chuckled humorlessly to himself and added, "I don't

suppose that my Pa would say quite the same now, though, if he were still with us to offer an opinion.”

“I am sorry to hear that you’ve lost your father, Jim. My dad spoke well of him, up until he turned traitor to the King.”

Jim cuffed him across the face with the back of his hand, though without much conviction behind the blow. He said, “’Tis not my father who is found traitor to his country tonight, Alec. You’ll keep a civil tongue in your mouth while we bring you in, and the captain will decide what’s to be done with you.”

John had poked Alec in the ribs then, pointing toward the first blush of sunrise visible through the trees. “You’ll walk in front, Alexander, just in case there are any of your allies about, waiting to spring a trap on travelers. Don’t get any ideas about running, though. We know these woods as least as well as you, and our hands aren’t bound, so you’d likely just wind up tripped or tackled for your trouble. Then I’d be obliged to hobble you, though it might slow us all up even more.”

His shoulders slumped, and his cheek warm from where Jim had struck him, Alec trudged into the darkness in the direction indicated. Behind him, he could hear Jim and John speaking quietly, but could only make out an occasional snatch of their conversation.

“Real shame about that family,” he heard, but he didn’t know if they were talking about his family or some other that had suffered misfortune in this accursed war.

His parents had most recently been turned out of the home where Alec had grown up, the home that his grandfather had built of straight timber felled from their own land. It was forfeit to the self-styled Committee of Safety, claimed as the price to be paid by a

notorious Loyalist family, they'd said.

Alec's father had set his jaw in the way he always did when faced with unbearable things that could not be changed, and had gathered up the few things that the committee's representatives permitted him. Alec's mother, though, had fallen to her knees before the leader of the squad, wailing and begging that their property be spared.

The man's face had started out, resolute, and the longer Alec's mother carried on, the stormier his face became. Finally, he'd called out to Alec's father, who was still carrying armloads of his papers and clothing out to the dooryard for inspection.

"Sir, please gain control of your wife, else we shall be forced to silence her on your behalf."

Alec's father had hurried to his wife's side and bent beside her as Alec looked on, helpless rage coursing through his body. He stroked her back and spoke soothingly into her ear, and she'd regained her composure sufficiently to stand and stagger over to where Alec stood.

"See to your mother," his father had said brusquely, and had turned away, going back to the task at hand.

Alec had stood beside her, feeling her quake with silenced sobs as she clutched his arm, and had resolved in that moment to do whatever it took to ensure that she need never again suffer powerless grief.

Alec was yanked out of this reminiscence by John's question to Jim, "Think we'll find any more of these sorry fellows tonight?"

Jim's voice carried more clearly than John's in the morning air, and Alec could hear him say, "Nay, I think we've got enough

to fill up the mine already, and work what may be left to work there.”



That had been the first Alec had heard about the mine, and now he found himself confronted with the reality of it, whatever that might be. In the inky void beyond him, he heard men muttering to one another, and then a clear voice called out to him.

“Got you with the short ladder, too, eh?” The voice was gruff, but laced with good humor. “Can you stand, or were you hurt when you dropped?”

Alec struggled to his feet, and cursed as his head struck a low overhang. He heard a rough chuckle from the darkness.

“I guess standing upright hurt you more that falling did, eh?”

“Aye,” Alec said, reaching up to feel where the ceiling was. His hand found a rough, low surface, damp with condensation. “If they mean to have men live down here, they ought make it fit for dogs, at the least.”

He heard a rumble of appreciative laughter from an unknown number of men, punctuated by a new voice calling out, “Have a care what you wish for, boyo, lest our loving watchers decide that you possess the perfect means by which to accomplish it.”

He could sense the nods of the men around the speaker, though he still could not see them. He asked hesitantly, “Have we no light at all down here?”

Another rumble of laughter answered him, this time less appreciative than knowing. The first man who’d addressed him answered.

“Aye, but we like to save it for when we eat. They’ll give

us oil for the lamps when they want us to work, but there's been no work for days now."

Alec walked unsteadily toward the voices, his chained hands out before him to feel for obstacles. He found a wall, and felt his way along it until he bumped headlong into a human form.

"Pardon me," he muttered.

"Don't worry about it," the huddled form mumbled, and Alec could hear the muffled clink of manacles.

He had the sense that the man had turned around to face away from him. Feeling his way down the wall with his shoulders, Alec lowered himself to the floor and sat down, his own back to the rough-hewn stone.

The gruff voice called out from just in front of him, "What's your name, son?"

"I'm Alexander Tinsworth, but most folks just call me Alec."

"Thomas," the other man replied, "just Thomas. I'm the leader of the prisoners here at New-Gate, I guess you could say. Been down here since they rebuilt the place last winter. Won't say I'm happy to have you here, any more than you're happy to be here, if I don't miss my guess." A mirthless chuckle sounded in the man's throat, and died as quickly as it had started.

Alec ventured a question. "How many are we down here?"

Thomas answered, "Twenty-eight, including you, unless Robert has given up the ghost since we checked him last."

A thin, raspy voice came from a corner that somehow seemed even darker than the rest of the room. "I ain't died yet, so you'll still have to give me my ration, and not keep it for yourselves

like you did Frederick's until the guards smelled him out."

Thomas' easy laugh answered the man, and he said, "Hope springs eternal, Robert. But we'll all be on short rations soon enough, if they can't find anything for us to do to earn our keep."

"Isn't this a mine?" Alec's confusion was genuine. "Not that I look to take up mining as an occupation, but it seems as though that would be a natural way to ensure that we've enough rations to spare..." His voice trailed off as Thomas began to laugh in earnest.

When the other man could speak through his chortles, he finally said, "Aye, and though the ore down here is pretty near to exhausted, you would think that, only they figured out pretty quickly that it wasn't such a good idea to put digging tools into the hands of prisoners."

Alec could almost see the flash of Thomas' grin before the man continued in a mock grumble, "We'd gotten a good start on a new tunnel to the outside, before they smoked out what we were up to." He snorted. "They only came down to inspect because they thought we had simply exhausted the vein, and wanted to see where they could have us dig out better ore than the rock we were sending up."

Alec nodded into the darkness, aware even as he did so that his interlocutor could not see his reply. "So, what manner of work have they given you since then?"

"They had us making and mending for a bit, until they figured out that we were even worse at that than we were at mining. Also, poor Jenkins had his accident with a needle and a pair of scissors."

A couple of the men broke into laughter at that, and Thomas

explained, “Jenkins had been informing on us – ‘twas probably him who gave the guards the hint that we were up to more than simply mining – and he somehow wound up with the scissors halfway through his head. Not sure how he managed to sew his own mouth shut before the scissors stopped him.”

After another bout of rough laughter broke out, Alec realized that they were laughing at the abuse and murder of a fellow prisoner, and he shuddered.

“In any event,” Thomas said, “after that, they took away all the sharp objects. One of the guards asked me last week whether any of our number had experience with nail-making, though, so we may have a new industry before long.”

“You converse with them? How?”

“Oh, they get near as bored as we do, particularly late at night. For the most part, they’re decent enough fellows, just a little on the hard-edged side. Of course, so are we, I suppose.” Thomas sighed. “All right, let’s get a look at each other, and you can meet the other fellows, as well.”

Alec was about to open his mouth to ask how, when he was nearly blinded by a long spark in the direction from which Thomas’ voice had been coming. In the brief flash of light, he got the impression of a series of long tables, and men sitting on benches on either side of them. He thought he’d seen bunks against the rock wall behind them, but he couldn’t be sure.

Another spark pierced the darkness, and Alec could see it find its mark in a bit of charcloth enclosed in the base of a candle holder. It flared into flame, and he thought that the man who carefully tilted a candle into it must have been Thomas.

The candle sputtered and smoked, and the light it gave was

too much at first for Alec's dark-adapted eye, but as he grew used to it, he could take in the group of men who sat peering back at him with the same curiosity that he was certain animated his own face.

Most appeared to be around his own age, though Thomas was far from the most grizzled of the bunch. None appeared to have seen a barber at any point in the recent past, and most of their faces were smudged with the gritty dirt under which they lived. A few men lounged in the bunks Alec had spotted, but most sat upright at the table, empty trenchers and a scattering of cups before them.

Whether they had just finished a meal, or sat at the table out of stubborn habit from their daylight lives, Alec could not tell.

The space was larger than Alec had originally guessed it to be, stretching away into darkness beyond the end of the tables. The ceiling was indeed low, but Alec was chagrined to note that the spot he'd bashed his head against was a timbered bracing that he could have easily ducked under, had he but known it was there.

Looking back to Thomas and catching the man's eyes, he nodded. "Good to know you, Thomas, though I do wish it were under happier circumstances."

"Same here, Alec. I'll let the rest introduce themselves before I snuff the candle, but I did want a chance to take your measure by sight, rather than solely by the sound of your voice. You're younger than I'd thought, but that's no bad thing, as it will give you more strength to draw upon in the days ahead."

He gestured to the man on his right. "Clem, go ahead and introduce yourself."

Clem was a nervous, scrawny boy, and Alec guessed he had to walk hunched over most everywhere in the mine.

The boy spoke, his voice hesitant. “Uh, I’m Clem. Got here a month and a fortnight ago, same as most of us. We was overrun by a rebel militia, and they done packed us down here to keep us out of the way.”

The man beside him spoke up next, and each of the rest of the men introduced themselves in turn. Only a few stood out to Alec. One grey-haired man sat with his spine ramrod-straight, as though he were not half a hundred feet underground, and introduced himself as “Benjamin Miller, late of Fanning’s King’s American Regiment.”

His eyes narrowed, the older man demanded, “How goes the war, young man?”

Alec frowned, unsure how to satisfy the man’s evident thirst for intelligence of matters of which he himself knew little. “In truth, sir, I was separated in a fog from my company, and have been keeping low for some days now. Prior to that, I know only that we were everywhere on the move, but whether we pursued the rebels or were pursued by them, I cannot say with any certainty.”

The old man’s mouth screwed up in a firm grimace, and he shook his head sharply, giving the next man in turn a pointed glance.

Alec didn’t think there was much chance that he’d be able to keep very many of the men’s names straight, but somehow, he had little doubt that he’d be able to remember Miller without effort.

The last few men in the bunks gave their introductions, including Robert, who looked as spent as his voice had sounded. Alec could well believe that they would be sharing out his rations in a matter of days, but he kept his thoughts to himself.

Finally, they came to the man who hunched by himself

beside where Alec had taken his own seat. Thomas called out to the man after everyone had stared expectantly at him for a long moment.

“William, will you introduce yourself to the man, or will we do it for you?”

The man grunted and turned to face back toward Alec. “William,” he said sourly. “They think I took George’s bread last night, so they’ve made me stay off the furniture until I give him mine tonight.” The man looked defiantly at Alec. “I didn’t take it, but this lot don’t care. They made up their mind even before the bread went missing, and then it was just a matter of finding some cause to pin on me.”

He hunched back over himself, and turned back toward the wall.

Thomas spoke up then. “William thinks he’s better than the rest of us, since he started out as a member of the King’s own regiment, come here all the way from Gloucester, and he thinks that gives him the right to put on airs and take more than his share.”

Alec knew the type; he’d served with a few such himself, before he’d lost his way in the woods.

Thomas said, “That introduces us all, then, so no need for this any longer.”

He snuffed the candle, and the room descended again into darkness.