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Kitson's well-worn boots crunched through the shingle as he walked down towards the shore. It was a cold, unwelcoming afternoon. The sky was low and slate-grey, and the waters of the bay churned with a heavy swell. Sea birds croaked dismally as they hung, wings outstretched, on the brisk wind. Most of the men who filled the landing zone were in uniform, but there were enough ragged-looking civilians among them for Kitson to stride past without remark. Reaching a small rise in the stony beach, he paused to scratch his beard and take stock of the scene around him.

On this, the third day of the invasion, it was the turn of the Earl of Cardigan's Light Brigade to disembark. Kitson pulled a pocketbook and pencil from his shabby, faded frock-coat. Squinting, he peered out at the rows of troop transports and frigates anchored in the deeper waters, and attempted to make out their names, jotting down those he could see. There were so many vessels in the bay that the horizon was obscured by a dense forest of masts, funnels and rigging. The echoing blasts of their steam horns drifted over to where he stood scribbling intently into his book.

Flotillas of long rowing boats were ferrying soldiers from the transport ships. Teams of blue-jacketed sailors, seemingly impervious to the cold, waded out into the surf to drag the boats' prows up onto the beach. Landing planks were thrown down, and hussars poured out, their scabbards held over their heads to avoid any chance of a freak spray or splash

rusting the blades within. Against the dull, washed-out tones of the afternoon, their uniforms seemed intensely colourful, a vivid combination of rich blacks, glowing reds and acid yellows. The blue-jackets stared as the cavalrymen calmly returned their sabres to their belts and strolled slowly inland as if the Crimea were already theirs. Kitson scanned the crowds of plush busbies and brocade-encrusted jackets, noting the regiments for his report.

The breeze changed direction, and a faint, inhuman shrieking reached the correspondent's ears. He stopped writing mid sentence. A bone-white horse was dangling over the side of one of the larger iron-screw steamers, suspended from a small crane. Leather straps were fastened around the creature's torso, its legs hanging limply down as it cried out in terror. Beneath it, rocking precariously on the waves, was a crude raft, made from several rowing boats lashed together. The squat black form of an artillery piece already sat awkwardly upon it, tied down with rope; the makeshift platform was unbalanced by its weight, and tipped drunkenly with the rise and fall of the sea.

After a short, tense descent, the horse's hooves touched the raft. Several sailors reached out at once, unfastening the straps and patting the beast's neck and muzzle reassuringly. The horse slipped on the shining planks, but was quickly on its feet again, nostrils flaring as it snorted with distress. Already, the next was on its way down, a chestnut this time, whinnying loudly as it came; and before long, three warhorses stood upon the raft as it floated unsteadily beneath the overcast sky.

Disaster was so inevitable, and so familiar, that the blue-jackets greeted it with weariness rather than alarm. One of the horses became tangled up in the cords holding down the gun and, immediately panicking, started to kick and flounder, screaming as it did so. The others promptly reared up, shaking off the men who tried to settle them, adding their voices to what was soon a piercing chorus. With a sharp whipping sound, straining ropes started to snap. A second later the gun toppled overboard, pulling the horse caught up in the ropes after it. Both vanished instantly

into the murky brown-green water. The raft lurched upwards on the side where the lost gun had stood, causing the two remaining horses to fall, and then slide off messily into the sea.

Back on the beach, Kitson winced and made a quick entry in his pocketbook.

A few other rafts, similarly troubled, bobbed and span among the looming iron-clads. Some of the transport captains, seeing the mayhem below, had decided to dispense with any attempt at conveying the horses to shore and were simply having them pushed from the deck, leaving it to the beasts themselves to find their way to the beach. Kitson watched them tumble down the sides of the tall ships into the waves, legs kicking wildly, landing in an explosion of foam. He tried to trace the dots of their heads as they swam for the shore. Some of them he lost; others didn't seem to be moving at all, so slow was their progress. His eyes started to ache with the effort.

Blinking, Kitson remembered the telegram, which he'd tucked inside the pocketbook's front cover. He pulled it out. The crumpled piece of yellowed paper bore terse words from O'Farrell back in London, shouted out in mechanical script: *Illustrator Robert Styles STOP Lands Eupatoria sixteenth September STOP HMS Arthur STOP*. It had arrived about three weeks earlier, at the telegraph office in Varna. Cracknell, predictably enough, hadn't been impressed.

'Men dropping dead from bloody cholera all around us, not a drop of decent brandy for five hundred bloody miles, a bloody great *war* about to commence, and what does our editor send out to his brave correspondents? A bloody *illustrator!*'

Kitson had muttered his concurrence. Inwardly, however, he'd been intrigued, and pleased that the *London Courier's* reporting team was to be enlarged. After months spent following Richard Cracknell through the brothels and slums of Constantinople, and then trailing behind him across the meadows of Bulgaria, Kitson had come to feel almost as if he were a manservant rather than a junior reporting partner. The thought of a peer, an equal, had a distinct appeal – and what was more, this Mr Styles, as an illustrator, a professional artist, would surely be a man of some

culture. He'd know about the successes and failures of the Academy Summer Exhibition, at least. Kitson longed for such conversation in a manner he wouldn't have thought possible half a year earlier.

Before him, the waiting hussars yelled encouragement as horses started to reach the shore. Kitson looked up from the telegram. The blue-jackets in the sea were attempting to get hold of the dazed animals before they could stagger out of the water, but the men were inexperienced, and allowed many to escape. Once on the beach, the horses shook their manes, looked quickly about them, and then bolted. One, a grey, charged by close to where Kitson stood, hooves clattering through the stones, eyes wide with fear, water streaming down its sea-darkened flanks. Several hussars gave chase, raising their arms in the air, whistling shrill signals that, on this occasion, the highly trained horse failed even to notice.

The stiff breeze knocked off one of the cavalrymen's busbies. Cursing, he left the pursuit and strode crossly to where it lay amongst the pebbles.

Seeing his chance, Kitson tucked away the telegram and turned over a fresh page in his pocketbook. 'Excuse me, trooper, but might I enquire as to your orders? D'you know when are we to move upon Sebastopol?'

The hussar was a tall corporal with a thick blond moustache, dressed in the blue overalls of the King's Royal Irish. He snatched up the busby and brushed it roughly with the back of his hand. Then he looked at Kitson, irritation written plainly on his face. 'What?'

'I'm from the *London Courier*,' Kitson explained. 'We are reporting on the campaign.'

'And why the devil would you be doin' that?'

Kitson met the man's hostile stare with a brief, amiable grin. He had been asked similar questions many times before, in the same suspicious tones, and had a standard response. 'Why, so that the British public might read of the heroism of their troops, of course, and the progress of their noble undertaking, thereby easing—'

The hussar was not listening. 'I cannot be seen conversin'

with the likes of you,' he interrupted impatiently, tugging the busby's golden strap under his chin. 'Now get out the damned way.'

His shoulder struck hard against Kitson's as he sprinted off after the errant horse, which was now somewhere amongst the piles of supplies that covered the rear of the landing zone. Kitson staggered, losing his footing for a moment, and dropping his pocketbook as he waved an arm to steady himself. As he stooped to pick it up, the telegram fell from beneath its cover. Caught by the wind, the slip of paper curled away across the stones, rising up into the air. For a moment, Kitson considered giving chase; but then just watched it go.

The *H.M.S. Arthur*, one of the older frigates in the bay, was anchored a good distance from the beach with her sails rolled. As her passengers were non-military, she had been allocated only two longboats, making the disembarkation painfully, tediously slow. In addition, the ship was taking on cholera cases for immediate transport back to Scutari. Every longboat from the *Arthur*, after it had been pulled up on to the stones and disgorged its civilian cargo, then had to be loaded with pale, moaning soldiers, each one bound to a stretcher, before it could sail back. Like every other operation that day, lifting the sick up to the ship once they reached her was made many times more difficult by the swell. At least two had been lost to the waves.

The invalids were receiving a great deal of attention from those leaving the *Arthur*. The majority were soldiers' wives who had been camped out with the army throughout the miserable summer in Varna, but left behind when the invasion force had set sail for the Crimea. Rows of anxious faces, framed by grimy bonnets, poked over the deck rail, both hopeful and fearful that someone familiar might be among those being carried aboard so precariously. They gasped when the sailors stumbled, and they wailed when men went into the sea; but they'd already seen far too much death that year to be badly shocked.

Kitson approached the cholera cases awaiting evacuation.

They were laid out in lines across the shingle like rotten railway sleepers. He looked at the soldiers' stained uniforms, streaked with vomit and faeces, their waxy, agonised faces, their rigid limbs that poked out awkwardly from under their blankets like snapped branches, and felt nothing but relief that he had so far managed to escape infection. This cold-hearted reaction would have shamed him six months earlier. Like the soldiers' wives, however, like everyone on the campaign, he had grown somewhat hardened against the misery of others.

He picked his way around to where the disembarked wives had gathered in a large crowd, huddled against the wind, shawls drawn in close around them. Many were calling out names at the invalids, in the slight hope of eliciting responses from them. The only able-bodied men present were the servants of the few officers' wives who had been obliged to travel aboard the *Arthur*, standing alongside their mistresses, a little apart from the grubby spouses of the common soldiery. There was no one present who might conceivably be Mr Styles. Kitson perched on a coil of thick navy rope and lit a cigar, settling down to wait.

Before long, another longboat scraped up on to the shore. Drab civilians piled over its sides, many not waiting for the landing planks in their eagerness to walk again upon dry land. As they dispersed, drifting off into a maze of crates, sacks and assorted pieces of military machinery, Kitson noticed a man vault athletically out of the boat. He threw a leather folder and a canvas bag to the ground, and turned quickly to offer his arm to a slender young woman who was stepping on to the top of a landing plank, holding up the hem of her skirts before descending with practised grace. The poise and careful courtesy of this interaction appeared entirely out of place in that dreary, chaotic afternoon. As Kitson watched, the man retrieved his belongings and the pair started in his direction, the lady's gloved hand in his elbow, their heads lowered against the breeze. A group of sailors heaved a large mahogany trunk from the longboat, puffing as they rushed it inland, overtaking the strolling couple. After thirty yards or so, they set it down with a

groan; the black chest was so heavy that it sank several inches into the pebbles. Rubbing their sore palms together, the blue-jackets promptly returned to their boats.

There were some distant screams as a warhorse leapt from the foam close to the soldiers' wives, trampling several of the cholera cases as it galloped off into the landing zone. The pair, who had by now reached the chest, both looked around to find the source of this sound, giving Kitson his first proper sight of their faces. He caught his breath: the woman was Madeleine Boyce. Grinding out his cigar on the navy rope, he got to his feet and walked towards them.

Mrs Madeleine Boyce was a lady of considerable reputation. Although only a shade above twenty, her fame as a beauty was already well established. That afternoon, as ever, her clothes were immaculate; a grey silk dress with a dark blue bonnet and cloak, unostentatious but radiating quiet expensiveness. Her cheeks bore the slightest flush from the sharp sea wind and the cold spray it carried. A few strands of dark hair had escaped from under her bonnet, and trailed across her cheek. Seeing Kitson approach, she smiled warmly.

'Mr Kitson! What a pleasant surprise!' Her voice, even when raised against the bustle of the beach, was soft, with the light accent of a Frenchwoman who had been among the English for many years. She gestured at the activity around them. 'How extraordinary all this is!'

Kitson returned her smile, marvelling at her relaxed demeanour. Does she have the faintest notion, he wondered, of the difficulties her presence here will cause? 'It is remarkable, *Madame*, truly remarkable, what wonders can be achieved by our modern armies. Why, King Agamemnon himself would gape with awe at the sight before us today. That so many thousands of fighting men can be landed, and in so short a time, quite amazes the mind.'

He glanced at her companion. The fellow was young also, a number of years younger than Kitson himself, certainly no more than twenty-two or -three. His wide, guileless face was clean-shaven, his skin tanned and unlined, his posture straight – this was no veteran of the staging post at Varna. He wore a black velvet jacket that was not only unsoiled,

but also reasonably new and in good repair; a soft, broad-brimmed felt hat in a deep shade of green sat upon his head, and long, light brown curls were tucked behind his ears. The leather folder, now under his arm, was plainly an album of drawings and sketches. There could be no doubt who he was. Kitson had located Mr Styles.

‘Allow me to introduce myself, sir,’ the young man said, extending his hand, ‘Robert Styles. Pleased to make your acquaintance, Mr Kitson. Mr O’Farrell assured me that you would be here to meet me, even if Mr Cracknell was indisposed.’

Kitson took Styles’ hand. The skin was oddly smooth against his own callused palm. Standing there, exchanging pleasantries with a fashionable lady and an artist, he was struck by a strange, momentary sense of familiarity, as if his old life in the salons and picture galleries of the Metropolis had somehow followed him to the shores of the Black Sea. ‘Welcome to the Crimea, Mr Styles. May I say how glad I am that you are joining us, sir. Your efforts will doubtless enrich our coverage of the coming conflict enormously.’

Styles smiled nervously. ‘I only hope I do not disappoint, Mr Kitson. Much faith has been placed in me, it seems.’

‘You are too modest, Mr Styles,’ interjected Mrs Boyce gently. She met Kitson’s eye. ‘He is a man of true talent, Mr Kitson. Whilst we were on board the *Arthur*, he took several studies of me, all quite excellent.’

‘Really, *Madame*?’ Kitson looked at the illustrator. Styles was blushing fiercely, intensely pleased by Mrs Boyce’s praise. It was clear enough what had transpired between them. Madeleine Boyce conquered fellows like this Styles without even properly realising that she was doing it. Kitson almost cursed aloud: here was yet another complication to consider. So much, he thought, for my optimism about the arrival of Mr Styles. ‘Is that where you first met one another, may I ask? On the *Arthur*?’

Styles nodded. ‘The vessel made a stop at Varna, sir, and Mrs Boyce came aboard. We were introduced soon after.’

‘Indeed, Mr Styles. What serendipity.’ Kitson turned back to the officer’s wife. She had removed one of her gloves and

was idly studying the exposed hand. 'Well, I must say that it is good to see you again so soon, *Madame*. We poor *Courier* scribes were resigned to meeting you next upon English soil.' He cleared his throat pointedly. 'Mr Cracknell will be especially gratified, I'm sure.'

Suddenly self-conscious, Mrs Boyce pulled her glove back on. 'And how fares your good senior? He is well, I hope?'

Styles was listening very closely, his brow furrowed. Our young illustrator is no fool, thought Kitson. He saw the change that came over her when I mentioned Cracknell's name. 'He perseveres, Mrs Boyce, in his usual manner. His, ah, inexhaustible passion for our task continues to inspire all in his orbit. Myself in particular.'

She smiled at this reply – not the confident smile that charmed and dazzled so many, but a genuine, involuntary expression of deep delight. Kitson looked away.

A small mule-cart was weaving slowly through some Commissariat tents pitched at the rear of the landing zone, heading in their direction. It was driven by a stout infantry sergeant, with a private sat at his side. The brass regimental number on the front of their shako helmets was just visible: these soldiers were from the 99th Foot.

'I see that your escort approaches, *Madame*,' Kitson observed, unable to keep a note of relief from his voice. 'The Lieutenant-Colonel will be most pleased to learn that you have arrived without mishap.'

The dreamy smile vanished. Mrs Boyce inclined her head stiffly in reluctant acknowledgement of her husband's existence.

'And we must leave you now, I'm afraid,' Kitson added apologetically. 'There are duties we must perform, and certain facts of our present situation with which Mr Styles here must be familiarised. I feel sure, however, that we will encounter one another again in the near future.'

Farewells were exchanged – rather hastily, as Kitson wished to avoid being caught conversing with Mrs Boyce by one of her husband's non-commissioned officers. It would be reported, various assumptions would be made, and trouble would surely follow. He was starting to feel that trouble was

something with which the nascent *Courier* team was already too familiar.

Madeleine watched the newspapermen walk away across the stones, taking care to give the cart a wide berth. A minute later, the modest vehicle pulled up close to where she stood. The squat brown mules were shaking their heads and braying, unsettled by the sounds of the teeming landing zone.

'Mrs Boyce?' said the sergeant. 'We're 'ere t'collect you, ma'am.' She nodded absently. The two soldiers climbed down from the cart and started towards the chest.

Turning away, Madeleine gazed inland, past the beach to the farmlands beyond. '*Je suis ici, Richard,*' she whispered, '*je suis ici.*'