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There are times in a man's life when he has no choice but to ignore the pain. Dylan had done it many times himself. But now he was filled with respect and awe as he watched Stephen scale the rubble leading to freedom.

He knew it had to take a superhuman effort for him; he could barely stand unaided on solid ground. Now he witnessed the emaciated man raise each infected foot weighed further by the thick manacles that slashed through the skin to the tender nerves below. His enflamed and blackened toes fought to find a crevice, no matter how miniscule. Unable to feel in his extremities, it was left to Dylan to tell him exactly how far to raise each foot and then verify when his toes were placed in a secure location.

They each held their breath while a mere half inch of each foot was forced to support his body as he searched for finger holds. It was an excruciatingly slow process and before he grasped another minute crack with which he hauled himself upward an inch at a time, Dylan was certain he would fall backward into his waiting arms. Wrapped around one shoulder was the rope from the black bag, further weighing him down.

It should have been the other way around, Dylan thought, anger at himself growing. But it had been Stephen's insistence that he go first. Dylan had never climbed the sheer face of a

cliff, which was what this wall resembled; but Stephen had, many times over. And it was apparent from the way he used every ounce of energy left within him that he was turning the tables to help save them both.

He reached the top and hesitated while he caught his breath. It was ragged and when he spoke, it was dry and rasping. "Bats are all over the place," he said. "This shelf is covered in guano so it's slippery. And it's raining."

"Lovely."

"I'm tying this rope off to the stone itself." His legs scraped the stones as he hauled himself onto the ground. He disappeared briefly only to reemerge a moment later. As he stuck his head over the side and peered down at Dylan, he half-smiled. "I made it," he said simply.

"You're a good man," Dylan said. "I don't know if I could've made that climb, especially wounded as you are."

"Freedom is a great motivator." He flung the rope down to Dylan, who caught it easily.

"You're sure it will hold?"

"It had better," he answered. "It's the only thing up here."

"Ooh." Dylan tied the rope around his waist and tested the knot. He didn't feel good about this, not good at all, but he had no choice. He glanced upward at Stephen's face before securing the black bag over one shoulder. He took a deep breath and expelled it noisily. His hands were sweating and he removed the gloves and wiped his hands against his jeans but that did little to dry them. Then he groped the wall under Stephen's instructions until his fingers had a minuscule hold. Then he hauled himself upward, trying to remember the path the other man had taken.

His shoes felt slick and inept on the stones, the soles too smooth and now covered in slimy droppings that made his movements even more perilous. He tried not to think of the rope as the only sure thing that kept him from falling, hoping Stephen had more confidence in an ancient stone ledge than he did.

His boot slipped on a hold too tenuous and he hugged the wall as pebbles rained below. He made a mental note as though

he might forget that this would be his only attempt at rock climbing. There was nothing even remotely fun about it.

The rope rubbed uncomfortably against his torso through the thick wool turtleneck and the leather jacket and he wished he hadn't tied it so tightly. He'd been concerned it wouldn't hold but now he felt its heat and coarseness.

The minutes crept past. Each time he found a toehold or a finger grip, he knew it would be his last. It made him marvel even more that Stephen had been able to scale the wall in his weakened condition.

"Dylan!" Stephen whispered hoarsely.

Dylan looked upward; he might have been a mere twelve inches from the top but it may as well have been twelve more feet. "Aye?"

"The ledge isn't going to hold."

"What?"

"It's been shifting as you've climbed. I thought it was embedded pretty well into the earth but..." His voice faded as he inspected the ledge.

Dylan forced his body against the wall until his cheek was pressed against the cold stone. It felt good against his skin; he was overheated and fatigued and the iciness helped in some strange way to calm him. "What might you suggest I'd be doin' at this point?" He called up.

"You can't untie the rope, I suppose?"

Dylan might have laughed if he'd had any sense of humor left in him. The truth was he was terrified to move; as long as he'd continued upward, concentrating on the next hold and the one after that, he'd been able to keep his fear in check. But now as he continued to press his body against the wall, he felt too large, too heavy and too clumsy. "No," he managed to say. "I'm thinkin' untyin' the rope isn't an option at the moment."

"I'm going to cut it."

A moment passed. He expected to feel the rope dropping off below him but it never happened.

"You have the knife, Dylan," Stephen said quietly.

Dylan pressed his cheek against the wall until it hurt. "Ooh," he groaned.

“Can you toss the bag up to me?”

He forced himself to look upward. Twelve inches. Maybe more. It was too far for him to throw his arms over the edge. He needed just one more finger hold; one more toehold. The rope dangled; there was slack to it.

“Tell me,” he said, “why is the ledge movin’ if there’s slack?”

“When you’re climbing, you’re depending on the rope to hold you.”

“And if I didn’t?”

“You haven’t fallen yet, have you?”

He processed this for a moment. “And if I started to fall now?”

“The ledge would come with you.”

“Christ Almighty.” He took a deep breath, exhaled sharply and inhaled once more. Then with a guttural groan, he forced one hand away from the stone as he sought frantically for another hold. He scrambled up the side of the wall, his boots slipping and sliding against the slick rock, until he had both arms over the side.

There was nothing but peat and the ledge and as he struggled to haul himself onto firm ground, he realized he had no choice but to depend on the ledge.

“It won’t hold, Dylan,” Stephen cautioned. He tried to grasp Dylan’s arms.

“Let go o’ me!” Dylan shouted.

“But—”

“I said let go o’ me! If I fall, I’ll take you down w’me, man. Get away from the ledge and get away from me!”

A wicked clap of thunder shocked the night air. A flash of blue light streaked across the black sky, momentarily lighting the ground beyond him.

He grasped the edge of the ledge and pulled with the entire weight of his body. As his torso cleared the opening, the stone teetered away from him and then toward him. He forced one knee over the edge as it shifted downward suddenly, pinning his remaining leg beneath it.

Stephen grasped the black bag, wrenching it away from him.

Dylan let out an involuntary grunt as he struggled against the ledge. Below him, the chasm felt wide and unyielding, the room beneath him a tomb waiting to accept his body. He felt like it welcomed him with open arms; it wanted him to fail, wanted him to fall into the same crypt that held the Nazi soldiers.

As he made one final push against the ledge to free his trapped leg, the skies opened, releasing a torrent that felt more like a river than rain. The peat seemed to turn to mud beneath his hands and he lost his precarious hold on the earth.

The ledge teetered once more and then slid along the back of his leg, scraping it and pinning it. He screamed out as he felt the rock break loose from the ground. As he grappled wildly for any hold, no matter how tenuous, Stephen lunged for him.