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“Mon Dieu!” Guillaume breathed.

We had been walking for nearly two hours, stopping frequently to listen for signs of the enemy. Twice we'd been forced to take cover in the long grass as British soldiers scoured the area, clearly performing their own reconnaissance. But we had reached our destination undetected, and we now peered over a rise just above the expanse of Pointe Platte.

The sight before us was astonishing. Beside us,

a brook spilled down the slope and meandered toward the ocean, and the enemy had established camps on either side of it. This was no surprise, since the brook was a source of drinking water. What amazed Guillaume and me was the sea of tents pitched before us. Thousands of soldiers were encamped there.

But it was not just the sheer number of men that astounded us. It was the preparations our enemies were making. Although the surf still ran high, boats had obviously been ferrying supplies almost continuously from the ships to the shore, and we watched now as men unloaded two more. The first carried the weaponry and ammunition we expected. The other was laden with timber and tools, which were being added to large piles of other building materials that had already been beached. The presence of so many men and the growing store of supplies suggested what I had feared from the beginning — the siege we were anticipating would be lengthy and fierce.

I glanced at Guillaume. His expression told me what I already knew. We needed to get this information back to our leaders as soon as possible.

A stick cracked somewhere to our right.

Guillaume and I pulled back into the tall ferns growing alongside the brook as more than a dozen

redcoats made their way toward our position, their muskets shouldered. I could hear them chatting as they drew closer, their words as unfamiliar to me as the letters on the Porte Dauphine plaque were to Guillaume.

Guillaume and I froze. Although our muskets were primed and ready to fire, the two of us would be no match for so many soldiers, and it was crucial that we return to Louisbourg with our report. As the soldiers approached closer still, I controlled my breathing to prevent even the slight movements of my chest from disturbing the ferns and betraying our presence. Guillaume, who lay a hand-width from me, was doing the same.

When the men were just steps away, I caught a sudden movement. A flick. And then another — the forked tongue of a thick brown snake slithering away from the redcoats' boots. Coiling beneath the ferns, it was far longer than my arm and thicker than the barrel of my musket. None of the reptiles in Île Royale were poisonous, but that was not what worried me.

I slowly turned toward Guillaume, hoping he had not spied the snake. But he had, his face now white as parchment. I wanted to reach out to him, to place my hand on his shoulder and reassure him, but I dared not move.

At any moment I expected panic to get the better of him and send him fleeing, an expectation that only increased when the snake suddenly glided toward Guillaume's face. It was as though the creature was unaware of his presence, perhaps mistaking his motionless body for a fallen log. I knew we could not escape discovery now. Guillaume would not be able to contain his terror. He would bolt.

I gripped the musket that I feared I would shoot for the last time, and I thought of Marie-Claire. I pictured how she had looked when we parted that morning, her eyes dark and tear filled. I thought of her praying for our safety and I waited for the worst.

The snake continued to slither forward, its scaly surface brushing Guillaume's chin as it passed. His eyes grew saucer wide and he swallowed thickly, the sound like a too-ripe pear being squeezed in a fist.

In that final moment, as I prepared to leap from our hiding place to attack the redcoats, I was grateful that at least I would die there with my friend. We had grown up together in France, crossed the ocean together, served our king together. We had begun our new lives together in this unfamiliar land, and together we would end them here.

But death did not come.

The snake slithered off through the ferns, and the soldiers walked within an arm's reach of us and continued on their way, never knowing we were there.

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“Are you certain?” asked the governor.

I felt awkward and tongue-tied in his presence, but Boudier had insisted that Guillaume and I share our findings with the war council in person. “*Oui, Gouverneur Drucour,*” I said, wishing I had had time to wash before entering his apartments. I was afraid my soiled uniform might brush against his fine furnishings. “There were at least twelve thousand men camped at Pointe Platte. Probably more.”

“And you agree with his estimate?” Drucour asked Guillaume.

“*Oui, Excellence,*” he replied. “At least that many.” While Guillaume had never learned to read, numbers were as real as rocks to him. “And the enemy is landing supplies all the time. Mostly building materials.”

The governor nodded gravely. He turned to Boudier and the other officers. “The British will launch their attack from the high ground that surrounds us, so they will no doubt build batteries there to provide cover for their weapons.”

“Their efforts will be wasted,” came a voice from my left. Lieutenant Colonel Saint-Julhien. “Our cannons will blow those batteries to bits.”

Governor Drucour shook his head. “Unfortunately, the British know the range of our weapons. We showed them the day you retreated from Anse de la Cormorandière when we fired over your soldiers’ heads to keep our enemies from advancing. The British will surely build their batteries safely beyond that distance.”

Saint-Julhien’s face flushed crimson and he said no more.

Governor Drucour addressed the council again. “Fortunately, transporting their supplies from the coast will be no small matter, and then our enemies must build whatever batteries and redoubts they hope to use in their assault. That may give us some time before their forces are in place and fully prepared to attack. I have written to our leaders requesting assistance. I am hopeful it will arrive before the offensive begins. Until then, we have only one option open to us.”

He turned to the map of Île Royale spread across the table in front of him. “Here is what we must do.”