

ENDURANCE VIAL
by
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In durance vile. Prison. Sitting on a louse-ridden cot, thinking of the life I could have been leading right at that moment. Twenty years! Twenty years for attempting to separate the young widow Ibraesia from her fortune, and afterward attempting to separate her brother's head from his shoulders. Thank the Gods I had my escape all planned. Bertholdt Mona does not stoop to hard labor. A noble brow and a talent for knavery allowed me long ago to ascend into court society and I wasn't about to return to where I had come from if I could help it. I have a taste for the finer things. Twenty years smelling other men's sweat was not for me.

I had been so close. I had swept her off her feet. From the moment I approached her at the funeral and introduced myself as a business associate of her late husband's, I knew she was mine for the taking. My kind words of condolence for the loss of that fat embezzler, my strong hands helping her into her carriage, my handsome face and courtly manners; what woman could resist?

I knew every trick. Soon she was coming to me for the least little thing, and there I was, always eager to help, never letting her even think of returning any favors. I played it just right; no lustful looks, no wandering hands. That's the last thing one wants to do. Patience is a virtue. One of the few I have, I must say.

And virtue wasn't easy, either. Adalia Ibraesia was the sort of woman that would make a eunuch sprout new growth. No painted jade, she. That sort of woman is easy to ignore. Innocence is much more distracting, and Adalia was innocence personified. She was a shy, pious country girl with eyes that might melt a statue's heart. The way she would peek out from under her long, dark lashes and nervously lick her perfect lips with her little pink tongue would have driven a weaker man mad. But not I. I was rigid. I stood firm. The thought of the fortune left her by that elephantine banker kept me in check. Not a finger did I lay on her in passion. Ever I remained the perfect companion, the genteel friend, until at last the burden of my

graciousness grew too much for her to bear, and she asked me if there was anything she could do for me in return for all my kindnesses.

The time had come. I got down on one knee and said that she would make me the happiest man in the world if she would only consent to be my wife.

She gasped and blushed, which of course was only the ladylike thing to do, and said that my request did not come as a complete surprise to her. She had noticed the looks I gave her when I thought she wasn't looking. She had found the crumpled poems I had thrown into the fireplace. I turned my head in embarrassed modesty and allowed myself a smug smile at my own cleverness and forethought. She touched my arm. Her hand trembled.

"In three months time," she said, "my year of mourning will have ended. I bid you sir, ask me the same question again at that time."

When I looked up, with carefully constructed soulfulness arranged on my face, her eyes were full of such love I nearly attacked her right there.

But I didn't. Three months and a wedding were all that separated me from a fortune rivaled only by the coffers of royalty. I wasn't going to let impractical desire come between

me and gold. There would be time enough for all that after the wedding.

My plan was simple; a few months romping with my new bride, a few months playing the happy couple in correct society, and then alas, the slow, tragic decline in her health while I sent to the four corners of the earth for doctors and healers, all to no avail. Finally she would fade entirely, and I would be left the poor widow's widower, alone with all those riches but no happiness. I could hardly wait.

In the end it was waiting that proved my downfall. Though Adalia's brother had more than a little to do with it. The mewling brat had always mistrusted me, but I was careful never to give him fuel for his suspicions. Unfortunately, three months is a long time, and to keep my mind from wandering to Adalia's ripe young curves, I took to wandering her house instead, inspecting the rich furnishings and devising the best ways of liquidating them. It was on one of these dreamy rambles that I came upon a jeweled cup that looked particularly valuable. My curiosity overcame me. I had to know its worth. I slipped it into my coat and went to visit an old acquaintance of mine with a knowledge of such things.

The bastard brother must have seen me take the bauble and followed me, for just as I was entering my friend's establishment, he spun me around. If he had let me talk, I'm

sure I could have soothed even him, for my agility with a sword is equaled only by the agility of my tongue. But no, he stuck his little blade in my face and that was that.

Once in court, everything came out. The widow went away in tears and I in chains, which brings me back to durance vile.

Not for long, however. As usual, I've planned ahead. I realized long ago that the penalties possible in my chosen profession and my abhorrence for mixing with the lower orders might one day come into conflict, so, instead of spending the spoils of my first successes on women and drink, I purchased from a practitioner of the black arts a potion of wakeful sleeping. The Endurance Vial, I call it. It allows one to go through years of drudgery and wake at the end, remembering none of it. One drop equaled one year, he had said, so twenty drops and the next twenty years would pass in an instant. My body would still be here, waking, working, sleeping, but it isn't really the body that suffers in prison, it is the soul, and mine would have escaped. I would wake in twenty years as if only a minute had passed, my mind as unsullied as when they locked me in.

The warder pushed a plate and cup under the bars of my cell. Stale bread and small beer. Ye gods, I thought, the sooner

I do this the better. I didn't want to degrade my memory with even one such meal. I slipped the vial from i's hiding place and counted twenty viscous drops into the mug. It had a spicy, over-ripe odor.

"Good-bye, dank walls. We'll meet again in twenty years," I said, then drank the draught, lay back in the pallet, and closed my eyes to wait.

What was wrong?

It wasn't working.

I strained my nerves for sleep. I wasn't even drowsy. A slight dizziness as I lay back, but after that, nothing. The sorcerer had robbed me! I sat up angrily and opened my eyes to look for the vial. My heart stopped.

Around me were no rough walls and iron bars. Instead, marble columns and brocade draperies met my gaze. In place of my straw bed, I lay on a canopied four-poster of immense proportions. The sun dappled through spring green outside open windows.

"By the gods, where am I?"

Across the room, a man in servant's livery whirled at the sound of my voice. He stared at me in wonder.

"Where am I?" I repeated.

"He spoke!" gasped the man, and ran out of the room.

With legs shaking and heart pounding, I climbed from the massive bed and looked around. Now that I had recovered my initial shock, I knew this place. It wasn't long ago I had checked that very tapestry for market value. This was a bedroom in the Ibraesia house! I looked down at myself - rich nightshirt, silken trousers, rings on my hands.

My hands!

These couldn't be my hands, not these gnarled claws. I ran to a mirror. Oh Gods! My body, old! My handsome face a crumbling ruin! The potion had worked after all. Twenty years gone in an instant. I had done it. I had escaped my prison term. My heart leapt, but then...

I froze in mid-thought. If that were so, why was I not still in my cell, ticking off the last few days to my release? Then it came to me. A drop is no exact measure, twenty drops even less so. Perhaps I had slept a short while longer than my sentence. It didn't matter. I was out, and though old, my mind still had its vigor and would adapt to any changes that had occurred. For instance, I must discover why I had been brought to this house and not cast into the street like any other released prisoner. Perhaps Adalia planned some revenge upon me now that I was out. But if so...

My musings were interrupted by the click of heels and the rustle of silk. I looked up into the eyes of a dowdy middle-aged woman - a painted jade, desperately trying to hold onto her long-lost youth. She looked at me with fear and anticipation.

"Who the devil are you?" I snapped.

"Bertholdt?"

That voice!

It was Adalia, my little widow, my ripe young country girl grown bloated and cheap. Life shouldn't happen to some people. What I had planned for her would have been much kinder than this.

"Adalia?"

"Bertholdt! You're back!"

She ran to me and enveloped me in her overscented embrace. I pushed her away.

"Adalia, what is going on? Why am I here?"

"Oh, Bertholdt. I can't believe you're speaking! I tried so often to cure you. I sent to the four corners of the earth for doctors and healers, but alas, to no avail. And now you just... wake up? Oh, Bertholdt! Praise the gods!"

"But how long? How long have I been here? When did I get out of prison?"

She took my hands and looked lovingly into my eyes. "It became too much, Bertholdt. I loved you so. The thought of you

wasting away in durance vile was more than I could bear. At last I defied my brother and bought you out of prison." She sighed. "I thought my life would be heaven then, but you... you never woke."

She fell crying into my arms and I mechanically patted her back as cold fingers of dread closed around my heart.

"When did you get me out, Adalia? How long ago?"

"A year after they put you in, Bertholdt. You've been free for nineteen years."

THE END