

A Sundial in a Grave: 1610

Mary Gentle

For Dean, my first reader;
without whom, nothing.

“[...] make

The sons of sword, and hazard fall before

The golden calf, and on their knees, whole nights, Commit idolatry with wine, and trumpets:”

II.i. 18–20, *The Alchemist*, Ben Jonson (1610)

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Hic Jacet

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Translator's Foreword

It's about sex, and cruelty, and forgiveness.

None of this is apparent from our previous knowledge of the story.

In 1687 the sole surviving manuscript of the *Memoirs* of Valentin Raoul Rochefort, French ex-gentleman and professional hired killer, was thrown on the fire by an outraged descendant.

Although the manuscript must have been rescued from the blaze soon afterward, many pages were found to be blackened and unreadable, and most of Rochefort's words were lost to posterity. It's only luck that we have a complete document—both the burned and the undamaged pages shoved carelessly together into a wooden box, by some anonymous rescuer, together with a few other minor documents of the time.

Now, after four hundred years, computer-assisted image enhancement can give us a version that is, 99 percent accurately, what Rochefort wrote.

In the middle of the nineteenth century a French novelist took what was legible of the *Memoirs* and made a popular and eminently readable novel out of it. I suppose that these days most of us know *Noblesse D'Épée* (or, as the English translator called it, *The Sons of Sword and Hazard*) from children's editions, or from a movie version of the story. The bare facts are well known. The novel was written in France, in 1860, by Auguste Maquet, famous as the collaborator of Alexandre Dumas on *The Three Musketeers*. (Scandal later claimed that Maquet was indeed the sole and only author of many of Dumas' novels—but it did him no good financially.) We know that Maquet had read a chapbook version of the *Memoirs* early on in his life; he recycled the names of the protagonists as minor characters in his synopses for Dumas.

Maquet ignored—because there was, then, no way of reading them—the oddest and most disquieting parts: the Rosicrucian conspiracy theories of the early seventeenth century, and a form of futurology that makes Nostradamus look an amateur.

The *Memoirs* themselves lapsed into obscurity. Ironically, when Maquet wrote *Noblesse D'Épée*, he had the frustrating experience of finding it dismissed as bad Dumas pastiche. This is perhaps why the novel never had a great success in France, and—along with its source—remains practically unknown. In England, however, Maquet was translated by Stanley J. Weyman, himself a notable author of historical Romances, and *The Sons of Sword and Hazard* was an immediate success. Edward Rose adapted a version for the stage before the First World War, and a silent-movie version appeared not long after the war ended. Indeed, that first movie, made in black and white, starring Conrad Veidt as Rochefort, and Fritz Leiber Sr. as the Duc de Sully, was almost as great a success as the book version (which reached its twenty-first printing by 1906). Other movies followed through the twentieth century. The Richard Lester early 1970s remake is my personal favorite, since it has a good deal of the unbuttoned

extravagance of the original, even if it does make hay with what we knew of the plot.

I should speak personally here. I have always loved *The Sons of Sword and Hazard*. I love Weyman's book. I love all the lace-and-steel movie versions, up to the Leonardo DiCaprio vehicle it has most recently become. (Although a more unlikely Rochefort I cannot imagine. The Russell Crowe/Angelina Jolie version currently filming will, I think, be rather more true to the original.)

And in the Spring of 1986, I first discovered that the protagonist (it is awkward to call him the "hero") of *The Sons of Sword and Hazard* was a real historical person.

It is possible that both Maquet and Weyman were not aware of this.

That's not as incredible as it sounds. To take the obvious example, Alexandre Dumas clandestinely lifted the plot and characters of *The Three Musketeers* from the work of a late-seventeenth-century historical novelist, Gatién de Courtilz de Sandras. Dumas loved to claim historical reality for his D'Artagnan, Athos, Porthos, and Aramis—but it seems likely that he remained convinced that his characters were works of fiction. In fact, research now shows that (even if the novel's plot owes more to gossip and rumor), there were at least historical musketeers in the King's forces who went under those names: Charles de Batz-Castelmore, Sieur of Artagnan; Armand de Sillégué, Seigneur d'Athos et d'Auteville; Isaac de Portau; and Henri d'Aramitz.

The "novelist" Courtilz was, however inaccurately, a biographer.

Likewise I discovered *The Sons of Sword and Hazard* is history inadvertently presented as fiction. Rochefort—Valentin Raoul St Cyprian Anne-Marie Rochefort de Cossé Brissac, to give him his full name—is, at the very least, based on a real man.

That fact formed the seed of an obsession.

All of it was old news among literary critics, true; or among those few of them interested in the "sensation" adventure novel. The complete *Memoirs* existed only in their damaged form, and it was by pure accident that the fire-blackened pages were not thrown away. I managed a trip to Paris on a student's grant, and saw the original manuscript; my schoolgirl French not helping me much with the (very kind) curators, nor with the crabbed Early Modern French of Rochefort's spiky handwriting.

Ten years later, having managed to force a fair amount of that version of French into my brain—I'm notoriously bad at languages—I was on a second Masters degree which had nothing to do with post-medieval scholarship. However, it was at that university that I first discovered people using computer techniques both to analyze medieval and post-medieval handwriting, and to enhance images to uncover previously "lost" damaged texts.

I had had it in mind, before that, to translate a new edition of *The Sons of Sword and Hazard*; but that doesn't seem necessary, given the freshness of both Weyman's and Maquet's writing. For those who expect *Prithee!* and *Gadzooks!*, this is always a pleasant surprise.

I knew instantly that I wanted to apply the new technology's techniques to Rochefort's *Memoirs*.

So, this translation of the *Memoirs* is an adjunct to the classic novel. I've tried to translate Rochefort's recovered narrative into modern English, keeping a flavor of the original terms, but making it a story we can easily read.

I should perhaps warn the unwary new reader that the complete text of the *Memoirs* contains passages that are, to twenty-first-century eyes, erotic or pornographic, according to the reader's definition.

Rocheport, writing some forty years after Montaigne, follows the pattern of the *Essais* by his un-flinching confession of his own conflicted sexual life. If *The Sons of Sword and Hazard* is a story of Machiavellian politics and romance, the *Memoirs* are, among other things, the story of a sexual obsession.

But perhaps that is the same thing. Any reader of Stanley J. Weyman, Rafael Sabatini, Georgette Heyer, and Dumas must admit that the popular historical Romance has a powerful unacknowledged erotic subtext, from which it draws secret potency.

In some ways, that is also the answer to the question: why a new edition of the *Memoirs* now? I doubt it could have been published in 1894, even if it had been known. However, we don't now face the censorship, or the self-censorship, of Victorian England. Rocheport's confessions can perhaps be read with sympathy and understanding—if, also, with some amusement.

I should note here that the strangest parts of the *Memoirs* are invariably those that have the most fire damage—to the point where I suspect this can only be deliberate. Someone desired to burn the parts of Rocheport's narrative that are to do with his sexual life. Someone also attempted to destroy almost all of what Rocheport wrote about the prognostications of the English physician and Rosicrucian theorist Robert Fludd (who barely appears in the novelizations). One can only speculate why.

Here, then, is the rediscovered and retranslated story, separated from us by one language and four centuries. The recovered *Memoirs*, rendered as fully as I can. Or perhaps it would be more reasonable to say: as adequately as Time permits.

And where it seems necessary—where they shed light on the writings of Valentin Raoul Rocheport—I have added to the history those other documents that were included in the wooden box that contains the manuscript of the *Memoirs*.

With one of which, we begin:

Mary Gentle
London, England

Part 1

Cipher Journal of Robert Fludd

*27th January, year of Our Lord 1608, Julian calendar.
(6th day of February 1609 by the Gregorian calendar that is to come.)*

The work continues well. The troubles in Jülich-Cleves look set to become war within another year, perhaps a year and a half. I am leaving the French King no option about what he says and does. And that man of his, Sully, and his foolish Grand Design—what does he know of designs, a French duke who came to manhood in the wars of religion, and who understands finance, violence, and very little of men's minds?

Sully builds canals. How infinitely sad. Builders are always fighting against the stream of time that erodes away what they do. Here in London, two streets away from my house, the spireless Cathedral of Paul stands ancient and immutable, and yet I calculate that within half a century or so, fire will destroy it, and another set of builders will raise another temple in its place. And that too will fall, half a millennium later.

Assuming I am correct.

28th January 1608 (7th February 1609 Gregorian)

Assuming I am correct. What man writes those words without a pang? True, I can see the partners of the dance coming together. Our King James keeps Robbie Cecil close to his heart—closer than it seems in court, since I hear rumours that Cecil and the Scotsman quarrel constantly over money, like a housewife bickering with her lord and master. But there they are, where I said they would be—and when I said it, Cecil was only Burley's hunchback son, not the first lord of this kingdom.

And the others, I assume, are coming together in France. The woman who would be queen. The Catholic school-master who will have his name written up large in history, although he cares as little for that fame as I do. Doubtless my spy-master is also in Paris at this time, skulking in the shadows and serving Sully's purposes.

I do not doubt. I do *not* doubt. How can I?

The man, the spy, came to London with Sully's embassy six years ago, in June and July of '03, but I was still from England then. I could not help my self-doubt: I went to Paris afterwards, and the court of His Majesty Henri IV, to get a look at Sully's agent. A poor scholar, I. A reader of books, a writer of books. And this man a man of war—well, he was no different from any other soldier-turned-spy. A tall man, a head taller than any other of Sully's thugs, and with a dark look of Spain about him, although French in truth. Not a face to be easily read. I did not watch him for long: soldiers have an instinct for something that appears more than idle curiosity. I walked back to my lodgings from the Louvre palace, through the muddy streets, my head swimming. Is this the man? This unremarkable man? Is he?

29th January 1608 (8th February 1609 Gregorian)

Today I drank wine at the tavern at the end of my road, and did not tell any man why. It is one of my most weighty calculations—this day, forty years ahead, and still by the Julian calendar, my English people will raise their King up on a dais and chop off his head. The first King to die at the hands of the rabble *who will be considered justly executed*.

Other things inevitably follow: other Kings killed. Eventually, all kings dead, and only despots left to rule—warlords and petty criminals masquerading as statesmen. They will bring three of the greatest atrocities of the world down on us, sights and dreams to give even poor Nostradamus pause. After that, worse will follow. And all from that seed, the judicial execution of the English King.

There must, therefore, be a different king. One they will not kill. A just man, a temperate man, a man of principle.

I am left, unfortunate I! with the royal line of Stuart. With which I must do what I can.

While drinking in Barkley's Inn, I smiled, and no man understood why. I was thinking that it might have been worse. I might have been given the French royal house of the Valois.

30th January 1608 (9th February 1609 Gregorian)

New calculations. A new factor, at this late stage? How can it be? And yet either all I have calculated is wrong, or else there is a new player on the stage! I do not understand.

2nd February 1608 (12th February 1609 Gregorian)

Candlemass. Death of innocents. Yes, I bite my lip until it bleeds, attending the services in St Paul's. Like Herod, I am to kill innocents. Unlike Herod, I hope to spare more by so doing.

I wept, kneeling in the shelter of one of the tombs. The stone was so cold under my knees. Death comes to all, death is final; I have so short a time to do what I can, before I too die.

It is no advantage to know that you *must* die upon a certain date. I have perhaps two years, if things go badly wrong. Fourteen, if I can put the right king on the throne. That must be enough, surely? To guard, to guide, to mould his mind into true kingship—stewardship of his people, as his name implies?

Even so, that is the most I can expect. To die in December of 1611, or May of 1623. I am not yet of thirty-five years of age. My body shakes with an ague when I think on it.

It would be an injustice to seek to divert the flow of time to give me a longer life. I will not—will *not*—make those calculations.

If I were of the Old Religion, I could go to confession. Any priest would think I was a madman, but at least I could confess to another human being.

Note to self: that loneliness, and the desire for intercourse with another soul, are the greatest dangers to this work. If the contents of this journal are not wise, still there is wisdom in the keeping of it. I must learn to be more solitary.

4th February 1608 (14th February 1609 Gregorian)

More calculations. Yes, there is another new player, although I cannot see what he will do. Perhaps that means his ship will sink and he be killed. Time shows me these dead-ends. Improbabilities. Fates that will never be. At any rate, there is nothing I can do until he comes further within my sphere of influence. I have not known a man come from so far, before this.

The woman will have left her home by now.

Jülich-Cleves progresses towards crisis. There are troop movements in Savoy. I did not expect my man to be sent to oversee them—that was a very minor possibility—and yet he has been. There is a smaller chance that he may die there. If so, what then am I to do? Something, surely, but *what?*

Time is a sea, vaster than the Atlantic. I am a man attempting to control its tides. How futile am I? A madman raving on a sea-shore, as in a play I attended? Only the progression of the days will tell.

18th February 1608 (28th February 1609 Gregorian)

All calculations re-done and complete. Yes, it will work. It is time for me to attempt my own communication here, with those of my countrymen who must be involved in this. Once that is done, and the necessary months expended to gain their trust, I can do nothing but wait for events in France. They

will bring themselves to me, and then I will act.

I walk in my other garden now, awaiting the signs of Spring, which are late this year. Frost still ornaments the marble, and the sun rarely casts a shadow from the gnomon of the sundial. I wish that I had the luxury of believing in omens.

Influence is being exerted to have me finally made a Fellow of the Royal College of Physicians, so that I may practise my healing with their authority. I have learned to be solitary; now I must learn to be in company again, but wearing a flawless mask, which I must not let slip.

One chance. The year 1610, which is the pivotal year. Next year. One chance to divert the avalanche that thunders towards us. God—if there is a God—guide my hand.

Rochefort, *Memoirs*

1

It is not every man who sets out to kill the King of France and begins by beating his own servant.

“Messire Valentin!” Gabriel Santon protested, staring up at me from the floor as if Fate and Chance together had both kicked him in the stomach, rather than I.

I can see I will have to do better than this.

I strode across the bare boards to the window, feeling the chill of the wooden floor through my hose. If I had more resolution, I would have waited until my boots were on and kicked him then.

Spring of the year 1610: the shutters, open, let in the smoke of every man’s breakfast cooking-fire, obscuring the Paris roofs with the common early morning haze. For all that, I could still see the shadow of my watcher down under the over-hang of the house across the street, where he (or another of the Queen’s men) had been all the sleepless night.

“Shave me,” I ordered curtly, and turned away from the cool May air, back to the fogginess of the room. The scent of horse-dung followed me, and the sound of raucous cockerels proclaiming dawn. I set myself down on the room’s one bare bench, deliberately turning my back on Gabriel.

I have no way to leave these lodgings without being observed, front entrance and rear, I thought—as I had been thinking for the past five hours, since the moment when Queen Marie de Medici’s men smirked and left me on my own doorstep. So, what is to be done?

Gabriel’s large fist shoved a jack of ale into my hands, and then he stepped behind me, and I heard the clatter of the basin as he filled it from the kettle of heated water brought up from the communal kitchens. I could have taken the risk of sending him out for food—

—but they will think I am sending him out with a warning. And they will put a dagger in his kidneys before he gets to the bottom of the street.

His tread was heavy on the floorboards, as befits an old soldier grown fat in my service. Gabriel was skinnier fifteen years ago in the wars of the Low Countries, when he discovered a fool of a young ensign

in search of a noble death. I think he knocked me down a time or two, in the course of persuading me that scandal dies sooner than a man, and that contempt can be out-lived. I barely remember; I was cow-kissing drunk at the time. Certainly drunk enough to provide an excuse for forgetting that my corporal had lessoned me much as he might one of his eighteen-year-old farm-boy troopers—and thereby kept me alive.

The ale was cool, and tasted smoky. Gabriel's disgruntled voice sounded in my ear.

"Head back, messire. Chin up."

I knew him well enough to know that it hadn't worked yet; that he would not leave me for a curse and one kick. His tone plainly said *Messire was out drinking last night, Messire lost money playing at hazard with dice, and guess who he takes his foul temper out on? Poor bloody Gabriel. As usual.*

The hair-splittingly sharp blade of the razor followed the soap over my chin. I sat perfectly still, as a man tends to when he has a knife at his throat. Every morning for fifteen years, Gabriel Santon might have slit the big artery on the left of my windpipe, and I have never known his hand shake. Nor, now I think about it, at any of the things he has seen in those past years, and mine is a business to shake the nerves of most.

The scrape of blade over stubble and the warming air of the room, as this fourteenth day of May dawned, set my own nerves on edge. I listed it off in my mind. I must get rid of Gabriel, because no man associated with me now is safe. I must *act* as if I am following the Queen Marie de Medici's orders, or her men will kill me, and I will have no way to get a warning out of what she plans.

And that means I must seem, convincingly to her men who watch me, to be arranging the murder of her husband, Henri, fourth of that name, otherwise Henri of Navarre, now King of France.

The towel wiped over my face, leaving only the moustache and small point of beard that it is my custom to wear. I felt Gabriel taking the weight of my hair in his hands, searching out such few parasites as haunt lodgings like these. I am vain enough to keep my hair clean, and to wear it long in the fashion of the court, since there is, at forty, not a strand of grey in it—and a man must be vain about what he can.

"Are you going to the Arsenal today?" Gabriel said idly, walking around in front of me with my cuffs and ruff in his hand. "Or is Monsieur the Duc at the Bastille now?"

I struck hard, knocking the linen out of his hands, and following it with a backhand blow across his face.

"What business of yours is it where the Duc de Sully is, little man!"

Gabriel began to stoop, protesting that he meant no harm, and simultaneously grumbling under his breath. I stood up. For a moment apprehension caught my heartbeat and the pit of my stomach: *Suppose I cannot save Gabriel? Suppose I cannot save the Duc?*

That I was afraid—I, Rochefort—made me angry.

I had not been afraid twelve hours ago, following an anonymous message into the back alleys of the Les Halles district. That was a usual occurrence, given what I deal with, and the men who met me sensibly did not attempt to relieve me of my weapons. I came armed into the evening-dim tap-room of the tavern, bending to get under the door lintel, glanced at the man supposedly in charge of this meeting—and recognised, by the expensive cloak and her way of tapping her feet as she sat on the joint-stool, the Florentine woman, inefficiently disguised as a royal waiting-woman.

I was tempted to say, "Good evening, your Majesty." King Henri's wife of ten years, Marie de Medici,

might well be full of her own self-importance today, after having finally been crowned Queen. She had the coming war in Jülich-Cleves to thank for it; the King planning to be out of the country and so leaving her that authority.

I supposed that after a decade of marriage to her husband without the title of Queen, she might celebrate this by harassing the agents of her enemies—and therefore had sent a message to me. The Duc my master is not the only man at court who is her enemy, but certainly the most powerful; men do not name the King without naming his friend Sully in the same breath.

Dusk, and a drinking house in the district of Les Halles, is notoriously not a time and place to come without a sword, or a half-dozen armed men for preference. If it surprised me to see Queen Marie playing Haroun al Rachid and sneaking unknown among her subjects, it did not surprise me that the dingy, taper-stinking room had ten of her faction's courtiers with swords and pistols at the doorways and windows. But the first sentence of the mask-wearing courtier who was evidently her mouthpiece made me snort a laugh out loud.

“You must commit a murder for us, monsieur,” he said.

This is beyond reason. I began, “Madame—”

“Not ‘Madame.’” She spoke in a whisper, without raising the overhanging cloth of her hood, so that evidently I was supposed not to recognise her. “These are the orders of my masters; I am only a poor serving woman who brings them to you.”

I have heard better lines in a play, and spoken much less stiltedly.

“A murder?” Allowing myself the unexpected pleasure of honesty to royalty, I remarked, “In the last fifteen years, madame, I have rarely come across such a ramshackle conspiracy. *I am to murder a man? And the Duc be blamed for it, I suppose?*”

A signal from her sent the mouthpiece and her armed men away to the room's doors, just far enough not to overhear. She had not invited me to sit, so I folded my arms and gazed down at her—I commonly find myself the tallest man in the room, and this woman seemed tiny in front of me.

The plump shape of her lip moved under the drawn-down edge of her hood. “Be quiet and listen. You are Rochefort, not *de* Rochefort. You are not a noble. You are a duellist and known murderer. You have no power of your own; all derives from being Sully's chief agent. You have made so many enemies in the service of the Duc that if he falls, it is doubtful you would get out of this city alive. Who else have you but him?”

The dimness of the room was a blessing; I was not sure I controlled my anger closely enough to keep it from my face.

Lightly, as I decided which way I would make my exit, I said, “Still less chance that you can bribe or threaten me into doing anything against his interests.”

Her apparent silliness—which might be protective in a court of men—gave way to shrewdness. “No, and it is not Sully whom you will damage. It is Henri of Navarre. You must have Henri killed.”

Stupidly taken aback, I said, “Henri of Navarre? Henri Quatre? The *King*?”

She gave me no time to adjust my thoughts. The hands that held the edges of her cloak together now moved, ticking off points on her fingers. “You are Sully's spy. It is your business to keep him secure. Because he is closest to the King, it is your business also to know who threatens Henri. We do not try to

bribe you—you do not live high, keep an expensive mistress, have family, known bastards, or gambling debts. You are not of the nobility. All you have is your position of power, and we will take that away from you if you don't do as we order."

I spoke in ironic amazement. "And I am to kill a king? Who is the Duc's friend and protector? *That* will be a way to get myself valued in his service!"

There is nothing here I need take seriously, I concluded. Although I should warn M. le Duc that *Queen Marie* is, in her first fit of excitement, something of a loose cannon. . .perhaps listening to agent provocateurs of the Spanish, the Huguenots, the Jesuits. And that he should now take seriously any rumour that she wants her husband dead.

In her creaky player's whisper, Marie de Medici said, "You *must* know of conspiracies to assassinate the King—"

"There are always conspiracies against King Henri," I said, giving myself the pleasure of interrupting the Queen of France, since she came disguised and could therefore hardly protest. "I believe the total stands at sixty-three attempts at assassination, over the years. Or is it sixty-five?"

"And there are some current. One of which must succeed. Tomorrow, Rochefort. It must be tomorrow."

It was true I knew of two, perhaps three, ripe conspiracies—that was not unusual. Henri contrived to make enemies of most of Europe at one time or another, if only by rescuing France from two generations of civil war and building her into a nation of great power.

"Regrettably, madame," I said, "no man gives me orders but the Duc de Sully. It is my job to see these threats come to nothing."

Her temper flared in a sharp whisper. "You will see why you must do as I say! Gaston!"

The Queen raised her hand and signaled. One of the black oak doors opened, and two more men dragged in another man between them.

Maignan! I thought, shocked—I did not give myself away by speaking aloud.

The bullet-headed man was dressed in a rumpled night-shirt, his head bare. He hung between the two courtiers, his feet dragging across the paved floor, rucking up filthy rushes as they dragged him in. At her gesture, one of the men seized Maignan's fleshy ear and pulled his head up. Even in this appalling light, a line of white was visible between his almost-shut eyelids.

"He was taken from inside the Arsenal," the woman said. "Drugged; removed from his room; brought here."

I am one man against ten; all armed, most with pistol as well as sword. Maignan cannot walk, never mind run. . . .

Maignan's heavy lids flickered. Either drugs or strong drink had slackened his face. And this is the man who is in charge of security inside the Duc's household, as I am outside.

The man who held Maignan's left arm pulled out his dagger, yanked it across Maignan's throat, and dropped him.

I was moving before his blade left the scabbard, but plainly it was expected that I should do so. With no

necessity for an order, the other men present hauled out swords, cocked pistols. I was at the centre of a ring of edged steel, every point within a yard of my face.

I am not a fool; not against ten men armed with rapiers and firearms. Furious, I slammed to a halt, knocking against the long table. Tapers overturned and began to stink, burning the rushes. The scent of slow-match drifted on the filthy air, catching in the back of my throat with the odour of blood. When I could see again—one of the men lit a candle too expensive to be purchased in this inn—the stone floor and rubbish in front of me was flooded black, and Maignan dead or dying, his artery cut through.

“*Sweet Jesu!*” Shock stripped me momentarily of control: I sounded ragged with outrage. “I’ll have even *you* arrested; the Duc will back me!”

“The Duc will not matter by sunset tomorrow.”

One of the other men reached down and grabbed Maignan by his ankle, dragging him across the stone flags towards the door. The body left a sodden trail. I saw, in the dim light, that Maignan wore soft silk slippers on his feet, such as a man does not wear in the street.

The woman’s voice came fussy, and foolish, and entirely certain. “This is to demonstrate. We have successfully planted a spy in the Duc’s household. It can as easily be Sully who lies bleeding and dead. You must do what we say, Rochefort. Who else have you but him, between you and your enemies?”

I stared, blank-faced as shock makes me; determined to give nothing away. *Once I am out of this room I will turn Sully’s household up top and bottom and execute the Medici spy.*

“If you go back to the Arsenal tonight,” the middle-aged woman went on huskily, “Sully will be killed. If you go anywhere *near* the Duc, he will be killed. If you send messages to him, he dies. You will not go back to his household now; you will make no contact with him until after Henri is dead.”

The feeling of sick catastrophe in my stomach became submerged by anger. *I am to be manipulated by threats to the Duc; I am to be compelled and blackmailed?*

“You will be watched, Rochefort. Every moment. If it seems that you speak to any man you should not, then Sully will be killed, inside his house where he thinks he is most safe. You will not find another master,” she added. “I will see to it that your enemies have you.”

I almost laughed out loud. Am I supposed also too stupid to see she must kill me, afterwards, as a witness to this? Who do they think they *have*, here?

I lost control, swearing, momentarily—but that might be all to the good; she would take it as a craven reaction. Thinking quickly, I gave her a silent look into which a man might read hesitation and apprehension. “He is the King.”

I deliberately did not say *my King*.

A dead man is a great convincer in arguments; she might believe me intimidated by Maignan’s murder, or subject to some mixture of self-interest and cowardice. It was not important *what* she thought, only that she be sure enough of me to send me about her business.

Once I am out, I can warn the Duke. Or kill the traitor in his house myself.

She spoke again. I strained to hear her under the noise of distant drinking and quarreling in other rooms.

“If it is Sully who dies, *you* will get the blame for it. Speak to no man.”

Her men were too close. I doubted I could kill her before they brought me down, even if I could allow myself that self-indulgence.

Hoping that I imitated a man who was both cowed and desperate, I said, "I must speak to *some* man, madame, or how else am I to arrange a killing!"

"Yes. We will be watching," Marie de Medici said, her voice a whisper in the stinking, butcher's-shop obscurity of the inn room. "You have the hours of darkness to arrange this. Now go."

On the way out I dropped back from her men and visited the jakes—much to their amusement—and in the necessary-house slipped a livre and a verbal message to the pot-boy, telling him to run straight to the Duc at the Arsenal after the courtiers had left.

I made my way from the Les Halles district, furiously thinking. Two more of her faction met me as I did so, making signs that a blind and deaf man would have noticed, and it was plain that I must make some stab at looking conspiratorial while waiting for my message to be acknowledged.

I had no option but to find a man who immediately came to mind—since I had been gathering evidence on him before I made it a matter of an arrest—and have a clandestine conversation in his lodgings. And now they would be watching him, also.

The night went on. I could discover no way through the cordon of the Queen's agents. No word came to me from the Arsenal.

What is happening at the Duc's household? Has Maignan been missed? Is there a paid spy, a servant, a killer, even now in the same room with my master Sully?

Time. *Time*. If I had more than these few hours; if she didn't want it done *tomorrow!*

And that is not wit, on her part. She doesn't do this because she knows it leaves me too little time to act. She does it because she's drunk on today's ceremony, because she has just been crowned queen, and she's too impatient to wait a minute longer to have her husband murdered.

By the time I was shadowed back to my lodgings, I had reached a towering fury. Two separate attempts to leave secretly, in the early hours, failed. On the second, when I set out plainly to walk to the Arsenal, one of the Queen's hired men accosted me. He said smilingly that he would not let M. Rochefort's temper rob the Duc of his life, and I put my sword through the upper part of his lung.

That led his dozen or so followers to escort me at a distance back to my street, where I found the pot-boy, half-senseless and bleeding, on the steps of the house.

"She gives you this one chance," one of the departing courtiers said: a short man with a Florentine accent. "No more messages. Do as you are told."

I sent the boy limping away with another two livres, and stamped upstairs to kick Gabriel awake to make me mulled wine, and sit scowling by the light of one candle.

Wit must sometimes stand amazed before foolishness. On the face of it, an attempt to turn her enemy's chief agent, and in person—the stupidity! If she is being manipulated by one or other of the King's enemies and she leaves proof, *there* is a scandal to satisfy even Spain.

But she can deny it, knowing the worst that may happen to a queen is exile to some provincial château for a year or two.

And if she were to *succeed* in turning me, what does she get out of it? A husband dead, good: she is then Queen Regent on behalf of her boy-Prince, Louis. Or else Sully compromised completely, because his man has attempted to kill the King. Also good: a most powerful enemy obliterated. She must think she can't lose.

But it will fail, I concluded then, in the early hours—and now, coming back to the morning sunlight and Gabriel flinching from my backhanded blow.

Because I have arranged it so. I have no intention of killing King Henri! This will fail as the other sixty-odd attempts have. And as it does, *then* I can warn Sully, in the confusion, that the Medici has an agent in his house.

Something in me still insisted that Gabriel Santon be got out of the way.

If I'm seen or arrested, or—body of God!—*caught*, while apparently setting up an assassination, they'll put my servant to the question.

I picked Gabriel Santon up off the floor by the neck of his linen shirt, dragged him to the door, and hauled him through it.

"Messire!" he protested, gasping and laughing, for all a slug of blood trickled down from his nose. "Messire Valentin! That wasn't insolence. Not to the Duc. I meant nothing. Sit down: I'll fetch breakfast."

He was a stocky man, and strong, if now in his middle fifties; and it moved me unexpectedly to find I could bundle him along so easily. Reaching the outer door, I unbarred it, hauled it open, and thrust him through it with much of the strength of my arm. He bounced off the wall opposite, tipped down the stairs, and fell like a sack of meal.

I remained stern-faced as his body thudded on the treads; and when he rose shakily up onto hands and knees, in the building's entrance, I shouted, "You're dismissed, you thieving idle son of a bitch!"

"But, Monsieur Valentin!"

"Didn't you hear me? You're dismissed!"

I saw the moment when belief touched his face.

"Sir! Monsieur. Monsieur Rochefort!" A pause. "My things! Sir! My belongings!" Gabriel Santon bellowed. "You can't do this! It's—*stealing*. Those are *my* things! Sir, you can't—"

"Get off my street, Santon. I will come out with a sword if I hear you speak one more time!"

I slammed the door, so that my watcher across the street should be in no doubt of my feelings.

It took me a bare few minutes to prepare, folding up the razor and putting that, and spoon and jack and other necessities, into a leather bag. I put what money I had loose under the floorboards into a belt that I wore tied around my waist, under the band of my breeches.

The leather bag I tied by its cords to my belt, but wore inside my trunk-hose—in the year 1610, men wore them wide and capacious to mid-thigh, from where they were close-fitting, and gartered above the knee. I do not say I ever did as some, who (afraid of thieves, or lacking lodgings), instead of the fashionable stuffing of horsehair and bran, wore their kerchiefs, wigs, and bedding in their trunk-hose. I do remark that it was easy enough for me to store several small objects and a spare pistol, and still

appear nothing more than a gentleman out for a morning's walk.

Out for a morning's walk to kill the King.

I cast a glance around the two rooms; there was nothing I could not leave without a look back. I make it a principle to live so.

By that time, Gabriel's pleas, kicks, and angry yells had ceased, although not before a stone rattled off the shutters. I waited another count of five hundred to be sure, my eyes on the stout oak of the door. I thought what it must be like on the other side. A door that, up till now, has been nothing more than the barrier between home and the street: something which can be freely passed. Now it is a locked door, and he has no more right to enter than any passing visitor. He has been shut out of his familiar life.

Let it drive him to anger. Best of all, let it move him to report my odd behaviour these last twelve hours to someone in authority. That way no man except me will be held responsible for my actions today.

I went out briskly into the observed dawn streets.

Rochefort, Memoirs

2

There is the King." I did not point, such gestures being identifiable even in a crowded Paris street.

François Ravailiac, beside me, tranquilly followed my gaze. "Yes, M. Belliard, I see. His carriage. The King."

I had had two likely men to choose from: one a soldier who had served in Venice, and with the Holy Roman Emperor's forces against the Turks and Berbers in North Africa; the other this provincial Catholic school-master. True, the soldier from Rouen, Pierre de la Jardin, Sieur de la Garde, would have been more apt to turn his hand to this job—indeed, he had been showing some skilled enthusiasm towards the supposed "Jesuits" who approached him.

But he would be more likely to succeed than M. Ravailiac here, I thought, gazing down at the man by my side. And that is the last thing required.

It is true I should have preferred a man a little more the archetype of a pedagogue. Ravailiac wore his red hair shaggy to his shoulders, and he had the hands of a builder, not a user of wax tablet and stylus. It was some consolation that if any man proved a witness, they were more likely to recall a square-shouldered man with Judas-coloured hair than his companion agent of the Duc de Sully: tall and Spaniard-complexioned though I might be.

"School-master." I touched his shoulder. "Are you listening to me, or listening to God again?"

"To you, Messire Belliard," he said in an easy monotone. "You and He are both saying the same thing. Kill the King."

Fifty yards away, the box-shaped cart upholstered in deep red velvet jolted up the street from the Louvre, towards us.

I rehearsed him again in an undertone. “Stand close behind me; I’ll go up to the carriage when it stops and ask the King if he’ll receive your petition; the rest is up to you.”

So much had worked to kill the third Henri of Valois, twenty years ago; when a monk presenting a petition had presented, instead, a knife out of the sleeve of his robe. It seemed clear to me that this latest Henri’s men were smart enough to be suspicious of random petitioners. Ravaillac had a freshly sharpened knife on him; I’d seen to that. Once they found it, and I had the confusion of an arrest and a full alert. . .

I glanced behind me.

Cut down to the river and reach the Arsenal, before the Medici’s agents find out what’s happened in the confusion. And if her agents are in my way, do some justice on Maignan’s behalf as I go through.

Now, when what happened during that early afternoon on the fourteenth of May is a matter of fame and common knowledge, rumour gives many facts that never happened. They say that the King’s coach was held up by the Carmelite Convent, opposite a tavern with the sign of the Crown and Pierced Heart, whereas I watched it come to a rocking halt—one wheel in the kennel-gutter in the centre of the road, the opposite one raised up—thirty feet away. I suspect the tavern keeper of venality after the fact.

One hand on Ravaillac’s shoulder, I forced him down between the shopping booths that cluttered the rue de la Ferronnerie, and made it such a narrow way despite any edict. Since he and I were both tall enough to see over other men’s hats, we both witnessed Henri grope at his breast for his spectacles, wave a dismissive gesture, and signal to the Duc d’Epernon sitting beside him to read a letter aloud while they waited for the jam to clear.

Any man, even a stranger to court, would have known Henri at once from the coinage, and from the jutting white beard that went up as he laughed at something Montbazon said. The Duc de Montbazon was seated on the other side of him from Epernon. The coach’s leather curtains had been drawn back, letting in the heat and Spring wind, and the stench of the streets. I could guess at those men sitting with their backs to us: La Force and Laverdin.

“De Praslin isn’t with him,” I confirmed. Four hours of waiting for palace rumour to be proved true, that Henri is indeed taking out his carriage. Now, I could see that what I had bribed one of the pages into informing me was also the case. Charles de Praslin, captain of the guard, was at Henri’s orders overseeing the readiness of the palace for Marie de Medici’s official entrance, tomorrow, as Queen. Which left nothing but footmen and a few outriders.

History says the King’s cart was stopped by a collision between two carters’ wagons, and the advent of a herd of swine, and that is true. History does not add that those three men were paid very well for their obstruction, although I have reason to know that it is so.

As the squealing pigs rounded the corner of the street, shoving men and women irresistibly aside, I saw an occurrence I could not have paid for—all of Henri’s footmen ducking into the Cimetière des Innocents, evidently using it as a short-cut to wait for their master further down the road, beyond the stuck wagons.

Of Henri’s two coachmen, one shoved his way into the crowd, bitterly complaining and waving his hands at the cart-drivers; the other bent over to re-tie his garter. It was a bottle-green strip of silk, none too clean; I remember it to this day.

The horsemen-outriders will suffice to take Ravaillac, I thought, looking to see where they rode behind the King’s carriage.

One of them caught my eye.

There are times when it is no advantage to be the tallest man in the room or the street. The rider on the bay, one of d'Epernon's men whom I knew slightly from Zaton's, pushed himself through the crowds and pulled up beside me, his mount's hooves sounding both hollow and solid on the spilled grain, muck, and litter of the street.

"M. Rochefort!" De Vernyes gazed down. "Did M. the Duke send you out to meet his Majesty? Can you help shift these *peasants*?"

I am used to controlling my expression. I thought my face showed nothing of the shock that coursed through me at being addressed in front of M. Ravaillac by my own name—and at being told that it was my master the King desired to visit.

"Don't look like that." The rider leaned on his saddle and grinned at me. "You've got nothing to worry about. Unless Sully *has* had his hand in the till. No, it was a *joke*, Messire Spaniard; don't draw! Help me get this damn coach on the way to the Arsenal again."

I realised abruptly that François Ravaillac was not beside me: that was why d'Epernon's man did not react to his presence.

Where the hell is the man! I swore, while making some anodyne remark; and Montbazon screamed like a girl.

Movement took my eye.

Ravaillac stood on the risen wheel of the coach.

His hand went up, arched down; went up again—and a fine, perfect arc of droplets went through the air. Droplets of blood. *They have to be*, I thought, dazed. *Dear good God: he has actually hit the King!*

Ravaillac's fist around the handle of the knife punched down twice more; d'Epernon threw himself across the King's body; Ravaillac stood down off the coach's rear wheel, hands at his sides, as if all his energy had drained out of him.

I had a second to look at d'Epernon, and think that this corpulent middle-aged gentleman who is my master's enemy had courage, even if he had begun his court career as one of Henri III's catamites.

François Ravaillac looked across at me from between Epernon and Laverdin, and said in a calm questioning tone, "M. Belliard?"

He should have failed! my mind protested as I stared at the body in the coach, as La Force threw a cloak over Henri's face. How could something this casual *succeed*?

I felt as winded as a man thrown from a horse. Henri's men were supposed to take Ravaillac before he got anywhere near the King. If they were inefficient, *I* would be standing next to François Ravaillac, and I would kill the man myself.

Under the coach, the filthy street gleamed with liquid that pattered down and ran between the cobbles and into the kennel. Blood rushing in a slaughterhouse stream.

That is not a casual injury. I stared. If Ravaillac were killed in the attack, one could bluff. Or if the crowd battered him to death. *But he's taken; he will be interrogated; he will break. I can be proved to have been in his company.*

And the King was on his way to see Sully: *Dear God! What more could the Queen ask for?* Henri assassinated on his way to ask the Duc about supposed accusations of financial malfeasance!

Squealing and screeching like the swine of Gehenna, young weaners fled every which way through the crowds, forcing men back, spooking horses. In the same moment, d'Epemon screamed at the coachman to turn the cart and ride for the palace and the doctors, Laverdin took tighter hold of François Ravailac, and I turned and shoved my way brutally out of the packed street, into the gateway of the Cimetière des Innocents.

Marie de Medici is at the Louvre!

There with the garlands going up for her entry tomorrow as Queen. I will denounce her where she stands. *There is Henri's killer, there is the murderer!*

Under these circumstances I hate cities. The business of agents is an underground war; I would rather have my wars in the open country. If that involves marching through intemperate heat and foul rain in the day, sentinel duty and alarms at night, and the disastrous result of pike and musket-piece on a man's body, still at least a man is free of streets in which he cannot move for the shoulder-to-shoulder press of other men—or if he is not, he can cut with his short rapier or poniard and hack a way through them.

I shoved my way through the crowd pushed back into the gates of the Cimetière des Innocents, broke out into the empty space beyond, started down the narrow white paths between the sepulchres—and heard de Vernyes hail me.

Glancing over my shoulder, I saw him behind me with sword in hand, sticking prick-spurs deep into the bay's flanks, and so forcing market-women, burghers, and street-brats out of the way with much more celerity than I could. He shouted something unintelligible. I thought *I have no time for this*, and ran, hurdling the fallen monuments as if anger could make me fly.

The expensive sepulchres stand close together in the Cimetière, mausoleums higher than a man's head; there is no seeing over their peaked roofs. I ran between them as silently as I could, picking my way east, halting where the ground opened up to flat tombs no higher than a man's waist, judging my direction.

Two men on horseback clattered out from the monuments and tombs behind me: de Vernyes and another of the King's horsemen.

They split, instantly, to go one either side of me and block off my way. Behind, I could hear a great howling roar now, in the streets: the news of the assassination attempt spreading out from the rue de la Ferronnerie.

"Sully's man!" de Vernyes' companion shouted; a young burly man wearing the most fashionable doublet and ruff over the body of a thug. He pulled at the waist of his doublet, trying to hold his reins with the hand that held his rapier. The unmistakable shape of a pistol's butt was visible hooked over his belt.

De Vernyes himself reined up, staring at me down the length of his blade. "You're under arrest: Throw down the sword. *Now!*"

My hands had gone by instinct to my hilts, cross-drawing rapier and dagger in a single movement. I backed away fast, circling to keep from being trapped on the paths in that narrow space between the tombs. "I? Why am *I* under arrest?"

De Vernyes' companion shouted down, "You were *with* him, murderer!"

This second horseman was having difficulty forcing his mount in among the tilted stones and monuments.

In the fumbling moment while he tried to unhook the pistol's butt-hook from his belt, I made a leap up onto one of the flat-topped graves so that I was level with him where he sat in the saddle, and gave him a thrust that went through his chest just under the armpit, and put six inches of wet steel out of the back of his ribs.

"Bazanez!" De Vernyes shouted to his friend and swore at me. His horse curveted. Hooves rattled on cobbles; tack clinked. He abruptly dropped the reins, freed himself from the stirrups, and slid down from the saddle without using his hands, they being both occupied with rapier and dagger.

I tightened my grip through my rapier's finger-ring, twisted, and recovered my blade from Bazanez's chest.

Heads were turning at the edge of the Cimetière.

I caught a flush on de Vernyes' face; he looked as though he wished it any man but me.

"Give up, Rochefort! You will speak as loud as a dead witness as you will alive."

"Not quite true," I said grimly, "as you may find by asking any of these men around us."

Skull-ornamented stones stood up in the bright day: jaws and femurs and time-glasses carved on monuments, along with weather-obscured names. The only men close by were dead men, but it might not be more than moments before live men came to investigate.

"Truly convenient, if I should lose," I remarked, jumping down from the gravestone, between hysterical laughter and absolute fury. *How can this happen!*

It may have been the confusion of the attack on the carriage. It might be that men thought us engaged merely in an ordinary duel. No man started to cross the Cimetière des Innocents towards us. I saw de Vernyes glance that way, make as if he would call out, and then think better of it.

With an impatience I cannot quantify, I realised that the fool could have called to any of the King's horse-or footmen that might still be left in the area—although that in itself was doubtful—or any help available from the citizens of Paris. Instead he preferred to make it a duel; preferred to have the "greater honour" of taking me alone.

"I have no need to kill you." I gave de Vernyes my shoulder as I stood sideways to him on the narrow flag-stone path. "It would only be wasteful."

"Merde!"

Dueling is endemic; I had a name for it myself, although it was my master the Duc who put forward the Edict of '02 that declared it illegal. Ironically, in law, de Vernyes and I might both be hanged now, and our property confiscated—although that would doubtless be of more concern to this rich young sprig of the nobility than to me.

Henri will pardon him, I reflected—and, with a shock as of cold water, thought of Henri now perhaps dying. The King grants his clemency to duellists and men of honour on average once a day; I have had cause to be grateful for that myself, although it made Sully grumble. *And now the King may be dead, at his wife's hand, and this fool will not get out of my way!*

I let habit take me into that flat gaze that does not focus on any one man or weapon; that takes in point, edge, pommel; riderless horses; a wounded man; stone crosses, white marble cornices against the sky, the paths that are exits from this narrow place; all with equal lack of emotion.

De Vernyes engaged my blade at once, driving for my face. As one of the King's horsemen, he wore a cuirass; a close cut quilted doublet of mail made in a rich black velvet. That and his voluminous dark Venetian breeches did not give me much of a target unobscured by cloth, but the body rarely is; his friend Bazanez had presented me with a chance opportunity.

"I am sorry, messire," I said, stepping in and taking his edge on mine, and wrenching the blades around in a disarm. At the same time I smashed the pommel of my dagger into his forehead with a fracturing crack.

De Vernyes stumbled back up against a tilted tall monument. The clatter of steel announced his rapier hitting the path six yards away. I kept both my points covering him. He slumped onto his knees and slid down sideways, laying by a knot of flowers and an icon of Our Lady, his eyes open to the blue sky.

The second horse, evidently well-trained, stood with its head down, the rider slumped over the pommel of his saddle, arms loosely hanging, the reins slipping to fall under the hooves. I did not turn my back to him.

I could have killed both of them in cold blood. I have done as much before.

But I need not, I realised.

The damage is already done.

The Duc de Sully is implicated, without their testimony on top of all. If d'Epernon himself does not remember Ravailiac speaking to me, then Ravailiac will incriminate "M. Belliard" as soon as he is tortured. De Vernyes and his companion are merely an additional inconvenience.

How could such a fool's assassination succeed!

Grimly, I picked up my hat and spent a moment or two trying to straighten the brim.

How much time has passed? A quarter-hour? More? The coach will have got back to the palace. She'll know, now, to have herself guarded. I won't get near enough to make an accusation before I'm arrested.

I put the hat back on my head, and stood for a moment with my sword in my hand.

Henrimaynotdie. But...that isn't a throw a man would sensibly bet on at dice.

Breathing hard with the exertion of the fight, I backed away from the horses and the fallen men, and ducked into the narrow paths that led towards the east side of the Cimetière. I did not take de Vernyes' mount, knowing it might be recognised by another guardsman. I thrust my way out into the most crowded streets, among the greatest concentration of guards, armed men, and noblemen's households, towards the palace. Here, any man might conceivably recognise "the Spaniard," but—

I *must* know. Henri may still live.

Church clocks struck faintly as men galloped through the shouting crowds, waving drawn swords. An hour gone past since the blow; it felt as if it had evaporated in seconds. Every possible rumour went from man to man as I elbowed through the crowd. Henri's alive; he's dead; d'Epernon has been seen weeping over his body, the Queen has spirited Henri out of Paris, the Spanish did it, no, the rebel Huguenots; no, the Queen has been seen running through the palace, weeping and crying *le roi est mort!*

I thrust through to the railings at the Louvre at the same moment that a guardsman nailed up a proclamation.

He was dead, Henri of Navarre, Henri Quatre, dead. He had died, I guessed, between Ravailiac's hand putting the knife into his chest in the rue de la Ferronnerie and the carriage jolting back through the palace gates.

As I stood with the Spring sun hot on my back, grave bearded men to either side of me began to weep openly, tears running down their faces. A silence spread out until the only voices were at the distant edges of the crowd, where men could not fight close enough through the streets to learn the news.

Henri is dead, I thought as I gazed over the heads, through the railings, at courtiers swarming around the palace gates, beyond the guards.

Henri is dead.

I began to ease back into the press of the crowd, letting other men come in front of me. What I felt—I confess it with shame—was almost an emotion of relief.

Now...Sully may be safe .

Henri is dead. *Two* suspicious murders in one day—no, that would point a finger more thoroughly than the Medici bitch will risk!

I gritted my teeth, needing more certainty than I had for that conclusion. Every impulse urged me to go straight to the Arsenal now. The saner part of my mind remarked: Even in this chaos, the Medici's men will be waiting there, where they *know* you will come....

She has a spy in Sully's household. She will leave the man there. But then, the next time the Duke is a threat to her, he is in danger.

No. The King, his friend, is dead. She doesn't need to kill Sully to get rid of him, now. This changes everything.

As soon as I am arrested—there is Sully accused of the King's murder.

As soon as Ravailiac is broken, there is the proof of M. Rochefort's involvement. There is Sully indicted.

Time. It cannot be undone. A man is dead. It has happened.

I swore out loud, passing unnoticed in that heaving crowd; swore and made a gesture, and only then realised that I still held my rapier, bloody and naked, in my hand.

I fought out towards the edges of the crowd, heaving against the current of men pushing in, arriving panting and dishevelled by narrow alleys. I risked one look back at the palace roofs. There was no way to see through to the river and the Arsenal. I could only guess that the news by now must have reached the grave Gascon Duke.

I cannot help the Duc now; I can only harm him. Let me get away safely, so Sully can reasonably claim I acted without his knowledge. Out of the city; out of France! Then let me send word to him—proof of her guilt—

I have saved the Duc de Sully, I thought, suddenly cold. How may I tell him that I have saved his life by killing his friend the King?

Rochefort, Memoirs

3

A man of unreasonable affairs should have a reasonable mount, one that will not stay in the mind of observers. I kept at that time two horse: a roan of seven years that was known in the city as “the Spaniard’s,” and a dun so unremarkable that men did not even notice it for a jennet, a superlative Andalusian of the true arched-neck breed. *It is on the latter I should leave Paris*, I thought, pacing down the empty cobbled street towards the stables, with my breath in my ears.

I did not like to put the sword away bloody, both for cleanliness and because the stains would speak against me. The best I could do was slam my back against the masonry wall of the convent and stare about, dragging my kerchief the length of the all-but-dry blade. I dropped the cloth in the kennel and trod it deeply under the black, sticky mud that is peculiar to Paris.

With a grim humour, I thought: If Gabriel has returned I shall have to shoot him to save him from himself. It will be kinder than what they’ll do to any man linked to King Henri’s killer.

At last I ducked through the gates into the stable yard. It had the same farmyard appearance as any stables then in Paris. It came to me all in a second’s glance: the dusty earth and single plum-tree, the steaming manure heap, the worn paddock in front of the stables themselves. Everything silent. Everything empty.

News has run this far: the grooms have gone to see if their King is dead.

“Safe!” I muttered under my breath, and it said something for my frame of mind that I instantly took the loaded and spanned pistol off my belt. I trod down towards the stable-entrance with the wheel-lock pistol in my left hand and the naked rapier in my right.

They were not good stables; few men would have frequented the large, barn-like structure if they cared for their mounts to be kept in stalls, or if they cared anything about neatness. It was for that reason I kept my horses there—that, as well as cheapness, I might benefit from the lack of general traffic. Great beams supported the roof, and equipment was stacked carelessly there on shelves. Under the entrance, on the stone floor, I saw the usual litter of straw and discarded woven baskets, rakes and trugs. I could just glimpse the shine of a horse’s flanks towards the great manger on the back wall, and see the slow flick of the ass’s ears, where it was tied up to the wooden hurdle at one side.

Apart from the absence of swearing grooms, it might have been any other ordinary Spring day. Flies buzzed on the muck-heap as I passed it. There was no clamour from the street beyond the high walls of the yard. I smelled nothing but horse, mud, muck, and hay—the scent of blood must purely be in my mind.

How could it work! I seethed. How could a hulking young idiot like the school-teacher succeed where sixty-two other men have failed! How!

Merest chance. A man is looking to the left, not the right; someone turns to speak; a guard is inattentive for a moment. All nothing, even taken together. Chance.

Although, of course—I reflected ironically as I stepped from harsh sunlight to dimness, under the overhanging roof of the stables—in this case one man did his best to *create* that chance. To have fortune on his side. Valentin Raoul Rochefort, mordieu!, who contrived much about that “chance” scene.

The roan stirred, further back by the manger, and the Andalusian dun shifted his great round hooves. Both are stone horses; I expect them to be a little restless and excitable.

There was a faint glint of light in the corner of my vision.

Nothing more than as if the white sunlight out in the yard had glinted on some piece of horse-brass—and I shot into a reverse on the heartbeat. I shifted my weight onto my rear foot and took a whole pace backwards on the cluttered floor, bringing up my pistol. The dun and the roan are restless not for me, but because there is someone in here; the glint not from brass but from steel—

A sword's razor-tip made a *wk!*-sound as it split the air in front of my eyes.

I brought the pistol up, sighting down my arm at the man's silhouette. *He will have been behind something—a ladder, a pile of bottles of hay. Or standing in amongst the woven baskets hanging on the walls, or the struts by the corner of the ass's pen.* From habit I halted my breathing as I squeezed the hard trigger.

The wheel-lock pistol gave a sharp, shattering whirr and a loud clatter.

Bemused for a split second, instinct had me bringing the rapier up into guard. I realised what had happened. The flint had shattered as the spring freed it to strike.

The mechanism is therefore clogged with fragments of stone, no fire has been sparked, and the powder is as useless to me as if I had none.

“How in God's name—!” I had been going to demand: *did you get here before me?* I stopped, my eyes adjusting to the shadow.

I had been looking too high. It was not one of d'Epéron's men. Or the Queen's. Or—as I feared more than I could tell—the Duc's. A figure halfway between young man and boy stepped lithely and sure-footedly across the cluttered floor.

“In a hurry? Somebody must have pulled *your* tail,” a lazy, too-familiar voice observed.

If I am to be taken by *any* man, it will not be him!

Anger and hatred felt like vitriol in my chest. In that moment I would have given my right hand for another loaded pistol. The sheer satisfaction of terminating this encounter by blowing the young man's brains across the wooden wall of the building—

“M. ‘Dariole,’” I said caustically, while I listened expertly. Nothing up in the rafters; nothing out in the yard. Evidently he had come alone, without his lordling friends. That argued such conceit that it left me breathless. I am Rochefort: men do not capture me singly, still less half-grown boys.

His pale, plump face became clearer against the noon light coming in through the ass's pen behind him. His unbleached linen doublet stood out against the brown shadows, amid the ruck of rubbish—rakes with broken wooden tines, leaking leather buckets, withy-hurdles on their sides. He looked malicious, cheerful, and with the duelist's common contradiction of seeming both excited and relaxed.

He doesn't know, I realised.

No man can fake that amount of innocent venom. He does not know, yet, that the King has been killed.

I might have asked, *Why are you here?* Instead, I said, “Get out of here before I kill you,” and took

another step back, and made as if I lifted my blade as an invitation to walk past me.

The surge of anger that had blinded me faded away. Urgency took its place. Men may be close behind me—they *may* be here any second—and I can't afford to let a chance encounter with this young fool delay my leaving the city!

He smirked as boys do; noble ones worse than the rest. "You're in a hurry, Rochefort. What happened to the bit where you tell me how much of an upstart brat I am? I don't mind. Let's get to it. You don't really think I'm going to fall for *that*, do you?"

The munching of the dun and roan broke the silence after he spoke. The two stone horses stood shoulder to shoulder by the huge manger, lifting their heads up to pull down hay; companionable as long use can make two entire mounts. Having heard my voice, they were no longer restless. The boy was between me and them—and also between me and the old battered wooden chest in which it has long been my habit to keep spare sets of tack and saddle locked, for the times when I might not safely return to my lodgings to get them.

I snarled, "*Out of my way.*"

His mouth began to curve up at one corner. I knew why. Anything except a sudden breaking into violence speaks of lack of confidence: I should not have spoken and given away my impatience. I should merely have knocked the yard-and-a-quarter swept-hilt rapier out of his hand, where he loosely held it, and put my blade through his chest.

The young man smiled with infuriatingly sunny insolence. "You know, I *thought* if I hung around here, I'd find you wanting to ride out some time. And now you have to get at your horse past me. Think you can do it?"

I wanted to yell in his smug, young face, *Don't you know how serious this is?*

While you've been sleeping off having spent the night drinking yourself sick and losing money at dice, your King has been killed, the whole balance of power is shifting—and you are still a nobleman's stupid young son out to pick duels for the fun of it.

I drew in my breath as if I collected myself. With a nod of my head, I lowered my sword still further towards the hay-strewn paving stones, began, "Messire Dariole," on a rising interrogative tone—and threw my heavy pistol full into his face and fell forward, rapier thrusting into a lunge at his eyes.

I do not know that I have ever hated a rival as I hated Dariole.

I underestimated him at our first meeting. It was a piece of stupidity on my part.

This was at Zaton's, a gambling house, in the Ordinary or dining-hall, where I sat with a number of my fellow gamblers after a successful after-noon's play. Most of the company were male, and likewise most of them soldiers, or professional gamblers; duellists and the like—all with too much time to kill, and too little money. Dariole (as he had rapidly been nicknamed) came in with a gang of other very young men.

I thought him no more than fourteen or fifteen, an adolescent, which was my mistake. He began to make comments as I passed to get more wine, moving from cheeky over-familiarity to the edge of insult, and I ignored it.

He had a set of weapons on him, but they were brand-new; I guessed the leather still squeaked. Papa's

boy, with the first good sword he had ever owned; the rest having been training-hall knock-about.

My silence silenced him at that point. Reputations are sometimes useful. It was a quarter of an hour or so later when he began again, calling me “Rocheport” without the courtesy of a “sir” or “monsieur.” He was closer to sixteen or seventeen, I noted, on closer study. A rather overweight young man in wheat-coloured doublet and slops, his hair hacked unusually short for a gentleman—just below his shoulders—and the merest shadow of hair on his upper lip. He twisted about on the bench on his well-upholstered buttocks, asking me how good a duelist I still was, after all this time, at my age.

This is hardly a new experience, and I caught the eye of some of my companions and smiled. They smiled back. Any duelist with a reputation gets this. Young men with testosterone in their bodies, fizzing for an outlet; looking to challenge anyone with a name for being a man-killer. Since I had earned my reputation, I felt justified in ignoring the boy again.

This went on until I went up to the kitchen-hatch for more wine, and the young man and his group of cronies began to mock directly.

“Sully’s black dog,” he said, grinning like a dog himself. Plainly he meant my hair, my complexion, and habitual dress. “Bark, messire! Your master wants you!”

Even if I had been inclined to let a personal insult pass—and why should I, when he was so plainly looking for a fight?—Sully was my patron.

With the benefit of later wisdom, I see that I should have taken Dariole seriously.

“Dariolet” was fairly plainly a pseudonym—the boy being evidently of noble descent, and equally evidently full of romantic dreams about coming to Paris and making his name as a duelist, or soldier, or whatever else boys dream of at sixteen. *Da Riolet*, “by the river”; it indicated that the noble family in question had an estate on one of France’s great rivers; the Loire, by his accent.

He was seated at the long table, with one of the pastries that had got him his nickname of *dariole* barely begun before him, and in the event I decided to exercise my wit. He, having insulted me to my face, to no response, was content to turn around on the bench again with his back to me and snigger; and when he did so, I politely handed my wine to a bystander and put Dariole’s face down into his flan.

I was a foot taller and several stones heavier than the boy; it was no hardship for me to lean my body over his, so that he was trapped against the table. Encouraged by the whistles and shouts of onlookers, I used my grip in his hair to lift his head up again, and then to wipe his face back and forward in the mess, with a slow, malicious deliberation that I trusted played to the crowd.

That done, and the boy held immobile, but spitting and swearing, I used my other hand to grab him by the back of his belt. Lifting him by that and his hair, I hoisted him off the bench and threw him bodily across the room.

It was a child’s punishment, and he should be glad of it; if I had taken the adult response it would have been a killing matter. At the best, I would have run him through a time or two. He would probably land with no more than bruises, though I would not have regretted it if he had broken an arm or his nose.

Cheers came from the older men present, and shouts of an indeterminate nature from Dariole’s young friends, and I am not stupid enough to turn my back on a man I know is not dead. I put my fists on my hips and waited for him to pick himself up and wipe the mess off his face, and listen to my sound advice about provoking fights with older, heavier adults who might not have my whimsical temper.

Dariole hit the floor and bounced up onto his feet and came back at me with his sword out.

He must have drawn while he was being hurled across the room, impossible as it seemed. He didn't wipe his face. The nearest he got was a jerking flick of the head that sent food sliding out of his eyes. And he came back fast enough that I barely had time to get my rapier into my hand.

There were the usual cries of "take it outside!" that occur whenever there is a fight in Zaton's, and the cook clapped the kitchen-hatch shut. It was no duel, just a brawl, and I had enough confidence in the outcome to wonder if I could afford to buy the company a drink to apologise for spoiling their leisure.

Five seconds later I was fighting for my life.

That is not a new experience for me, but it's rare. Most swordsmen are simply not as good as I am. Even then, with my reputation, I was out no less than once every month, and I either downed my man or forced him to recant. I know men and I know swords.

The boy had me fighting at top-level within heartbeats. Benches went over, tables skidded back, men dodged; but I couldn't trip Dariole backwards over any of the obstacles. If he didn't have eyes in the back of his head, he had amazing peripheral vision. And he drove me around the dining-hall like a dog herding sheep in Andalusia.

My fault was that he had had the initiative ever since the first blow, and the fight was too hard and fast: I couldn't take it back from him. His edge came cutting in, his point thrust low and hard, and he caught my free hand and drew blood in the first minute. It never occurred to me that we might stop: this was no formal duel. Never mind first blood; it might not stop the first time one of us ran the other through.

When he pinned me up against the wall, uninjured, I understood that he wouldn't kill me. Otherwise why bother to pin me there? I stood jammed back against the stonework, hands down at my sides, not dropping my weapons, but unable to do anything for the rapier-point that stuck under my ruff and made a dull burning ache at my throat.

"Sully's dog!" he said, grinning and panting—too plump to move this fast without over-exerting himself, I suppose. His face was still stained with cream and sauces, and I anticipated something bad, not liking the humours of adolescents. If he had run me through, it would have been disastrous, but something I could remedy if I lived through it. Nothing holds young men back from what—to a mature man—may seem attractive but unwise actions.

Dariole had not been the only partaker of pastries; they were a delicacy at Zaton's, and there were tarts and flans abandoned on the tables. He pinned me right-handed with his blade, and, left-handed, picked up such a pastry and ground it into the crotch of my breeches.

I let him—I had no alternative—but I don't think I have hated like that since *I* was sixteen.

When word got about that, not only had I been defeated, but I had suffered a catastrophic affront to my dignity, I found myself challenged three times in one day, and a dozen times in the week.

Having killed two and put the rest in hospital, the challenges died down somewhat, but my hatred didn't. I hated the boy Dariole with the insensate, bitter loathing we can only feel for someone who has bested us. Tell the story to myself as I might, I couldn't tell it any other way but that it ended with my losing a fight and being humiliated.

That he could have killed me—that I had felt, however momentarily, *fear* of him—I could even less forgive. I took every occasion to fight him again, and looked a bully as I did so: a grown man threatening

a mere boy. A number of inconclusive bouts were interrupted by the authorities. Each time, the plump young man grinned at me as if *I* had been rescued.

The fact was that with the initiative not on his side, or not lost to me, I had skill enough to kill him—but I could not prove it. The interference of some provost intent on keeping the King's peace did not rescue me, but him. *But I could not say so*. Because the only time we had fought to a conclusion, I had been the one to be beaten.

Laughter followed me. I was aware of it. I tried ignoring anything that did not demand a duel, and those men that did, I sent home wounded or killed, in bloody-minded satisfaction at my own skill. But "Sully's black dog" followed me too, and I do not think I have ever had so mortifying an experience as when the Duke called me in to explain to him, in person, exactly how I came by this sobriquet.

Therefore, when it seemed I must leave Paris—who knows for how long—and now that he and circumstance positively *invited* me to it—I could not leave without killing Dariole. I *had* to.

It was not a fight to watch (although my contention is that none of them are); it was unspectacular, except for that final error that all swordsmen fore-see—the one that is getting them killed.

The boy put my point safely past his face, too quickly for a common duelist's skill, but I by that time remembered him to be uncommon.

At the same moment he brought his left forearm up, braced, and took the impact of the pistol on it without a flinch.

And at the same time as *that*, he thrust in time with me, the tip of his blade leaping for my sternum, and stepped in and kicked me in the belly.

I confess now that I had no expectation of his doing it. He was a young man, not yet grown to his full height or weight. He must have realised that in physical grappling, he would be at the greatest disadvantage; that he must rely on the forty-four inches of steel in his right hand or I would pummel him into blood-pudding. It was the greatest shock of my life—and I can claim only that my mind and attention were back with Henri and Ravaiillac—when I parried his blade but he succeeded in putting the toe of his riding boot into my gut.

A hand-span lower and pain in the stones would have blinded me. Even so, I gasped for breath and bent forward. And, in seeking to correct, over-corrected: I jerked too rapidly away and back.

One of the pieces of debris left on the stable floor was a two-wheeled cart, with rakes and sacks piled up against the extended shafts. It happened too fast and with too much inevitability for me to stop. I lodged the calf of my leg up against the concealed wooden shaft, fell backwards over it with the boy all but in my arms, and couldn't shorten my sword to stab him, or grab my dagger from my belt.

I caught my balance as I brought my other leg back—then continued in the fall, as I twisted salmon-like, away from the dagger-stab he threw into my face.

It is not always an advantage to be a tall and heavy man. Something cracked against the back of my head as I slammed down, full weight, to the floor. Dazed, I smelled feathers and chicken-dung, the unswept remains of horse manure, human sweat (the latter mine); and my eyes filled with dazzles.

There, I had time to think, in less time than it takes the heart to beat. One misjudgement, *one*, and then fourteen inches of sharpened steel in the guts or heart—

A great weight crushed my chest. I thought, dimly, *This is how a thrust through the lungs feels*, and then realised there was no penetration, only weight.

I opened my eyes, and saw through one of them. My left eye was black. No: black shot with sparks of red and white brilliance.

Something pressed against eye-socket and ball, pressed flat—*the blade of his dagger*, I realised; freezing for a second as the tip of his knife poked into the place between eye-corner and nose. A sharp sinus-pain went through my head.

“You *lose*, messire,” a voice said, so close to my ear that I felt warm, moist breath on my skin.

The words were not easy for me to make sense of, stunned as I was. All my skin was tight with the anticipation of a thrust and my death. I felt the boy’s body hard on top of mine, felt that his free hand moved while I was still knocked half into unconsciousness—that he dragged my right hand out of the hilt of my sword; that my arm was pushed behind me.

It could only have been seconds before it became clear to me both what he was doing, and that he had succeeded. He pushed both my hands under me, rolling my body to either side by my shoulders. I lay on my back with my own weight pinning my arms.

His dagger point still pressed against my eye; did not dig into it. I was not dead.

“You lose,” Dariole repeated, sitting back up, straddling my chest and stomach. His weight was warm and damp with sweat, his face flushed, and the sunlight from outside made a dusty aureole around his hair. His chest rose and fell under the dirt-smearred doublet. He panted, “How about that, Rochefort?”

Idiot, not to have killed me! I thought, all my mind coming back to me. He pinned me, but, yes, even a year after our first encounter, he had only a young man’s weight and strength. For that very reason, he needed to stay at the full extent of his reach, and fence. And now he sat on my sternum and belly, thinking the threat of a knife in my eye enough to subdue me.

A man can live with one eye. A man can *fight*, still, with one eye, although vision is different; I might even train myself to be no less of a duel-list. Half blind is better than dead.

I concentrated, so as to go from immobility to attack in a heartbeat without any tensing of the muscles that would warn him—and he shifted where his plump buttocks pressed down into my belly, glancing behind.

“Oh, now,” he said softly, in a different voice. “Will you look at that.”

The focus of a man’s mind is a strange thing. I had been aware solely of the concentration of the fight, of his knife-edge where it threatened to slice into my eyelid. I had not consciously felt the heat and solidity of his body, or of mine.

Now I was, all in a second, aware of how I lay helpless under him. That I could rip his arm from his shoulder-socket for the price of an eye was not in that moment relevant. I lay on my back with the cold of the flag-stones seeping through doublet and trunk-hose at my shoulders and pelvis. My hands were trapped under me by my own weight. And the boy’s warm solidness rested on my belly; weight shifting as he moved his left hand to grope down under the seat of his breeches, where his buttocks pressed against the pit of my stomach.

He put his hand on my prick, through the velvet and linen of my hose.

Every muscle in my body tensed. What held me back from throwing myself up from the floor and beating him bloody was not the knife. The focus of the duel fell away from me. My face must have gone instantly scarlet, since I could feel the heat of my skin.

I could neither face nor deny the fact: inside my breeches, my cock was standing up taut where he put down his gloved palm.

You must understand that in the court of our previous King, Henri III, in which I grew up as a young man, my reaction would not have been unusual—under other circumstances. M. Dariole, haloed by the sunlight, reminded me vividly of that King’s louche young men, far more interested in their own company than that of the Queen’s women-in-waiting.

If panic seized me, at that moment, it was because these were not those other circumstances.

“Now will you look at that?” Dariole repeated with a wicked child’s leer, looking back at me in a complete travesty of lust. I suppose my expression must have been something to behold, because the false face broke and he burst out laughing.

And I suppose that any other man, or any man not as I am, would at that point have freed his hands, at the cost of one eyeball, and used them to strangle the life out of M. Dariole. Dariole was slight; it would have been little harder than wringing the neck of a poached rabbit. But I did not do that. I froze, under the insignificant weight of him, staring up at his face.

“You’re not going anywhere, you know,” he said confidently, and with the fingertips of his left hand, set about unhooking the front of my hose.

I am a gentleman; I am used to servants dressing and undressing me. To be pinned to the stone floor of a stables, however, and to have the fabric wrenched at by a boy who giggled as he did it—who laughed with such joy and malice that humiliation held me frozen still—was an indignity that I could not have conceived of.

He undid my linen under-breeches, and took out my stiff prick in his hand.

A man’s cock is such a small amount of flesh compared with all his body. And yet everything changed with the shame of it being bared to the open air—and the still-greater, overwhelming shame of its response. I forgot Sully, Henri, the panicking streets of the capital; forgot everything but this ignominy.

The cold air on my flesh, and the disgrace of such nakedness, should have wilted the member in his grip. And it did not. I grew stiff as a man on the point of congress with a woman, and with such confusion in my head that I could have roared out blasphemies, hit him, or wept, with equal ease.

“You could get out of this,” the boy said, as if he could read the thoughts behind my blank face. “I’d have your eye, but you could get up, and you might even kill me. But you’re not going to, are you?”

“I’ll kill you,” I got out. “So that you can never tell any man what happened here—”

“I’ll call men in from the street.” He spoke with not a fraction’s hesitation. “What do you think, there might be a crowd to see the great M. Rochefort on his back with his prick hanging out—oh, whoa! You *liked* that one!”

His gloved fingers were tight around me, and I could have sobbed like a boy. Between shame, confusion, and the sensation of weakness that flooded my muscles, I was for the first time completely at a loss. I did not know what to do.

The boy shifted, his buttocks grinding my pelvic bones into the cold flag-stones. His teeth were bared in an amazed smile of pleasure. He said, "And this is what I should have done at Zaton's, in front of everybody."

My flesh leaped in his hand. I could feel my skin heat from my throat to my forehead. I could feel, too, droplets of sweat running back into my hair.

That is the end of Rochefort, I thought with a stunned calm. *If I was not forced to leave the city before, I would have to go now.*

And not because this brat might—*will*—tell other men what he has seen. Because I cannot live in a place that has seen me react so to disgrace.

I confess that all I could find to say, to choke out, was, "*Let me go!*"

It was an error, as I would have seen if I had not been so completely at a loss. It sounded not a threat, but a plea. I felt an increase in that sensation as if my muscles were melting and turning to water. And my rebellious flesh swelled; I could do nothing to prevent it, even though he still had his hand wrapped about the shaft.

His weight shifted on me, and he looked down past his shoulder at my face. His expression was something between Henri III's feline courtiers, and a child when it torments some frog or spider. His cheeks were flushed in pleasure at my complete downfall, and I was so far beside myself that I could have wept.

He lifted his head and yelled, "*Help! In the stable! Fire! Help!*"

His youth's voice cracked with the vehemence of it. Horror flooded me, that he did mean to call in witnesses under any pretext, and chose the one that would get most passers-by here the soonest. The knife-tip drew dull pain from my eye-socket. I realised I was straining against the sharp edge, and that it broke the skin; warm blood tickling my nose and cheek as it ran down.

Heart-beats ticked by. Nothing broke the echoing silence.

"Call all you like," I said hoarsely. "No man is going to come! Dariole—Messire Dariole..."

That attempt at civility, that sounded as servile as any groveling courtier, sent heat into my face again. I could not help but meet the boy's eyes. There was a glaze about his expression, as I have seen on a man's face when he goes into a woman, and I slammed shut the doors of my mind: I would *not* consider it.

Urgency was all that was left. *It is not for me alone that I have to go.* Without thought for the consequences of such honesty, I said, "Henri is dead. The King, murdered, in the rue de la Ferronnerie. *I must leave Paris.*"

The dazed, daydreaming expression on Dariole's face froze. His eyes became alert. He opened his hand, freeing my flesh. "Is that why no one's answering?"

"Yes."

"But you?"

"I'm leaving the city." The breath was raw in my throat, but I had myself under control. Another few heart-beats and I might have him lulled, engaged in conversation, and then I could attack and kill.

His weight shifted.

All in a second, he slid his left hand into the grip of his discarded rapier, picking it up by the asymmetric hilt; and rocked back from his knees up onto his toes in a squat.

The flat of the dagger ceased to press against my eye; flashes in my field of vision ceased. In the same moment he brought the tip of it up under my scrotum and sagging, half-full cock.

“Up on your feet,” he said, close enough that I could smell the faint perfume on his court doublet.

Shock makes a man’s muscles shake, do what he may to prevent it. I reached out and grabbed the wooden cart-shaft, with hands numb from lack of blood; knocked a stack of baskets over and sent turnips scattering across the floor; lurched up and got my feet under me, and stood up, swaying.

Through all the jerking, swaying movement, he rose in complete balance onto his feet. His dagger point never left my stones, and never cut me, though we were all but in each other’s arms. I remembered the dull pain in my throat in Zaton’s, when he held me with the merest fraction of his sword piercing the skin; I had to admire the control of his blade, at the same time that I could have killed him for it.

So much shame, fury, fear, and anger rushed through my body that for a moment I had no sense of hearing or sight. I stood, shoulders back, staring out over his head. I did not look down at where I hung out of my breeches. If I saw that taut flesh as well as felt it, swollen and trembling on the brink, I foresaw myself undergoing such a humiliation that I could not wipe out with his death—that I could not, myself, live with.

Con conversationally, he said, “You know I could make you kneel to me, don’t you?”

I spoke roughly over him, as if I could cut off the words and not be affected by hearing them. “I will make you a deal, Messire Dariole; one of my horses for your life. Stand aside and I won’t kill you before I leave.”

The corner of his mouth pulled up again, in a smile that made fire and ice go through me. The cold iron of his dagger hefted my sac. He said, “You can’t kill me. *I* can kill you. Or I can make you beg for your prick—that would be fun, wouldn’t it? I wonder if I can make you spend?”

I do not know what seemed the greater hurt in my own mind, then: to be castrated, or to be made to unwillingly spill my seed in front of him.

What was the greatest humiliation was that we stood close enough to touch. His chest heaved with his rapid breathing, and I all but felt it. I could have attacked him, barehanded, and downed him. The dagger might cut me, or it might (more dangerously) pierce the great artery in the leg. Either way, I still stood a reasonable chance of survival.

But you will not do it, I apostrophised myself, as I held the boy’s gaze. I felt weak at the knees and the belly. If I had cared to admit it, I might have confessed that I had lost my nerve for attacking this young man—that the appalling response of my body had thrown me into such confusion that I only wanted to run; I would not fight.

I would not think of the assassination, of Gabriel, of the Medici, or the Duke. At the thought of being put on my knees to this boy, my skin shivered like a horse’s flanks.

“I must leave,” I repeated, and I had the greatest success of my life; I kept all pleading out of my tone. “These are matters of state. I will—take this up with you later. You may be sure of it.”

The young man's gaze lifted. For a second, he looked as dreamy-eyed as before; then his features sharpened, as he evidently concentrated.

"The King's *dead*? You saw it? You were there?"

I inclined my head. It is difficult to be dignified with one's body shaking from tension, and with unfastened breeches, but I did what I could.

"Why are *you* going?"

"Sully."

It was the simplest answer—it was even the truth—although he would take it to mean I had the Duc's orders.

Slowly, he shook his head.

"I think I believe you. That Henri's dead, I mean. You look...but then you wouldn't *leave*. The Duc would need you. Unless he's involved. Or you are. And he's the King's friend."

"Messire Dariole—"

He stepped back, still with the knife pointed at me, and cocked his head to one side, the sunlight illuminating the dirt-smear of a moustache on his boy's upper lip. I could see the moment when his wit leaped.

"You know who did it, don't you? And—you haven't told *Sully*? Sully's dog hasn't...and you're *leaving*?"

He glanced briefly towards my horses; the duelist's snap of the head, that barely loses sight of the opponent for a fraction of a heart-beat. His eyes slitted in the light as he looked up at me.

"Why wouldn't you tell Sully? Because he wouldn't like the answer? Oh, name of the good God! You did it. Didn't you? If the King *is* dead...you did it."

On any other day I might have killed him there, while he was dazed by his conclusions, or said something to make him believe it merest unfounded speculation. As it was, I was in such confusion that I only protested hoarsely, "I didn't kill Henri!"

"No? But you really do have something to do with it...and you're Rochefort: *Sully's servant*, Rochefort..."

As in a nightmare, I saw the young man nipping at his under-lip, his dark eyes on me, and an expression of unusual gravity. *Who would have thought M. "Dariole" could think at all, never mind so quickly?*

He grinned maliciously.

"People are going to ask questions. Of you. Of anyone *connected* with you. Oh, I see. I see why you weren't going to kill me, messire. You'd be happy for the King's interrogators to do it."

I suppose I glared at him. "The King's dead, *boy*! Do you think I have nothing better to think of than you?"

He laughed; an effeminate sound that grated on my ears. Gesturing with his free hand, he said, "Harness

up both of them, Messire Rochefort.”

I stared at the dun jennet, the roan, and back at Dariole. “*What?*”

M. Dariole gave me a sunny look, but he did not take his dagger out of immediate danger to my prick and balls.

“It’s easy enough to find if the King’s dead or if that’s just you lying. The first man I meet on the street will tell me that. And if you’re lying, then I kill you right there.”

Dust sifted down golden in the air, still not settled from our undignified scuffle. Completely at a loss now, I repeated, “*Both* horses?”

“You’re leaving Paris.” Dariole shrugged with one shoulder; the one that did not support his dagger.

“You don’t want hot irons and the strappado, and being slung into some airless cell in the Chatelet for ten years. And I tell you what, Messire Rochefort—nor do I.”

I opened my mouth to protest. He suddenly laughed, looking as elated as only a very young man can.

“You killed Henri, or you know who did. You wouldn’t be leaving town if you weren’t deep in it. And now *I’ve* been connected with you—a hundred people might have seen me coming into these stables! Looks like finding you this morning wasn’t the stroke of luck I thought....”

For one of the few times in my life, I could only stare. His grin widened. He touched the cold point of his dagger to my flesh again; then withdrew it.

“You put that away, messire. And saddle up. Hurry! We’re going to ride out into the streets and I’m going to see if you’re right; if there *has* been an assassination. And if there has, and you’re leaving Paris—I’m coming with you.”

Rochefort, Memoirs

4

His dagger had nicked the corner of my eye-socket. A tear of blood ran down my face. I wiped it away as I urged the Andalusian jennet out of the stable yard.

Through the Porte St Honoré, west, and circle around north of Paris, I thought briskly. Ride up through Normandy and take ship for England. I may write at every stop and every provincial town, and send messengers in person back to the Duc, warning him of the traitor in our house.

The boy straddled my very recognisable roan stallion, just at the distance which meant I could not draw and cut him down without giving advance warning. He had recovered from somewhere in the barn a short, fashionable cloak, and a wide-brimmed, tall-crowned hat. Now he sat bright-eyed in my second-best saddle, the picture of some nobleman’s young son.

The stallion tested his control and he contained it effortlessly. He grinned. “I can shout out that you’re responsible. It wouldn’t even need to be true. They’d string you up off a beam like *that*.”

Hooves struck sparks from the cobbles in front of me even as he snapped his fingers. A dozen armed men pelted past waving drawn swords and loaded pistols. Not thugs or guards. The fathers and sons of noble families. *Henri's death has shattered lives; all in a second, like a hammer dropped from a height onto glass.*

“It’d be good to see Messire Rochefort hanged. They say hanged men spend. That might cure that lump in your breeches!”

I slammed my mind shut on the events of the last half-hour.

Riding as if no such thing had ever happened—*could* ever have happened—I forced a way through the crowded Paris streets to the Pont Neuf.

Royal guards lined it.

I swung the Andalusian’s head around, the stink of the Seine in my nostrils more pungent than leather and sweating horse. Men were jammed shoulder-to-shoulder with our mounts. It would be impossible to force my horse though. Already people swayed and tottered as the press pushed them, without volition of their own. I looked back over a sea of hats and coifs. Equally difficult now to make a way east.

“So. Where are we going?”

I ignored the boy, torn for a moment between knowing I *must* leave, and desiring to know what was happening at this moment in the Arsenal, where I should be. *The Duc: is he still there? Already in prison? Gone to the palace? Taken refuge elsewhere? Ridden out south for the home estates of Maximilien de Bethune, Baron Rosny, Duc de Sully?*

I know that in three months the Arsenal has sent three thousand pikes, muskets, and corselets east for the war; not to mention the hundred cannon. The cupboard is bare. But—all the same, I do not think the mob will have hanged him *just* yet. The King’s widow, though. . . .

“Messire Rochefort!” Dariole gave me the grin of a young man who has walked out of his lodgings with no more than the clothes on his back and the sword at his side, and I felt momentarily old. “Are we leaving Paris or *what*? And how?”

His tone was provocative; on another day I would have drawn without a second thought. Today—today, I could abandon my spare horse and tack without a second thought, if that was the sacrifice that abandoning M. Dariole demanded.

But I must not! I realised.

If I could safely leave him as a distraction for any man suspicious of me, then I would do just that—Messire “Dariolet,” duelist, young nobleman, gambler, is just the sort of foolish young man who might plausibly have become involved in a conspiracy to kill his King. It would be pleasant to think of Dariole put to the question and tortured.

But that is precisely the reason why I must not do it. He can connect M. Rochefort, the King’s death, and M. de Sully. So he must not stay in Paris to be interrogated—and he must not live.

There are many quiet roads north and west of Paris, in which a young man might most regrettably be ambushed by bandits and left for dead .

Barrels of wine stood out on street corners here, ready for the Queen’s celebrations tomorrow. Half of them had been broken into. I forced my horse between drunken, brawling men, aware of Dariole

following behind me.

Momentarily sheltered in a corner between two houses, I took the opportunity to wrench out my wax tablets from my purse and scribble on them with the stylus. I clapped the wooden covers to.

“Here!” I thrust two livres and the tables at an older apprentice, where he stood up on an oak windowsill, peering over the heads of the crowd. “The Duc de Sully, at the Arsenal; now! He will give you twice this when you deliver.”

He stared at me with bewildered, hesitant eyes. There was no time for more now: the press gave way again, and I spurred through the shouting crowds towards the Porte St Honoré.

The noise of shrieks and shouts beat back from the masonry walls, arches, and towers. Visible over men’s heads, tall pikes jutted: Savoyards and Swiss mercenaries brought into the city for the upcoming war guarding the gate.

The iron portcullis was still raised up.

I saw the jagged spikes where it hung, under the top of the pointed stone arch. And civilians, arguing with the guards—but being passed through. *No one has shut the city. Yet.*

Dariole nodded ahead, at men in slop-breeches and cuirasses, with heavy muskets leaning back on their shoulders, marching into the space in front of the Porte. “Think you’ll get past the gate? Want to put money on it?”

I am Sully’s agent on the trail of the King’s assassins. Travelling incognito, because, if the King can be murdered, these assassins are evidently dangerous men. What could be less suspicious—for an hour or so more?

Dariole chuckled too loudly for my liking in a crowd full of mourning. “If any spy’s thought about where he can run to, I’ll bet *you* have!”

Recovering myself, and to lull his suspicions with familiar animosity, I snapped, “I am no common ‘spy!’ I am the agent of my patron the Duc.”

“Bark, dog!”

If anything was lacking to stir genuine animosity in me towards him, it was this: that I have, indeed, considered what way a man might leave France at need. Catholic Imperial Spain to the west; fanatical German Protestants to the east.... No wonder so many exiles from court end in the Low Countries, either at the court of the Archdukes (if of Spanish sympathies) or in the United Provinces. My desire for that backwater, England, sprang from a requirement to avoid the obvious in that respect.

I swivelled around in my saddle and urged the dun jennet on a pace with a touch of my heel, passing under the heavy masonry of the Porte St Honoré, hailing the guards.

The roan gave one nuzzle at Dariole’s knee; then responded to his casual caress by walking on beside me in perfect dignity and obedience. Dariole rode with careless expertise, one of those boys trained to the saddle from birth.

Something in his expression troubled me.

It does not happen in war or an affray, but sometimes, between two men fighting a single duel, there comes the creation of something between them—as there is where men dance, or play music together; a

certain complicity of action.

In a fight, it more usually ends in death than it does in a dance. Still, it is the same sense of partnership, though the two do not work together for the same end.

I shuddered, quite involuntarily, and did not know whether I managed to conceal it.

I know what it is about M. "Dariolet."

He is amused by what has happened between us. And triumphant.

But he shows nowhere near enough disgust.

They account it forty-eight miles from Paris to Rouen by the Seine river-boats. By road it is the better part of a day and a half's journey—even when roads are not crammed with men walking, palfreys, asses, wagons, and a multitude of riders. Then half as much again to the port of Le Havre.

I wondered briefly if I might take a river-boat to Rouen, and at least get out of the county of France and into the Duchy of Normandy; passage would be three or four sous for a man, but then there are the horses...

The boats were full.

They were taking no more passengers for any price—but in any case, following the river's great loops, it would take us until evening to get as far as St Germain. And boats are difficult to abandon quickly.

I took the shorter, cross-country route, becoming uncertain also about the wisdom of St Germain, with that being one of the King's palaces. In the event I passed the bridge there as quickly as possible, and broke the journey some miles on at Poissy.

"They say the Duc has barricaded himself in the Bastille!" Lassels exclaimed, as soon as he saw me. "Is it true?"

Lassels, being one of the tax intendent's junior clerks, and therefore one of Sully's employees, was a man I had often used in the capacity of a spy. He came and seated me, anxiously, by the window of the hôtel at Poissy; pouring out wine, and rushing about to provide me with a very basic meal of butter and milk, walnut and eggs. I dare say I looked dust-covered enough to justify his concern.

"When did you have the news?" I demanded.

"An hour since; the sergeant at arms told M. the Intendent while he was putting up a proclamation in the square."

Evidently, men riding out post from Paris would outdistance me. Not having a re-mount, I did not dare push the Andalusian to his limits.

Looking out of the hôtel's window at the square, I saw the reason why I had no re-mount. M. Dariole, hand resting on his rapier hilt and the feather of his hat cocked up, reading the proclamation among the locals in the town square. He had ridden the eighteen miles with his reins in his left hand, his right arm across his lap close to his hilt, and at precisely a yard outside the distance where combat may start without warning.

"You will have better information than I," I added, to Lassels, and lied out of habit: "I am on my way to

Paris now. In the Bastille, you say? It's defensible."

"But yes. They say the Duc walks up and down, weeping for Great Henri. All the other great courtiers have been rushing to the palace, to offer their services to Queen Marie." Lassels, like the Duc himself, came of an old Huguenot family; he sounded a little green, and I could guess why. Preferment would be thin on the ground for Protestants in a Medici court. Lassels added, "He will not come out unless he knows himself safe. Will he be safe, messire?"

"We may hope," I said, feeling as grim as I sounded.

The late afternoon sun shone on Poissy; on the small white stones paving the main road that led through the square, going arrow-straight to the north-west. Even here, the roads were full. All kinds and conditions of men: lawyers, farmers, soldiers, servants; walking or riding; all anxious to take the news out to the provinces. Light flickered through the poplars that walled the road beyond the town gate. Light shone through the clouds of dust going up from men's feet. *Great Henri is dead*. It will take a week to spread the news from one end of the country to the other.

And there will be men riding post to the Lowlands, to Spain, to the Pope; men in the pay of other spy-masters, who will need to calculate how this event shatters the buildup of power in Europe. What will happen to France now?

I re-sharpened the quill that Lassels had brought me, and dipped it in the ink, finishing the third copy of my enciphered letter to the Duc my master. Each copy detailed, as well as I could deduce it, the circumstances under which Maignan could have been kidnapped, and therefore the most likely men in the household amongst whom he should look for the traitor.

I cannot hope for acknowledgement of receipt. And to be certain, I must send more messages than a traitor can intercept.

"The governor," Lassels added anxiously. "M. the Intendent says the governor is closing all the town gates and calling out the local troops, in case we're invaded by the Spanish. Do you think there'll be a Spanish invasion, M. Rochefort?"

I gave him, absently, something that sounded convincing. "There are too many French guns and men near the Spanish Netherlands border for that to happen; they can as well defend us as go to Jülich and Cleves."

"Yes. Yes, thank God!"

"You may open M. the Intendent's purse, while I'm about it," I said with a grimace at Lassels. "I am down to my last few pistoles, and I cannot help the Duc with that alone."

Lassels flushed. "But, messire, I can't. He's taken the *taille* money with him. He and the governor and the mayor are all together at the governor's house; they're planning to put down a revolt by the local Protestants—"

"Is there an uprising in Poissy, then?"

"No!" Lassels sounded frustrated. He was a small, thin man; he did not wear a sword; still, there was a light on his face at the thought of a Protestant rebellion. It vanished. "The dear good God—if the Huguenots are blamed for Henri's death now, it could be another Bartholomew's Day!"

Strange, the potency of that memory in men's minds. I was born about the time that the Valois King Charles IX stood back and let his Catholic subjects slaughter Coligny and almost all the Protestant

citizens of Paris, and even *I* sometimes feel that I lived through it.

“You *must* ask M. the Intendent for money.”

“I can’t!” Lassels looked the colour of old cheese rind. “He won’t do anything now, not even for you, M. Rochefort. He’s frightened. Look! Who knows what will happen now!”

Where Lassels pointed, I saw men with half-pikes and arquebuses jogging out to assemble in the town square, with a richly dressed man I took to be the local governor haranguing them. They made no appreciable difference to the flood of traffic on the main road, but plainly it wouldn’t be long before the town gates did get closed.

And there is M. Dariole, I thought, bringing my gaze back to him through the obscure panes of the leaded window. I could observe him clearly enough to see that he was watching the militia drill with a would-be professional eye. *If he gets into conversation with the soldiers. If he should think it funny to have them apprehend M. Rochefort. He has no idea of the seriousness of this. He is a boy.*

“I do not want to be stopped and questioned,” I told Lassels. Lassels had the expression of a man accepting that the Duc’s spy might not want to be hindered in his business. By way of dissimulation I said, “Is the road clear to Paris? You must take these letters; the Intendent’s couriers may get through before I do.”

He took the first two copies with a degree of reluctance. I added: “Come, have *you* any money, Lassels? I will see the Duc repays you.”

He bit his lip at that, chewing at a blond moustache no thicker than a string. He shook his head, and his gaze slid away from mine. In a time of fear, men hold fast to what is theirs. The King is dead; Sully’s influence already weakens.

I suppressed my impatience, and my concern for money; pushed my ring into the molten wax to seal the final copy, and stood. “Here. If there is no more that you can tell me, I will be going.”

“The proclamation....” He hesitated.

“Well?”

“Parliament is supporting Queen Marie. They all sent her messages to say they would do her will, whatever it is. She’s signed the proclamations as ‘Queen Regent.’”

I took leave of Lassels, striding down the hôtel steps into the square, and spent another of my pistoles in paying the boy who held the horses, taking back the reins into my own hands. I led the dun and the roan across the crowded town square.

A spy is by no means a popular man. Were that different, I might have a number of men willing to lobby on my behalf—Sully’s fellow Huguenot, Jeannin, President of the Council. De Lorme, the King’s physician, for the same reason. President de Vic; procurator-general Lullier; other courtiers. I would need powerful support to stay and maintain my story against Marie de Medici; I am not a wholly innocent man. As matters stand, I have no more of a potential faction on my side than—well, than this boy-duelist has!

Coming up beside M. Dariole where he watched the governor and the arquebusiers, I was moved by an odd quirk of conscience. “Don’t ride any further with me, messire.”

It was remarkably unwise. He would be a voice used to convict Sully: I must wish him out of the way or,

preferably, dead.

He turned back from studying the imposing frontage of Poissy's governor's mansion and gave me a cheerful look. "But I'm leaving France with you. There's one thing I can rely on—if there're rats leaving the sinking ship, M. Rochefort will be the rat who can swim!"

It was obvious to me that he opened his mouth without thought. If I had mistreated a man as he had mistreated me—my face burned as the memory came near the surface of my mind—I would not be so anxious to be in that man's company. Or to leave him alive, come to that.

He thinks if I do not attack him with a sword, there is no other way I can harm him. And he believes me defeated .

I held the horses' reins in my right hand. I rested my left hand down on the pommel and grip of the long Saxony rapier I wear. The flat black ribbon-guards knocked against my knuckles. Forty inches of steel, broad as the first joint of a man's thumb; long enough to be used in a duel, short enough to be drawn in the scrum of battle. It might not have served me in the stable. It is far from being my sole weapon.

Dariole nodded at the proclamation pinned on the market cross, a few yards away. His voice was quiet and joyful. "You read that, messire. There's a reward for any man who had anything to do with the King's assassination. You're worth *money* to me, Rochefort."

I gave him a foul look, wishing it was safe to call Monsieur the governor and let the young man Dariole try to explain why he was in Poissy at this hour, eighteen miles from Paris and still running. He might be blamed for much. A reward for his capture might supply the lack of my own money, I having in fact been forced to leave with no more than two hundred pistoles and the gear I stood up in—and even if I slept in the fields between here and Le Havre, there is still boat passage to be paid for, across the sea to England.

But I cannot, and he must ride with me .

"Take my advice," I said soberly. "Go back to Paris, keep quiet, console yourself with the thought that you have—disadvantaged—the duelist Rochefort. These are men's matters now."

I would not have been altogether sorry if he had taken that advice, although I had planted enough barbs in the giving of it to make sure that he would not. Some vague thought in the back of my mind desired him to leave at my charitable offer, and be in debt to me for that, even though he would never know it. It would go some way to re-dressing the balance between us.

I could not think back to the occurrence in the Paris stables with enough clarity; my mind flinched away from it. If some part of me wanted him gone for his own sake, some more obscure part wanted him gone for mine.

Clearly on the verge of giving me a sharp reply, Dariole's gaze went past me, past the horses whose reins I held. "Do you know that man?"

Lassels was on the steps of the hôtel. Standing in front of him, a thickset man in crimson velvet trunk-hose and a short grey cloak stabbed a finger at the little man's face. It was too far to hear what he said, but evidently he made demands. Lassels' gaze, moving across the square, hesitated for the briefest second when he came to me—and then moved on.

Lassels pointed at the troops, evidently directing the man to his excellency the governor.

The man is asking about me .

He turned: I saw his face clearly: I recognised him. He had been in Les Halles, with Marie de Medici; he had held Maignan's right arm, while his compatriot cut Maignan's throat.

Dariole put his fists on his hips, grinning. "Hey, shall I take a chance and call him over? I guess he *might* be one of Sully's—"

I grabbed Dariole's shoulder hard enough to wipe the expression off his face. He made no move to pull his sword out of the scabbard: looking startled, taken aback.

It was the first and only time I had imposed a physical presence on him. The shock, and his reaction, betrayed me into unexpected plain honesty. "That is one of the Medici's men. Mount up; ride out of the south gate after me."

"Medici? The Queen? *South*? But that's back to Paris!"

"And we will ride around a different way when we've gone a league from Poissy. Now go!"

I pushed the roan's reins at the young man. With a creak of leather, I pulled myself up into the jennet's saddle.

The thickset man stepped down into the crowd and was immediately lost.

On such occasions, there can be a handful of minutes in which a man may move unobserved. *He is here; there may be others. If chance gives me this short space, I will not waste it.*

A league or so down a country track, with the white hawthorn flower covered in dust, and the bright wild flowers in the verges trodden down by passing men's feet, M. Dariole edged the roan closer to me. "If that was one of the Queen's men, why didn't he just order the governor to shut the gates, and search the town?"

This, too, was a sharper question than I expected from him. My instinct was to say nothing. An impulse that he should be made aware of some part of his foolishness, coupled with the knowledge that he was unlikely ever to be returning to Paris, moved me to speak.

"Because if I am taken in public, there is danger in my telling what I know."

"Danger? Because you'll say something the Queen doesn't want known? Oh, good God—the *Queen*?"

I shrugged. "I warned you not to come with me, messire."

"Death of God!" He slapped his palm down onto his rapier hilt, and grinned broadly at me. "And I only thought I had the Chatelet prison to worry about!"

He lifted up his head and began to sing as we rode in the May evening.

If there is one man in France who cared nothing for King and Queen, I have the pleasure to be riding with him, I thought grimly.

I struck off to the west, down tracks that passed farms where peasants came out and stood watching us, not daring to speak, but plainly hoping that some man might tell them what was happening fifteen miles to the south, in Paris. The countryside was by no means deserted enough for a safe murder, experience told me.

How far west must we go before I can circle back to the Rouen road?

The horses ambled on, in that tireless pace I know them capable of keeping up for thirty miles in a day; crossing a bridge; passing a monastery; all the time with the young man singing one of the drinking songs you hear in the taverns in Les Halles—a particularly filthy song for an evening where the sun gilded the dust we raised. And a particularly inappropriate cheerfulness in a country just robbed of its King and Father; I did not know how much longer we could pass as travellers who had not heard the momentous news, in a country whose head of state has just been assassinated.

You must understand, at this time I thought that I had nothing more to worry about than being hanged or broken on the wheel for the murder of Henri the Fourth of France. And even that I did not think likely: I thought it more than possible that I could elude any pursuers. Especially if Marie de Medici considered herself hampered by needing to kill me in secrecy.

I rode north, to keep an appointment that I did not know I had.

I woke with a cock-stand.

There was, momentarily, no reason I could think of for why. I had been deep in a nightmare or half-awake memory: the Porte St Honoré at Paris, and the Swiss and Savoyard soldiers on guard. In my dream, this time they did not let me through, but escorted me back, and then to the Chatelet. Nothing in that to raise a man's prick.

I opened my eyes, not to the masonry and jagged iron portcullis of the city gate, but the grey dawn light of a provincial inn—an inn barely big enough to call itself one, but at this time even it was packed with travellers: a monk, a wealthy farmer, and a lawyer's clerk shared the bed with M. Dariole and I. M. Dariole whom I had not been able to get alone without witnesses, and who now slept as if he had no cares in this world.

I had thought, I suppose, that by ignoring them I had escaped the consequences of what had been done to me in the stables. Pain. Rage. Humiliation.

The young man lay next to me, a colourless lump under the sheets. There was so little room in the bed that he was thrust up against me, his buttocks against my belly. And tight against the skin of my belly, I felt my erect flesh.

It being so cold a May night, and the inn-keeper not running to a fire as well as blankets, none of us in the bed had done more than take off boots, ruff, and weapons. It was not the boy's naked flesh that pressed up against me. I felt the warmth and solidness of his arse through the velvet of his breeches.

Shame and fear raised a sweat on my face. I dared not move, in case I woke him. If he did wake, he would mock me unmercifully.

It is nothing. Nothing more than human warmth; I probably dreamt of a woman as well as the nightmare of leaving Paris. It is *nothing*....

I could not keep it out of my mind. The stables: being trapped under his lithe weight, his hand at my crotch, and how everything of my helpless body had been motionless except my prick. And his threat to expose me, naked, to public scorn....

My flesh ached, straining at the linen of my drawers. If I could have, I would have laughed at myself; I was closer to a sob. I have not spent in my breeches since I was a boy of twelve—and *here I am, on the brink of it, and for what reason!*

Infinitely carefully, both because I dreaded to wake him and dreaded the reaction of my body, I slid out from under the coarse linen sheets and woollen blanket. My heart thudded loudly in my ears. One of the other men snorted, but did not wake. I stood, the boards freezing cold through my hose. The grey hour before dawn: the inn-servant was already stirring, I heard her downstairs.

On the pretence that I could not sleep, I went down to the tap-room and demanded beer and oatmeal porridge, since only that fare was on offer. The maid rubbed her full bodice against my shoulder as she served me, and I snorted, thinking that she very nearly got more than she imagined. I could have spread her across the table and had her in that instant. The thought did not satisfy me, so I made no offer. Pox is an expensive penalty for oblivion.

A man does not wisely trust the ostlers of poor inns, so I went out after the meagre meal to check if the Andalusian jennet and the roan had eaten any better. The horse-bread was of reasonable quality. I dismissed the ostler, tacking up both horses myself, and then stopped, resting my arms against the saddle. The smell of oats, straw, horse-manure, and human sweat brought back the Paris stable with such immediacy that I was again physically embarrassed, and in mental torment.

Leaving aside what he may guess of Henri, of the Queen—*how can I risk traveling with the boy?* He may tell any man, at any time, what happened to me when he defeated me with the sword. He may desire to prove he can do it again. I will be wiser to solve this with my rapier, today. Good as he is, I am still better.

I heard, in my mind, what I had tried vehemently not to hear him say in Paris: *You know I can make you kneel to me, don't you?*

I snatched my hand away from absently fondling the crotch of my breeches. A man may have a piss-proud erection of a morning, I thought. *It means nothing.*

I sighed. A man does not get to my age without knowing when he hides something from himself.

It is merely an obsession, I told myself firmly. The turn of a woman's head has done as much before now. The shape of a smooth thigh as some noble lady raises her petticoats to tie her garter. And then the pursuit, the chase, the capture—and the obsession done, gone, and over with. This is no more than that. In a month I will wonder what it was that moved me.

Before the week's end, I will have killed him to stop him falling into the Queen Regent's path.

We saddled up and rode towards the north gate of that town, and I caught a glimpse of a profile beyond the crowd of men going to early Mass. He had worn a grey cloak in Poissy; now he wore a green one. He was walking towards the north part of the town.

Wordless, I turned the Andalusian's head and rode west.

The boy had a chance before the close of day to see how adventures in the May sunshine end. The vast sky clouded up, darkened, and rain began to plummet. By the time we came to Ivry—where my master once fought a battle, and much further west than I had ever planned to come—water streamed off my Spanish traveling cloak. M. Dariole reached up, adjusting his hat-brim so that it shot the rain onto his shoulders and not down his collar.

His high riding boots and his breeches were water-darkened, his doublet hidden in the swathes of his short cloak, and the egret-feather on his hat hung down thin and pitiful, reduced to a white rat's tail. Water dripped off the chape of his rapier. For all that—and to my irritation—the grin that I caught between his cloak-collar and hat-brim was alive with excitement.

It happened that I knew a quiet inn by the river, which I had had occasion to use before when riding out towards Brittany; one with a tactful landlord. With the noise of the rain almost drowning out my words, I bargained with him for sleeping quarters in the hay-loft over the stables, the inn rooms being full of lawyers, a silversmith and his family, two priests, and several horse-traders; all on their way to Alençon, Mayenne, and Rennes. It did not put me in good humour to be housed so, but I did not have the money to bribe the man, not if I were to have enough to leave France at the end of this.

I stamped back to the stable both to establish a pallet-space to sleep, and to wipe down the Andalusian jennet and the roan, if the ostler had, as I suspected, done a poor job.

Their breath was smoky in the rain-cold air as I walked down the long shed in which the inn housed its beasts.

The young man, Dariole, crouched with his back to me, with the contents of my saddle-bags strewn on the ground.

“*Son of a bitch!*” Vicious joy flooded through me. His weapons were on the floor, in their scabbards, some distance from his feet. Let no man say revenge is not a complete satisfaction. Before he could grab rapier or dagger, I took him by his doublet collar and slammed him face-forward up against the piled bales of straw at the end of the stables, so hard that he bounced. I kept a tight grip on the back of his neck. “What are you thieving from me!”

He laughed. My weight pressed him face-forward against the straw, and he laughed. Blind rage touched me; for a second all my muscles tensed to yank my dagger out of its scabbard and shove it up under his ribs. End it as I should.

“I’m soaking!” He laughed again, twisting his head back to look at me. “I wanted a spare pair of breeches, messire.”

“You wanted *what?*”

“Got ’em, too.”

Evidently this was some great joke to him. I kept my fist clenched in the sodden linen collar of his doublet, dragging his small ruff back against his throat, determined to wipe the smile off his face.

He pushed back against me.

He was half-dressed; I had barely noticed. The hem of his shirt hung down below his doublet-tabs and dangling untied points. He was clutching the front of a pair of breeches up, but they had fallen down at the back, and what pressed against me were his naked hot buttocks.

In the way that one notices minor things, I noticed that the breeches he had been pointing to his doublet were indeed mine—a sober, charcoal-wool pair of trunk-hose, ridiculously over-large on his skinny frame. The waist-band hung down and cut under the curve of his arse, just at the tops of his thighs. White breath steamed from between his lips as he laughed—laughed at *me*.

Pressed against him from shoulder to thigh as I was now, there was no hiding it.

Involuntarily, I groaned.

“What’s the matter, messire?” His voice was thick with laughter. “I didn’t know you cared....”

My other fist clenched, within an instant of crushing the bones of his face. For a moment I wanted that so

badly I could *see* it: his nose flattened sideways, cheekbone bloody, spitting out broken teeth.

“No,” I said, barely intelligibly. *There is a better way.*

I grew up with Henri III’s court, and his catamite young men. When rough bullying among the younger boys at times got out of hand, the older youths would assert their dominance physically.

“What would be a better way to teach you a lesson?” I said, and pushed him face-down over a lower straw-bale, bending him forward. With my free hand I wrenched open the front of my breeches and drawers. My prick stood up hard between the two of us, throbbing between flesh and flesh; a desire for absolute and fitting revenge drove me.

“Can you feel that?” I snarled in his ear, letting all my weight crush him down, as it had done at Zaton’s. “Can you feel my prick between your fat little bum-cheeks, *boy?*”

In a cracking adolescent voice, he snapped, “I’m not a boy!”

“Tell me that when you need to shave more than twice a week!” I grabbed one of his wrists in each hand, and pinned him down. He tried to push back and wrench himself free.

“You are old enough to fight duels and kill men. And you are old enough to pay for letting a man live when you should have killed him!”

I freed one hand, spat into it, and dropped it down to wet the length of my prick.

He shoved, slippery and muscular as an eel, and wrenched his hand free. I leaned my head back to avoid being clawed in the eye—glanced down, and saw his fingers vanish into the fork of my breeches.

In the next second, his dead-cold fingers cupped my sac, and he held my balls in the palm of his hand.

I froze. I thought I might weep. Despair, desperation, and fury went through me. I felt him wrench his other wrist free of my grip. I had a second to think, *Oh dear God, what is he doing to me!*, and to anticipate the searing pain of his crushing and twisting my testicles.

My prick stood up full and stiff, bobbing ridiculously against his smooth buttocks.

He cocked his legs slightly apart, reached behind himself with his other hand, and pushed the head of my prick up against the bud of his anus.

I groaned, lost in a tide of physical feeling that drowned all thought. It must hurt him, to have my ungreased wet prick thrusting at his arse—but there was the pop of his muscle-ring opening, and I froze, the head of my prick inside him, on the brink of spending.

He took hold of my wrists. One of his hands grasped each. I have the hard, broad wrists of a duelist: I could have pulled free. I only stood, I suppose with my mouth hanging loose and my eyes goggling. His fingers dug into my wrist-bone and muscle, as if to signify that it was he who held me. I heard him chuckle, and he twisted his head to look over his shoulder and grin at me.

He worked his hips twice, pumping at the head of my prick, and I incontinently spent my seed into him, with no volition of my own.

The thunders of the little death flooded my body. It was so sudden, so devastating, that I did nothing, said nothing. I only stood, lost.

He turned around, his head no higher than my collar-bone, laughing up at me. His hands were on me

again. I felt him take my wet prick in his hands, tuck it back uncomfortably into my drawers, and—without fumbling, his hands not shaking—fasten up the front of my breeches. That done, he gave me a not-quite-contemptuous pat on the front of my trunk-hose.

It was the more humiliating because, if I could have spent twice in a few minutes, that gesture of his would have provoked it.

“*What have you done to me?*” I said blankly.

I could have forgiven myself a passion for a pretty boy; that obsession is far from unknown even in the court of Henri of Navarre. A discreet liaison between experienced maturity and golden youth....

“You’re not even *pretty!*” I groaned.

He snorted with laughter and reached behind himself, threading and tying the points that attached my spare breeches to his doublet. He bent to pick up a belt and buckle that on, in some attempt to make the over-large garment not flap around his thin waist.

“I *had* you!” I protested wildly. “You took the woman’s part! How is it that—”

I broke off, humiliation choking me.

He shifted from one foot to the other, plainly amused. “I got a sore enough arse. But you’re right, Rochefort. *I had you*. And you know what?”

“What?” I demanded; and then, when he didn’t answer, but looked at me, suddenly serious, “*What?*”

One corner of his mouth pulled up into a smile. “You never *expected* to get away with that one.”

It should be him, I thought, stunned, gazing at the young man. It ought to be Dariole on the verge of weeping: a grown man does not weep. It ought to be Dariole, wanting to fall to his knees in the straw; wanting to take out his pistol and blow his brains across the stable wall. Most of all it ought to be Dariole defeated, broken, in despair.

“After all, it’s not like I need a sword to put you down, is it? We both know *that*.” Dariole walked past me, leaving the stables, heading for the tap-room.

Sweat sprang out all down my spine and along my hairline: if someone *saw* us—!

I felt my flaccid prick momentarily react.

No.

Fear went through me. Not the fear that one feels in a duel, facing a sword-blade or pistol-ball. I watched Dariole walking away, and I felt a fear that loosened my knees—and, more disgracefully than anything else I could imagine, began also to stiffen my prick.

It did not last more than seconds—I have never been particularly able to repeat myself on the instant, although I have a remarkable stamina in some respects. But it happened. I could not, I realised frantically, deny it. It happened.

At the thought that he had beaten me, and at the thought that he might defeat me again in the future—at that, and the imagination of being again helpless before him, my prick stood up.

Rochefort, Memoirs

5

I went outside.

The rain had stopped. I sat on the damp earth, wrapping myself in my heavy cloak, and leaned with my back against the wall of the stable. I watched my cold breath drift white on the air. For a long time I stared into the dark.

After an hour, I realised that even the sifting mist of drizzle had cleared. I looked up at the cold night sky. The stars turned overhead. The constellations of Spring: Gemini now in the ascendant.

That, I thought bitterly, *is apt enough*. I am two men. One wishes to deal with this catastrophe that I have unwillingly provoked on the country: protect Sully, preserve myself; in due course stand witness against the Queen Regent, if I can make such an unlikely event into a possibility. And the other—oh, the other man. *He* can only think of his prick, and a brat. A youth not twenty, not *eighteen*, dear good God! Impudent, insolent, unconscionable brat.

Windows went dark in the houses around me, but not all of them. Men burning their cheap rush-lights or expensive candles to sit up late and debate what will happen to them now that France is to be ruled by a woman's courtiers and parliament, not Great Henri.

And I sit here debating my prick .

I snorted quietly, shaking my head with disgust, and got up. The wet mist had soaked my hat and hair. Tangles of the latter hung wetly into my eyes. I wiped my face clear, trod quietly around the outside of the building, and looked in at the tap-room window.

M. Dariole sat on a settle close to the fire, face bright over the dice, playing two men at hazard.

I got one glimpse of him. The inn's public room was remarkably full. Men in whose company he will drink, dice—and talk.

Yes, he is fool enough to spread rumours about the Queen Regent and murdered Henri. He'll laugh, say *I know something you don't know*—and there is Rochefort in custody, the Duc de Sully accused, the employees and clients of the Duc ruined: all because of one irresponsible young man. Does he even realise he will be in danger, too?

I can do nothing while there are witnesses. If I am taken and imprisoned, that will be as bad .

Overhearing closer conversations, I guessed that the landlord had let out more than his stable for impromptu overnight accommodation. Here are men and women in service, or apprentices, or day-workers, all fleeing home from Rennes or Alençon to their families, because what will happen to us now? Will there be Papal troops in the streets, Hapsburg soldiers; will Henri's own countrymen rebel against his wife? Will there be civil war again? Better to be home at such a time.

The cold wind stirred the streets of the town. I took a solitary turn towards the river, walking wrapped in my cloak and with my hand on my sword. No man disturbed or challenged me. I came back to the inn

without a brawl or robbery—*And I would welcome it*, I thought; welcome just the chance to wipe out memory with action!

The young man still played at hazard, this time with a different group of men. There was no disturbance as I looked in at the door. *He has said nothing yet.*

He glanced across the room, and the corner of his mouth tugged up when he saw me, as if he found the act of smiling irresistible.

I did not demand you leave Paris with me! Dear God, if I had only had a chance before now to kill you!

I slammed back into the stables. He had made himself a pallet there. I thought of him imagining he might sleep beside a man armed with dagger, with pistol, with sword.

I went outside into the yard and sat down with my back to the stable wall, feet apart, arms resting on my knees. Between them, I held a pitch-lined jack of raw brandy from my saddle-bags. It burned a fiery line down my throat. The heat of the spirit must be the excuse for the heat of my face.

I did not sleep.

Ten times I got up and walked into the stable, determined to saddle up the jennet and ride out of the town. Ten times I went back out. *The town gate is shut now, they will let no one through before dawn; not even a man with the Duc de Sully's accreditation. Not at a time like this.*

The stable was empty apart from men's horses. There was no sign of Dariole. I went back to look through the tap-room window, moving clumsily with the advancing night's cold in my muscles.

He lay wrapped in his half-dried cloak on the settle, talking cheerfully to other men as they spread out blankets, evidently preparing to sleep on the tap-room floor. The inn-keeper would not be poorer for this crisis. Dariole stretched out his booted feet towards the end of the settle and the dying fire.

He's there because he knows I cannot kill him in front of a room full of people .

Turning away from the dimly lit room, my eyes dazzled at the darkness. The clock struck midnight as I stumbled to the stables, and threw myself down to sit on a straw-bale beside the Andalusian jennet. I drew my dagger and turned it about and about in my hands, staring at it.

The hilt-work was black, both ribbon-flat guard and pommel; the grip was bound in braided wire. In a man's gloved hand, that grip does not slip. And the wide polished blade, made of quarter-inch stock and as long as the space from a man's wrist to his elbow, had an edge silvered with sharpening: I had sharpened it the morning before I stepped out of my lodgings on the way to kill Henri IV.

I should settle this simply, I thought. As soon as he leaves the inn. This dagger in under his ribs and up, straight into the heart: *that* will solve this problem.

Death is a casual thing. I have killed men in duels, when I did not choose to let them live. Marie de Medici has chosen to kill me, to give the order: *Rochefort knows things that he should not, make sure he does not live to tell any other man.* I will be in no great quandary, killing M. Dariole.

The cobwebbed darkness of the stables felt oppressive. I sprang up, disturbing the jennet. He scraped at the ground with his fore-hoof, then turned his small head on his great arched neck and lipped at my arm. I yanked a wisp or two of hay from the manger and fed it to him, then wound the folds of my cloak tighter about my body and went outside into the yard.

The sudden jolt of men shouting made me drop the folds of cloth and have my sword out in my hand in a second. *No—it is outside, in the street.* I heard a rasp of edge on edge, running footsteps, an authoritarian shout, a shrieking sob, and then a mutter of voices and orders that went on for ten minutes or so. The town's watchmen clearing up a brawl.

The hilt of the rapier comforted my hand. I made a couple of expert passes in the darkness of the stable yard, hearing the edge cut the chill air; then re-sheathed the blade. Faint starlight glimmered on the horse trough. I walked over, stripping my gloves off, and cupped freezing water to splash on my face. The shock of it tingled along my nerves. *I can wash nothing away.*

The silence broke again, with the shriek of a baby being eviscerated.

Hot sweat ran down my spine, although I identified the noise within in a second. The body and the mind are often thus distinct. *A vixen, I realised. Calling in the May night because she wants to mate. At least she is a she!*

The love of the Greeks has sophisticated Classical precedent; the Bible forbids it; either way, it has never been a great passion of mine. I have not been prone to young men since I grew past the age of twenty or so, dividing my liaisons since then between three-livre whores and the wives of complaisant friends.

And yet here I am, and here is the boy, and I desire him—here is the witchcraft of it. How can I desire him when he disgraces me! How can I desire disgrace? Can he have robbed me of manhood, of courage, of myself?

The inn-keeper appeared in the door to the yard, his face hidden by the light of the lantern he carried. His voice sounded worried. “Monsieur, if I can get you anything?”

“You, out of my sight!” I snapped, and to my dishonour had my hand down on my sword like any ruffian bully in Les Halles. He shook his head at me, muttered something under his breath, and vanished back inside. I heard the clatter of the shutters going up on the upstairs windows.

Two paces took me to the tap-room window again. I took a last glance through the leaded glass. Dark lumps of men rolled in blankets dotted the floor, outlined by the fire that an inn-servant was damping down even as I watched. I heard voices as they chattered in the dark. What will happen to us now? Wars of religion, again? We have only been at peace ten years, after all. Invasion from beyond the border? Fire, floods, comets in the heavens; all these might be expected.

It was as if they gained support from their own proximity and the prattling of rumours, soothed like hens clucking in a hen-coop.

I could not see his face, but I recognised Dariole's sleeping form—on his back, one foot off the end of the wooden settle, one arm dangling down, every muscle carelessly relaxed. Deep in peaceful and untroubled sleep.

The shutters went up as I walked away, back to the stable yard. The inn sank into darkness, if not quiet. A swaying light shone in the street, dimly illuminating the overhanging upper storeys of the houses outside the inn yard. The watchmen going past with lanterns on poles, I realised. I doubt such keenness to attend to their duty existed before the fourteenth of May. Their footsteps died away on the damp cobble-stones. One guffawed loudly into the night.

I left off my glove, took my dagger out of the scabbard again, and felt the edge with the pad of my first finger. With a curse under my breath, I strode around the stable yard's confines, the movement beating the cold painfully out of my feet. I lifted the weapon to hammer the pommel on the closed and barred

door of the inn; lowered it again without using it.

If he does not come out tonight, there is tomorrow. But by then he may have spoken .

I did not sleep.

The stars moved on from east to west, arcing over the earth. The more esoteric court gossip this year had been news from Italy: worlds have been seen through a glass, circling the star Jupiter, far overhead. I wondered briefly if there were men on those worlds, and, if there were, if amongst them was to be found another such fool as Rochefort?

I will kill him. That will be the simple end to this. He cannot expect to treat men as if they are toys, for his delight .

The leather jack was not yet drained of brandy. I sat again, took off my hat, and leaned my head back against the brick wall of the stables. Narrow Roman bricks, barely visible in starlight, taken from some proconsul's villa a millennium and a half ago; now they serve to keep in horses. The wall was cold against my hair and scalp. I put the jack to my mouth, tilted it, and coughed as I swallowed the raw spirit.

I have seen no man here: that means nothing. All the while I persist in trying to get word back to Sully, there is a chance my messengers will be killed, my letters intercepted, my path followed. I may as well leave sign-posts behind me! And yet how can I not?

Bleakly amused, I thought: *I am, after all, Sully's black dog.*

The Duc must be able to identify and remove the man whom Marie de Medici has in his house. Apart from that. . . .

Even in cipher, I did not write that I knew who was responsible for Ravaillac's actions. No name. *If I tell him that, and the Queen's agent is not yet caught, the agent will be required immediately to kill him.*

I took another drink of the brandy, the night air cold on my heated face.

If I could but be in Paris!

And if I were? M. the Duc will hear me out, for as long as it takes me to name Ravaillac's instigator. And then—then he will ask me the precise circumstances of Henri's death. And I must say, *Monseigneur, to save your life I endangered the King's, and matters so fell out that he died. . . .*

A more personal shame, at the back of my mind, whispered, *I cannot go back to Paris with the memory of what Dariole did to me there.*

The flag-stones breathed damp chill, and my cloak and the straw that I sat on barely kept me warm. I was reminded of nights on duty in the Low Countries, in the war against the Spanish there, when I was a much younger man.

Scandal dies, a man need not . Where is Gabriel Santon to say that to me now? Even he, if he had been in the stable tonight, would have been hard put to tell me how I could outlive the humiliation that M. Dariole had inflicted on me.

"Perhaps I need not worry about outliving it," I remarked aloud, comforted from the world by the brandy. Marie de Medici does not want me found alive and inconvenient. All the while I am merely missing, I am a finger of accusation pointed against the Duc de Sully. Discovered, I will be a witness

against *her*. Therefore Maignan's killer and her other men will have orders to leave M. Rochefort's body under a light covering of earth in some backwater area of Normandy or Brittany.

Which is the grave I have always supposed I might come to—but *I will do my best to avoid it for many years yet*.

Or else they will produce my dead body, and let *that* mutely accuse the Duc de Sully—one of his agents unfortunately killed while in flight from the King's murder.

Either way, a remarkable number of men now want me dead. I wish I might put the blame on something other than my own error.

The brandy made me feel treacherously warm. As the coldest part of the night came on, and it sank into my bones, I got up and walked about: the stable yard, the inn yard, and back inside the stables again, fumbling to light the lantern in my saddle-bag. Both the dun and the roan were asleep on their feet. M. Dariole's pallet was undisturbed.

"Her arm might be long," I murmured in the dun jennet's sheep-like ear. I had been assuming that I could communicate freely with M. the Duke when I reached a foreign capital, whether that were London or The Hague or elsewhere. Now I thought: *The Medici's agents will persist; may in time look for me overseas*.

She needs me dead or missing, not alive.

I closed my eyes, for a moment entertaining what I knew, bleakly, to be a mere pitiful daydream: Sully's position staying strong at court, his allies standing by him, and he calling M. Rochefort back to France to safely testify against Madame the Queen Regent.

The jennet slept on, his flank warm against my brow. I straightened up.

I *must* speak with Sully! He will regard the assassination as the greatest betrayal: how could *his* man do this to Henri? I must make him see that it was not intended, that it was calculated to fail, that it was by the smallest slight chance that it ever came *close* to success. I will take what punishment there is for my action, but I will not let him believe I have betrayed him.

The lantern glimmered and died, leaving me in pitch darkness, my hand invisible in front of my face. I groped my way out to the stable entrance and into the yard. In the dim grey of starlight, I could at least see shuttered windows, dark eaves of buildings, the stone water trough. I sat on the edge of that for a time, in the chill air, moist with the dew that falls before dawn. The cold penetrated my Spanish cloak, my doublet, my linen shirt.

Let it, I thought. If my body has betrayed me, I can punish it. Perhaps it will be less eager in future.

At the very thought of M. Dariole I became somewhat warm, stirring where I sat. It was excruciating. I might hate the young man with all the venom at my disposal; a man's prick is not so easily controlled.

If this is madness haunting me, well, it is easily solved: dead boys have few friends and no lovers .

Infinitesimally, time passed. Eventually the grey pre-dawn light grew; became more distinct. Dew shone wetly on the clumps of grass that grew between the yard's paving-stones. The first sounds of birds rang out under the arch of the sky. Feeling jaded, I heard the servants begin to move again inside the inn. The last of the brandy stung my mouth.

I threw the jack across the yard and looked down at my hands, as if I could find the life that had fallen

through my fingers. The flesh was blue and white with cold. Pulling on leather gauntlets over my stiffened knuckle-joints, I winced at the pain of returning sensation and cursed myself for a fool: a duelist does not let his hands become cold and unsupple.

The light increased. I smelled cooking from the kitchens. Returning inside the stables, I sat down on the straw to sort a clean shirt from my pack, and momentarily leaned back against the bales.

An armful of straw hit me in the face.

I groaned, sat up—realised I had been laying down—and realised, then, that I had fallen asleep between sitting down to take off my doublet and un-fastening the buttons. By the altered daylight, it had been no more than three quarters of an hour.

Dariable's face grinned at me from where he stood by the roan, flicking bits of straw off the front of his own doublet. "Sleep well, messire? I did!"

Without a word I got up, stalked out of the stable, and put my head under the water in the horse trough.

When I wiped my sopping hair out of my face, shaking my head and suppressing curses, I saw that M. Dariable had followed. He leaned up against the wooden post of the stable entrance, arms folded, his lips pressed firmly together as if he repressed a smile.

"I would have woken you for breakfast, M. Rochefort, but...you looked very peaceful."

Both the pommel of my dagger and the hilt of my rapier had been jammed into my sides as I slept; I could feel that much. I wondered if, had I fallen asleep without my weapons to hand, I would have woken to more than an assault by a handful of straw.

"Listen to me," I announced grimly. "The men who follow us are looking for one man, not a pair of travellers; that is why I choose to keep you alive for the moment. From now on we will travel as a young man and his guardian—uncle and nephew, I think."

The corner of his mouth curved up. "Hey, isn't that incest?"

I ignored his taunt. "I made enquiries of the landlord. As I hoped, there are a number of fishing villages on the coast north of here. We may reach them in under a week, with haste. Once at sea, I may be deemed to have gone to any country, without any man knowing which. Once we reach the coast, we are free of the necessity of each other."

Dariable pointed to his forehead, under the brim of his hat. His skin in the morning sunlight was as smooth as a girl's. "What does it look like I've got written there, messire? 'Idiot'? I know you have to kill me. You can't leave me behind, in case they get what I know out of me. And I've guessed a *lot*."

I studied his face. His expression held scorn, joy, and delight; all together. He did not take seriously the thought of his own death, I saw that.

I made to walk back into the stable, towards the jennet, and he moved off the door-post to keep a few yards of space between us. No, not an idiot. Although if the feather-brained young man had to have another of his rare moments of thought, I could have wished it to happen at some other time.

"Messire Dariable, you want final proof of which of us is best with the sword. Wait until we get to the coast," I directed. "There, we will fight our last duel. If I win—you are dead, and your silence is assured. If you win—then, neither the Duc de Sully nor the Queen Regent is in any more danger from me. Is this fair?"

He looked at me with something approaching seriousness. As if automatically, his fingers stroked the guards of his rapier. He gave a short nod.

I went back in to saddle up the Andalusian.

Messire Dariole is young, I thought. To give him credit, Messire Dariole is brave. But he is, nonetheless, a fool.

I stroked the arched neck of the Andalusian stallion. Among his less evident qualities is one not common in a young mount: I have taught him to act as a stalking-horse while I hunt game, in place of some tired old mare or cut-horse. He is very used to the noise of a hunting gun or fowling piece being fired off beside him.

Yes, we will duel before I sail for England, I thought, watching M. Dariole saddle up.

Or rather, we will ride out to a secluded place, and when we dismount to draw sword, I will have two loaded and checked pistols in my saddle holsters. And under cover of dismounting I will draw both of them, and, over the beast's withers or under his belly, I will shoot Messire Dariole dead.

Rochefort, Memoirs

6

We rode out with the waning moon.

A certain equanimity should come with age. If there is anything that ought to differentiate a young man such as M. Dariole and myself, it is twenty-odd years of experience. The ability to put aside anger and hatred, and think what it is necessary to do.

Anger, hatred—and lust.

I am not such a fool as to ignore my own infatuation when it torments me. But however importunate a man's prick, that does not mean he must submit to it.

The moon's crescent shrank. League on league, the suspicion of pursuit forced me further west—much further west than I wanted to go. In the last reliable moonlight I rode all through one night, doubling back on ourselves, and then heading north.

The anxiety of men dogging my footsteps still moved me. On the sixth day from Ivry, when the dark of the moon fell, I tried again to ride day and night without pause other than to rest the horses.

The ostensibly slow pace fretted Dariole. He had ridden the roan stone horse with exasperation, surprised when night came on and I did not seek out an inn. The same slow progress—two hours of riding, two hours of resting the mounts—continued on past sunset, and all through a darkness that, before dawn, split apart in lightning-fire and storm. If it had not been open moorland, with chalk-white paths dimly visible under the horses' hooves, we could not have inched forward in the breaks between torrential rain.

Nonetheless, we were in the coastal port by nine of the following morning.

I rubbed my hand over my cheeks, feeling stubble rasp under my gloved palm. When Gabriel Santon is not there, I can make shift to shave myself—but this last night I could not heat water. My eyes were gritty with fatigue. I had the consolation, however, of thinking that any pursuers would, by now, be at least twelve hours behind us.

Effort counts *when* it counts, I thought, as I concluded my business in what had turned out to be a surprisingly large fishing town, rather than village. *There is always the significant moment.*

Dariole spoke. “All right, messire—are we going to settle this now?”

I had just come out of the quay’s most reputable tavern. I shaded my eyes to look out at the glittering morning sea, now quiet, although a wreck or two had been rumoured in the night.

The merchant brig *St Willibrod* out of Hamburg stood at anchor in the bay, narrow stern towards the land. She could not come into the quayside until the tide came in, and there was depth for her keel. I had had to sell the roan stallion to pay passage for myself and the dun Andalusian jennet; that, frustratingly, meant I could not have myself rowed out to the ship by boat and leave immediately: I must wait for the noon tide, and lead the jennet up a gang-plank here.

The smell of fresh fish filled my nostrils; spilled guts from the steps by the fish shambles. The wind tugged at my salt-heavy hair. I gazed down at the boy—whose eyes were as red as I supposed mine to be; he had not, this last long night, been willing to sleep in my company.

“Yes,” I said. “This is far enough from civilisation that they will be used to seeing gentlemen fight their private illegal duels here; I don’t suppose we shall be disturbed. Will the beach suit you, messire?”

Low promontories went out into the sea on either side of the town. Around the westernmost one was another bay, empty and secluded, where the tide flickered in surf and wavelets, halfway out on the expanse of white sand. It would be far enough from the fishermen’s huts not to cause disturbance. They would not hear a shot.

“I went out to look. It’s flat, past the rocks.” Dariole shaded his eyes with his hand. “Like a salon of defence. Sure. Let’s do it there.”

He was more sober this morning than he had been the previous few days. As we made our way across to the next cove, I walked in his wake, leading the Andalusian, not willing to risk riding the stone horse over the weed-slicked flat stone. Like a boy, M. Dariole peered into every rock-pool as he passed—but I noted that he kept one hand flat on the hilt and hanger of his rapier, and he was always far enough in front of me that I could not have drawn sword without giving him time to react.

The two wheel-lock pistols rested in the Andalusian’s saddle holsters, loaded, spanned, cocked, and ready.

So my obsession ends. M. Dariole leapt from rock to rock with a light-footed expertise, and strode out onto the white sands beyond. He walked with a duellist’s strut, cockily aggravating in so young a man. I was not disarmed by his too-charming smile. The wind blew at his hair, where his hat kept it fixed back and out of his eyes. If we had been going to fight, there would have been no chance of it blotting out his vision at a crucial moment.

I put the thought out of my mind with a shake of my head. It is not my honour and my self-esteem that I need to think of now.

If it were, I would take care now to discover whether I or M. Dariole is the better in combat. Have him

submit to me, perhaps on his knees, and admit *my* superiority—that is what I badly need, to take the acrid flavour of humiliation out of my mouth.

But none of that is relevant. A man of my age knows that some things must go unresolved. *I must stay alive, so that in time I can speak out; he must die, so that he can't.*

I spared a glance back at the sleepy town, vanishing behind the edge of the cliff. With the first rush of the morning's work over, fish gutted, packed, on their way to be sold, the boats had gone out again. There was a surprising amount of gossip about Henri's death for a place so far from Paris, and a week behind with most of the news—as I'd discovered, talking to the retired infantry sergeant who supervised the guard on the town gates. The town hall armoury, evidently opened up, resulted in his men being armed in ancient mail, and brandishing the halberds and heavier swords of a previous age of France. Two generations of war have left us with inevitable re-flexes: guard gates, question strangers, distrust travellers.

M. Dariole might not stay alive here if it were suspected he had anything to do with King Henri's death, I reflected.

Nor I, if they attached the name *Rochefort* to me.

Or "Belliard," if Ravailac has confessed that alias. He must have! I would more probably swing from a lantern-beam than go back to Paris under arrest. Or be tortured, as no doubt Ravailac is being, if he has not yet died of it.

I looked back to M. Dariole, where he walked out from the rocks and onto the sand, skirting bales of sea-weed washed up by the night's storm. Sea water clung in hollows around the mats of bladder-wrack: that uncertain ground would be excellent to drive a man back onto, during a fight.

There will be no duel!

Men have each their qualities born within them: much as I hated him, I had to admit that. This boy "Dariole" might be another Crillon, another so-famous duelist, if I left him alone to grow older, resume his real name and noble status; or another marshal of France, devious as those men often are. Sardonicly, I thought: *He may be an Alexander, a Caesar!* And all that potential would die here, this morning. Does it matter if he dies with a pistol-ball through his skull, rather than a sword-blade pushed into his heart?

I will not have beaten him, I thought, as I led the Andalusian down off the slippery rocks and onto the sun-dried sand. I looked for a chunk of basalt to set on the stone horse's trailing reins; saw none.

We have not ever had an uninterrupted fight on ground that favours neither man.

It is cowardly, to kill him like this .

I stood up from hobbling the horse. The wind blew stiffly off the sea, bringing a faint spatter of sea-water in the air. Birds cried overhead.

The figure of M. Dariole, spot-lit by the sun on his crumpled linen doublet and much-marked velvet Venetian knee-breeches, paced up and down. From time to time he stamped on the sand to feel the texture of it: a good surface to dig in the heels, knees flexed. He wore his weapons still in his scabbards, but his feet on the sand took up the duellist's stance as if it were second nature. Forward foot a little advanced, back foot turned to the side; balance squarely down through the centre of the body, so that a man may move instantly in any direction without shifting his weight first.

He would have called men in off the street to witness my humiliation.

“Messire,” I shouted across to him, lifting one hand, and as I did so walked around behind the Andalusian, between sodden mats of sea-weed, so that I was on the far side of the stone horse from him. I saw him turn.

“Changed your mind?” He grinned, walking back towards me. “I thought you’d fight, messire, not chicken out! What’s the matter? Decided to stop running, and turn Sully in to the Queen Regent?”

He knows where to plant a barb . I said stiffly, “Even if I were inclined to it, she would not let me live.”

“Ah, but you’re *Sully’s man*.” He jeered the last two words; a boy winding himself up to fight. “I often wondered, messire—just what *is* it makes you his dog?”

That Maximilien de Bethune, Duc de Sully, was more than a dull Gascon duke with the soul of an accountant, it had taken me very little time to learn. Wars racked France as I grew up: each of the Valois sons of Caterina de Medici succeeded in their turn to the throne, each madder than the last, and men of the true religion and Huguenot Lutherans happily killed each other by the thousand. There among the grinding civil wars was Henri of Navarre, cousin to the Valois, known successor to the throne, walking a narrow precipice—and always with him, doggedly incorruptible, and with a devil’s grasp of finance, Maximilien de Bethune, Baron Rosny, who ruled his household and the taxes of France with an absolute grip, and who, some three or four years back, the King made Duc de Sully for his successes in turning the country from a wasteland to a prosperous state.

“You might better ask,” I said ironically, “why the Duc de Sully permits M. Rochefort to be in his service. But that is not a story for young ears, messire boy.”

He put his hand on his sword as he walked towards me. “I wouldn’t worry, Rochefort—soon, it’ll be ancient history!”

He approached the out-flung strand of weed on the sand that I had picked as my mark. Pistols are inaccurate much beyond arms-length, although the damage a one-inch lead ball makes smashing through a man’s body more than makes up for that disadvantage. Out of his line of sight, I took one wheel-lock pistol out of the nearer holster and hooked it to my belt, and held the other ready to clap to his chest as he walked around the Andalusian’s head.

A pistol is sure, I thought. When it fires. But there is no skill in it.

I will not ever know if I could have beaten him. All I will know is that I was like a frightened boy, too scared to put it to the test.

And this, also, is a humiliation.

Which, out of necessity, I will bear .

Dariole approached closely enough for me to see his eyes slitted against the sun and wind, his expression bright. He grinned. “Is this where you make some attempt to put me in the ground?”

I looked at him over the horse’s withers. “Some attempt, yes.”

“I don’t seem in much danger, do I? Even if you do have a very impressive—weapon. Is your flesh upright again, messire?”

His smile was a miracle of covert amusement and knowing complicity. I suppose that I coloured a little, it being beyond a man of my age to blush.

The cold sea-wind blew into my face, and it was the smell of freedom. I spared a glance north, for the long glitter of water, the *St Willibrod*. From here to London, to Zeebrugge, to the Scandinavian countries, to the New World: merely a step. I felt as if the brisk wind that tugged at my hair could blow everything away.

And then I saw his boot come down on the sand. The next step would bring his foot to the strand of sea-weed; I would step forward and shoot.

He was not pretty, so much is true. His eyes, set wide apart, were the only things that gave distinction to his face in repose. Otherwise he was nondescript. What brought his features alive—with malice, with wicked amusement, taunts, triumph—was his smile. At this precise moment, that smile vanished in favour of a look of priggish seriousness.

“I can kill you, you know, Messire Rochefort.”

He was an inch or so taller than when I had first laid eyes on him in Zaton’s, a year ago. His hair was now cut shorter, just touching the ruff that made a piquant frame for his face. Although he still had the puppy-fat of an adolescent young man, the practise of swordsmanship gave him a balanced poise.

A man is as old as his actions, I told myself. M. Dariole has been killing men in duels for a year to my knowledge, and doubtless longer, given that his skills did not come to him in an instant. He is old enough to pay for gratuitously intruding himself into conspiracy.

I shifted my weight back, momentarily hidden by the Andalusian jennet’s shoulder, and checked the cocking of the pistol. I set my finger to the trigger, brought the barrel down, and stepped forward, out from the cover of the stone horse.

He was not there.

For a second, I gawked in amazement; then my gaze fell.

The young man Dariole was down on his knees in the sand.

Blood thundered in my head: I felt myself go hot, then cold, and dizzy.

I hesitated.

Twenty years of experience, and I hesitated. If he had had a pistol in his turn, he could have blown me to the afterlife with no more trouble than a man swatting a wasp.

“Really, messire,” I stuttered, at a loss. “Begging is not something I expected from you!”

The boy dipped his head down, ignoring me—*ignoring me*. He dug into the matted sea-weed with his dagger, pulling frantically at it with his other hand.

Has he gone mad?

I raised the heavy wheel-lock pistol, preparing to step forward and clap it to his head.

“Look at this!” He yanked up the line of sea-weed that I had marked. It rose in a sand-crusting curve. *Not weed—thin rope*. The slimy length of it vanished into bladder-wrack, where he groped at a lump of flotsam that might have been a chunk of wooden beam from a wreck, or a dead animal.

As he yanked off the covering weed, I saw it was a human body.

“He’s—” The young man turned to gaze up over his shoulder. His voice stopped.

I suppose that I hesitated over shooting Dariole because he was on his knees. Certainly I can think of no other reason. He knelt by the body of a drowned man, his hands entangled with weed, and it would have been the easiest thing in the world to put the pistol’s muzzle to the back of his neck, and blow his brains out straight over the other corpse.

Dariole looked up at the pistol and his expression visibly dismissed it as no threat to him.

Face bright with enthusiasm and concern, he demanded, “Do you know what to do, messire? Help him!”

“A drowned sailor.” I regained something of my mental balance. “Regrettably, that is common. And none of my concern. Whereas—”

“He’s not!”

“What?”

“He’s not a *man*.” With a grunt of effort, Dariole rolled the body over so that it was face-up.

The yellow lemon-light of the morning sun was too bright, suddenly, the surf too loud; given the interrupted concentration of combat and the throb in my head from the previous night’s lack of sleep.

The face was inhuman.

I looked down at sallow, yellow-dark skin; ragged and too-black hair. Most of all, the eyes. Even shut as they were, they were the wrong shape—small, and like a nut, and with the skin folded down at the corners.

“You see?” Dariole demanded. “It’s a demon!”

I believe in witchcraft no more than the next man. Less, in all likelihood, growing up in a court containing Caterina de Medici and her sons, and that deluded man called Nostradamus. I learned early that human malice explains the vast proportion of evil in the world. Satan’s servants are not needed to account for it.

The drenched cord that the tide had trailed up the beach for M. Dariole’s attention was knotted about the waist of what I should otherwise have taken to be a stocky, balding man in his fifties. A drowned sailor. Evidently rumours of a wreck were correct. I was surprised the local peasants had missed salvaging even a corpse.

“He’s still breathing!” Dariole reached up, ignoring the pistol, and grabbed my left wrist.

I am not used to being manhandled by other men. Instinct should have had me punch him, or club him with the pistol.

I did neither. Dariole pulled my wrist down with surprising strength, forcing me into a crouch beside him. It was shockingly reminiscent of his grip on me in the stables at Ivry; before I realised what was happening, I had let myself be constrained without question.

Dariole thrust my hand into the junction between the body’s head and shoulder. “How do we save him?”

I recovered my hand, wrenched off my glove, and felt a heart-beat under his chill skin.

Down on one knee, with the wind off the Channel blowing revivingly into my face, I stared at the body. “This is no demon—unless demons smell like men.” I took refuge in sardonic humour. “Do *you* smell sulphur?”

“Do you know how to *help* him!”

I have a charge in each pistol, one for each man .

Irresolute, I gazed at this barely living man that chance had brought to my feet. To risk another witness to my departure from France—a witness to my killing M. Dariole, come to that—would be stupid in the extreme.

I spared a glance for the boy, poised on one knee, his scatterbrained enthusiasm evident.

And how he thinks *he* can demand assistance from *me!*

If I forced my mind from the press of confusion that surrounded Dariole in my thoughts, that only brought other memories to mind. I found myself picturing Ravaillac. Bazanez and de Vernyes. Henri the King.

“Turn him over,” I directed. M. Dariole stared at me as if I were mad, then grabbed the man’s clothing. It seemed to be plain linen, fashioned something like a night-gown, except that it opened at the front like a doublet. Dariole hauled the dead weight over onto its face again.

I stood over the body, bent to get my arms under his, hauled him up so that his chest was a yard or so above the sand, and rammed my locked fists back up towards me, constricting his ribs and belly.

I have no liking for water. Like most men, I fear drowning. Therefore, I do not forget having seen Gabriel Santon wrestle and squeeze the life back into a trooper of ours, who had fallen drunk into some dike in the United Provinces.

Of course, *Gabriel* is skilled, I thought grimly as I worked. And this man has been sodden for a long time.

Gabriel Santon came vividly into my recollection. In the Low Countries, pistol in hand, bawling death-threats at any man who would not jump in to fetch the trooper out—Gabriel himself not being able to swim. *And where is he now? With the Duc, in the Bastille? In the Chatelet, being questioned, like Ravaillac? Has he had sense enough to get out of Paris?*

“Rochefort, you’re going to kill him!”

Dariole had his hands on me again, clinging to my arm. The lack of a man’s full strength told in him when it was not a matter of swords.

The body in my arms jerked of itself. The man’s trailing feet twitched. His head lifted, and he gave a coughing puke. Water and thin vomit splashed out and soaked my sleeves. I let him repeat it until nothing but air came out, and dropped him face-down on the sand.

“I *told* you he was alive!” Dariole exclaimed, elated as if he had won a bet at Zaton’s.

Already regretting the impulse that had moved me, I busied myself with the leather flask of brandy from my saddle-bags, and, after a moment’s thought, a spare doublet. I got the “demon” to sit up and drink from the one, and put the other around his wide shoulders. He was, despite his lack of stature, almost as wide across the shoulders as I. To find a man so ugly, so deformed, stripped down to his under-linen and with nothing else to him but what was, now I looked at it, a soaked and braided silk cord...

Dariole knelt, supporting the man against him, half-buried in sea-weed as he still was; keeping up a flood of young man's chatter to which I did not attend. He made no reference to the pistol when I put it back on my belt.

"Messire, we need to get the demon into shelter!"

Against my better judgement, I allowed myself to be drawn into contradiction. "He's not a demon."

"He *is*. You look at his eyes!"

The stocky man was shivering violently in the wind off the sea, even with my scarlet wool doublet around him. His flat face showed a yellow-grey. Ill. Unless he had been born like it. He gazed around in a dazed way, and I dropped into a crouch and caught his jaw in my hand, staring into his face.

His eyes, under oval lids, looked out at me as black as tar. And their shape... *This is not a hare-lip, or breasts on a male body; no common freak.*

"Do you understand me?" I repeated it in two or three French dialects, as well as the few words of Basque I have. He might be a natural idiot born to some family hereabouts. And now brought back to life, consciousness, memory.

M. Dariole should have minded his own business, I thought, in amused despair at yet another complication in my life.

The "demon" spoke. Thick vocal sounds rattled out of his mouth, with such aggression as to make me grateful I still had my pistol.

"Who are you?" Dariole surprised me by speaking in the *langue d'oc* as he supported the man. No sign of comprehension showed on the misshapen face. "What language do demons speak, Messire Rochefort?"

"Spanish?" I murmured ironically—Spain being the great threat to the French court. *And yet this is a man, and I suppose he may be foreign as well as deformed.*

I began to run through greetings in the foreign languages I knew. A man picks up a number in my profession. He gave me no reaction at all to French, German, the Italian of the Veneto, or my skimpy knowledge of Arabic tongues.

"God give you good day." I spoke Spanish. To my shock, a glimmer of interest showed in his eyes. "Mordieu! Spanish *is* the Devil's language, then!"

On a hunch I addressed him sequentially in Portuguese and English. Comprehension lit up his face, where he lay braced against the young man's knees.

"He knows English, Spanish, and Portuguese," I said. "The languages of sea-farers. I think your demon is from this world, not Hell."

"He's off the wreck." Dariole looked, if anything, a trifle disappointed. "A woman said they'd been out early combing the foreshore. I guess they missed him."

"The tide's coming in now." There were fragments of debris slopping about further down the beach that might have been whatever was of no worth, left over from a wreck. I pointed, repeating myself in Spanish and English, "Were—you—on—a—ship?"

The man watched my lips attentively, as if he accustomed himself to my voice.

“Ship. Down gone.”

My ear recognised the words: London English.

“Maybe it was a demon ship?” Dariole remarked.

He sounded hopeful. I wondered if he had been one of the young men who would go from Zaton’s to a gypsy foreteller or back-alley alchemist.

The freak’s black eyes were clearer than one would expect in a man who is old: past his fiftieth year, and perhaps approaching his sixtieth. *An old demon*, I thought, mordantly amused at Dariole’s superstitious insistence on the man’s supernatural qualities.

But then, the boy has not been alive for so many years as I, nor seen so many natural freaks. Nature is unkind and God seems singularly indifferent to what She practises.

“Where are you from?” I made the question English. “Who are you?”

He said a word that I didn’t understand; I supposed it by that to have been a proper name. He repeated it. This time I caught the sound, if not the sense.

“Nihon. Nihon, God give you good den, honoured-sir. Nihon!”

““Nihon?””

With evident effort, he made his voice slow. In English, he said, “The Japans.”

I had some memory, it came to me now, of a silk screen owned by the Papal Legate, Father Cotton, who was a frequent supplicant to my master the Duke. It had showed round-headed and black-haired pilgrims in procession, hundreds all packed close together. As if the two images superimposed themselves in my mind, I looked at the living, breathing man on this Normandy beach.

“The Japans,” I said aloud.

He gave a sharp jerk of his head, a sound that might have been assent, and fell to vomiting up small amounts of water again. Over the coughing and choking, while he held the man’s shoulders, M. Dariole said, “Where’s ‘Japans?’”

“The Indies. Chin.” As he looked blank, I added, “Where the Jesuits get their money from. He is a merchant, probably, if he was on a ship.”

And here he is, alive, and what am I to do with him!

““Merchant?”” Dariole repeated, in English.

“Not merchant!” The foreigner lurched away from M. Dariole; I grasped his forearm, stopping him from tumbling face-forward on the sand. He stayed on his knees, gazing at me with black, misshapen eyes, gibbering out words faster than I stood a chance of hearing them.

“Slower!”

He stopped, gazed at me, and spoke more slowly, all his emphasis wrong, but words nonetheless comprehensible.

“I am of the Ambassador’s party. Ambassador of Tokugawa Hidetada to King-Emperor of the England!”

There were too many names in it for me to hold them in my mind. I shook my head. He tried again:

“Where land is this!”

Politely, while I thought, I said, “You are on the coast of Normandy, monsieur; in France.”

“What part of England is this ‘Franz?’”

I straightened up without answering.

I cannot leave M. Dariole alive here. I cannot kill Dariole in front of this foreigner without also killing the foreigner, because he can make himself understood. I should never have revived him! *Why, at my age, have I been sucked into this dilemma?*

Self-evidently, I have been a fool. I delayed the necessary death of M. Dariole—and now I have got myself a live Nihonese sailor, for my pains.

This situation is regrettable.

But many things that are regrettable must be done. I have two pistols, and if one hangs fire, I have my rapier.

“Messire Rochefort.” Dariole’s voice was oddly emphatic. “Here come men to kill you.”

Rochefort, Memoirs

7

I spun around, leaving the half-drowned man on his hands and knees, grovelling in the encrusting sand. Dariole pointed.

Seven men came down over the sand towards us, from the direction of the fishing village. Three more men were coming in over the rocks around the next headland. And two more behind them, further back.

Which of you out-guessed me? Knew I would ride all through the night?

There was no proof of it, but they ran as men run into combat. Fast, determined—but *not soldiers*, I observed as the larger gang ran out onto the sand, spreading out as some of them ran faster than others.

They don’t know enough to keep together, they will reach us piecemeal, they are courtiers and back-street thugs from Les Halles.

“You—run!” I directed.

The last thing I desire is for M. Dariole to suppose he can stab me in the back and collect a reward from these men . Which he may just be stupid enough to think he can do without suffering interrogation himself.

I glanced down at him. “At least you will be a diversion; split their forces!”

Dariole stood up beside me. A smile went across his white face. “You want me anywhere but behind you, eh, messire? *That* doesn’t surprise me!”

My fist clenched: I came within a hairsbreadth of laying him out on the sand.

He put up a restraining hand. “It’s not like they’ll leave me alive. Suppose we delay you blowing my head off until we’ve got rid of this lot?”

He spoke with a ridiculous buoyant optimism—and as if it were an agreed thing between us that I would not shoot him.

I shifted the pistol to my left hand and drew my sword. The hiss of metal against wood veneer brought him even more alert. I said, “Are you supposing that, in the unlikely event we survive, I would be reluctant to kill a man who had fought beside me?”

He grinned at me. “You’d be reluctant. You’d still do it. Or—you’d *try*, Messire Black Dog.”

Contradictory feelings threatened; I quashed them.

The first man was clear enough to see: sword clutched in his right hand, other elbow pumping as he ran, the bobbing heads of following men behind him. Perhaps a hundred yards away. *A dozen of them. This is a death-trap.*

“The matter may be purely theoretical, Messire Dariole,” I said lightly, and reached out and rapped the Andalusian stone horse in the ribs with my fist. “*Down!*”

He was not a war-horse, I would be at a disadvantage if I mounted. He sank down, hooves thrashing up sand, eyes rolling, and fell on his side, as I have trained him.

Hardly enough for a barricade, I realised. We are caught between them and the sea. Ironically, pistol shots will not be heard and bring help.

I will have time for one set of re-loads; not that that will help against twelve. They may have guns. There is nowhere to run to. If they miss, it will all be down to the sword. I cannot kill a dozen men!

Dariole dropped down on his knees in the churned sand beside me, ducking away from the jennet’s head. I heard a coughing sound. The “demon” from Nihon, on hands and knees, was dragging himself into the makeshift shelter of the horse: both afraid of death and clever enough to identify the nearest possible shelter. And therefore, I thought, definitively human.

“Not that this will last as a shelter more than moments,” I remarked, and lifted my pistol. The running men were all much of a muchness: in dark doublets and trunk-hose, modest ruffs, and high crowned hats with brims turned down to keep the sunlight out of their eyes.

A ball whined overhead; another smacked into the sea-weed. I dodged back, leaned over the jennet, shot one man—coolly astonished to hit a target at long distance—and shot off the other pistol, and missed.

Both shots served their purpose: there was a fusillade of fire from the running men, all of it going wild. *Now let them realise they can’t re-load while they run!*

“Teppo!”

It was a grunt from the Nihonese foreigner. He gestured urgently, where he lay, prodding at me with blunt fingers. I realised he was groping for my powder-flask and pouch of bullets.

“Teppo!”

One man in the oncoming group dropped down to his knees, I guessed to re-load a pistol. Urgently, I spilled the equipment into the foreign man’s hands, crouching down behind the jennet’s heaving chest. *It is this or Dariole, and I will not trust that young man at my side with a pistol!*

The Nihonese stranger re-loaded one pistol, expertly and quickly, and put it into my left hand. I shot it off as he re-loaded the other. For a handful of moments I did nothing but put the muzzle over the Andalusian’s saddle and pull the trigger, exalted at the rate of fire we achieved. I ducked down as cast lead bullets whined over us towards the sea.

Fifty yards . And there are still six of them coming close.

I slapped the foreigner’s shoulder. “Use the pistols. Teppo! Messire Dariole. Can you fight at a man’s side or are you only a duelist?” I got up onto one knee, poised to receive the charge.

The young man had his back bent low. His face was bright with excitement. He might have been a hunting dog anxious to be let slip at bear or wild boar. “I can fight; you watch me!”

“Then, since they have been kind enough to split themselves, we will kill these nearer men first.” I stood up coolly, and took my final shot at the nearest man. I missed. The man behind and to his right folded at the knees and plummeted into the sand.

I dropped the slim butt of the pistol into the Nihonese man’s hand. “Two wounded, at least; we are down to ten men against us.”

Dariole laughed loudly, but he sounded high and breathless. “Oh, that’ll make all the difference!”

“*Now!*” I sprang up onto my feet as the men came at us—and split to go around the stone horse.

I barely had time for the fierce rush of exultation at their stupidity. *A pair and three: they have split their forces!* I spun around, the Andalusian now all the guard I had for my back, stepping over the foreigner’s prone body and slamming my blade down hard on the first man’s rapier.

“Stay at my right hand!” I yelled to Dariole. “Use the horse to keep them from coming behind us. Let them come to you!”

Maybe they are not so foolish, I reflected, as the young man sent his rapier-point into an attacker’s face. They have room not to get in one another’s way, and the rest will be here within minutes.

I cross-drew my dagger, caught the second man’s blade, and wrenched it out of his grip; I think breaking his wrist at the same time. They used Italian guards, not badly schooled: *prima guardia, seconda, terza*. Madame Medici’s Florentines. The first man thrust at me and the second made a stab with his dagger.

I have two; Dariole has three; he’s untrained, he’ll get drawn off into single combat and slaughtered—

“Messire Dariole! Do you hear me!”

His boots made grooves in the sand as he leaped back, landing a fathom away on my right-hand side. The boy took one blade on his dagger and lifted it out of the way with that sliding push and blow that the

Florentine schools call *intreciata*. He stuck his sword under the rapier blade and into the first man's chest.

My half-disarmed man flinched for the merest fraction of a second as his compatriot choked and spewed blood. I whipped the edge of my dagger in a slicing cut across his chin, feeling the numb bash of a bruise as my fist caught his teeth. In the same move, I kicked the second man's feet out from under him.

The scree and whirr of blades took my attention. A sharp crack startled me, and a solid thud. I had time only to realise that the Nihonese man had reached forward and shot at one of the men attacking Dariole. No one appeared to be staggering.

"They may have mail doublets or cuirasses: go for the throat or the face!"

One man stumbled; Dariole thrust at his face, and I cut down into the opening and chopped through the man's ham-string. He fell back, mouth wide, screaming. I spun around for two short thrusts: into the chest and the eye of the men I had incapacitated.

One, two—it had taken bare seconds. Out of the salon, duels are brutal and brief. The men coming off the rocks had not reached the sand yet. As I flicked a glance their way, one threw up his hands and vanished. No sound of gunfire. *Weed on the rocks; he's fallen.*

The two men fighting Dariole backed up a pace.

One, in a hat with a crimson plume, called, "Messire Rochefort!"

A Florentine accent. I remembered it. This short, squat man is the man who stopped me on the night when I was attempting to reach the Arsenal.

"Throw down your weapons!" he shouted. "There's too many of us: you don't stand a chance!"

With their pistols empty and the first men down, and with the crack of pistol-shot from our side, the next two or three men behind him slowed, hesitating. With his every word, his men lost momentum. I saw that I could catch my chance now, before they paused and regrouped.

"I am not Maignan!" I called out. Now the next three were close, I recognised two more of them from that tavern room—the man who had held Maignan, and the one who had slit the vein in his neck; the latter a left-handed swordsman. Two down-at-heels courtiers, clinging to the coat-tails of someone rich and powerful; in this case the Queen Regent. Disgusted, I thought I might have been looking at mirrors of myself.

One yelled, "The Queen offers you a fair trial!"

Lying fool .

I stooped to put my hand flat on the Andalusian jennet's neck, shouted out, "I'll give her a fair trial of my cock!" and slapped hard.

The stone horse thrashed up onto its feet. I darted back. It plunged and reared around in widening circles, sending sprays of sand flying.

I had hoped that one or other of her courtiers would have been made angry by the obscenity. None displayed hesitation. I hoped the horse would incapacitate them: they dodged. Four men down on the sand, and I could not be certain that any one of them was dead; five men closing in on the two of us. Fools, but still enough to kill us. . . .

Two more pistol shots cracked out. Even if bullets didn't strike home, the fire kept our attackers demoralised. I took what advantage I could from the panicking horse; darted in on Dariole's left hand, engaged two blades, and caught the third man's point on my dagger.

I realised, too late, that the boy was not engaged in fighting two men, but only one. *I cannot see the fifth man—*

A coughing grunt sounded on my left-hand side.

Something hot but rapidly cooling splashed my left arm and face. *No, it is not the sea.* The water is too far away—and too cold in the spring to feel this warm.

A weight thumped down beside me.

The heavy object that rolled a few inches on the sand was a man's head.

Movement in the corner of my vision resolved into the "demon." He stood in the churned sand, ragged clothes trailing concealing weed, a bright curved sword in his hand, a decapitated body at his feet.

Dear God, if I'd guessed him *armed!*

In a heart-beat, I realised: He is a swordsman, he uses a curved scimitar blade like the Turks and North African emirs; he is barely recovered from having his lungs emptied; I cannot rely on him to defend that flank.

All that before the head stopped rolling, clogged with sand; before the fountaining arterial blood soaked tepidly into my doublet.

"The rest of them are on us!" M. Dariole yelled.

I glimpsed movement to the right. Two men were off the rocks and coming towards us: one at a dead run, the second limping behind.

Four and two of them left—fighting three of us now, if the demon can stay on his feet.

I glanced swiftly back to the approaching men and saw Dariole pressing ahead, away from me, into their group.

"Stay where you are!" I yelled, too late.

The man that Dariole dueled drew him out and away from me and the foreigner, all in a split second. I saw the boy's sword and dagger flying, too quick for thought; he was focused, grinning, strung to the highest pitch of excitement.

The man he was fighting was a head taller and heavier than he was. *M. Dariole is trying to trip him over the hamstring man—*

In a skirmish, acting alone gets you killed.

The two men off the rocks ran up to me as the four men split to circle Dariole. I had no choice but to swing around and engage them. "Dariole!"

The "demon" grunted and fell down on one knee.

One of the men fighting me tried to break off, backing towards Dariole. I drove for a kill on him, missed,

caught the second man's wrist and jerked him forward, throwing him over my hip. I stamped down, stumbling as I caught his throat, and re-engaged the second man, hampered by trying to take note of two things at one time: *M. Dariole is about to get himself killed and therefore me along with him....*

The deformed "demon," down on one knee, slashed his heavy curved blade around at the height of a man's ankle. It sunk deep into the foot of my attacker: I instantly put my point through the base of his chin and up into his brain. The second man rolled to his feet, choking. I caught his blade in the drop-hilt of my dagger, twisted hard, and could not hear the snap over the noise of men screaming and yelling, but I felt it all down my arm. Spinning, I thrust into the man's groin, and as he folded and dragged my sword forward, I slashed my dagger's edge across his eyes. His scream deafened me.

A thrashing body rolled past me: the Nihonese man, his thick arms wrapped around a bloodied European. One of the wounded. I stuck the sword-rapier down, piercing the man's back at his kidneys, and he spasmed into stiffness.

Desperate, I swung around.

Dariole—too far away for me to reach in a half-heart-beat.

One cut at him from behind, one man thrust from the left, and two more men from the right.

Dariole spun, dropped his rapier inverted over his shoulder in a glissade and caught the first blade. Simultaneously, he stabbed the man on his left in the groin, and stepped away. One man out of the fight.

As the first wounded man dropped to his knees, Dariole twisted under a slashing cut on the right and continued his spin, and engaged the third man's blade and licked his point in to take him in the face, through the eye and into the brain.

Dariole recovered his sword, dropped down on one knee, and thrust up simultaneously with rapier and left-hand dagger.

His sword cut through the throat of the remaining man on his right. Blood geysered across Dariole and the trampled sand. His dagger ripped up the doublet of the man behind him—and jarred across mail or plates sewn inside it. That man brought his blade up, fainted, and thrust, *botta in tempo*.

I sprinted towards them.

Dariole took no notice of the feint. He sprang up and brought his rapier down across the man's sword-hand wrist, cutting forward at the same time as he moved back.

The edge hit so hard there was an audible sound above the wind and the yelling: a sound like a butcher splitting a pork knuckle.

The man's sword fell away. His hand hung from his wrist by a tearing strip of flesh.

Dariole thrust perfectly into his throat, turned, and took the first wounded man's blade, and deflected it by sheer force. Dariole slid his rapier up the other sword's edge, and his point went into the man's mouth, shattering teeth, and out of the back of the skull.

The noise and their shrieks were drowned by surf.

Two of us stood panting, staring at each other, dripping red onto the churned sand. The wind on the wetness soaking me, chilled me through breeches and hose.

I have seen that precision before. At Zaton's .

Quiet: a deserted beach: no movement from the village or on top of the headland....

"We should have kept one alive," I said, aware that my chest was heaving now, taking in air. "To find out if there are more. And where they have left their horses."

The young man Dariole wiped his forearm across his face, and only succeeded in reddening the linen cuff at his wrist. "There's one alive over there. I think he's alive."

Dariole stepped over one body and bent down to examine the next one: a blond man with a pearl at his ear. The sand was soaked dark under his face. Dariole's teeth showed with a grin that had nothing to do with humour, but only with the exultation that comes after a fight: *I live, you live, they do not.*

"No." Dariole straightened up. "He's dead. I killed him. We've taken twelve men's lives in as many minutes."

There was a light in his eyes and a spring in his step. This is what makes bullies of some of us. The knowledge that we *can* take another man's life. We can kill armed men. We can do what we please.

Four men at the one time . I shook my head. "I admit it, messire," I said, with precise gravity. "You are—very good."

He grinned.

I looked down at the men, spread across the yards of sand, some dead, possibly some still dying.

"And you are very stupid," I added. "If I tell you to stay somewhere, then *stay where I tell you!*"

His grin widened; he did not seem at all taken aback by the rebuke. "That's helpful advise, messire—from the man who was about to shoot me!"

I confess I glared at him. To be witness to such bloodshed, to have come safe through a skirmish, to be rid of the Medici's courtiers, and *still* to be faced with the ineradicable problem of his presence—it galled me more than I can say. It would have been remarkably convenient if he—and the "demon"—could have contrived to get themselves murdered in the course of this butchery.

"Besides," Dariole added, "you can't kill me. I've saved your life."

"*You?* You saved *my* life?" I found myself waving my arm at the bodies on the beach. "What was *I* doing here!"

I would have added more, but the Nihonese "demon" wiped his mouth and got to his feet unsteadily, and made a motion that was strange to me. As I realised it might be some kind of foreign bow, he fixed his black eyes on M. Dariole.

"Truly," he said in English, "you are very skilled, honoured mistress."

My first thought was: *He does not understand the language.*

This sea-farer, who comes from who knows what Eastern country, no wonder he cannot make himself rightly understood in this mixture of languages from England, Spain, and Portugal.

The sea wind blew over the churned beach. It did not carry away the stink of blood and shit. The young man Dariole stood motionless, his messy rapier in his right hand, his dagger still jutting from a corpse.

Blood dried dark red on his face and soaked ruff.

A light came into his eyes.

He laughed, recovering his dagger and swiping his blades on his breeches to rough-dry them against later rust. The sun was on his face, and the light showed every tiny flaw in his skin.

I saw, in that intense light, the shadow of hair on his upper lip. It *was* no more than a shadow—no more than a smear of dirt, put on and brushed off again, leaving a ghost of darkness and *men see what they expect to see*.

The black eyes and flat face of the rescued Nihonese “demon” turned towards me. From far away, manners will differ, dress will differ, and so, because his customs are not ours, he instantly sees—

“I had think she was your sword teacher, honour-sir?” the misshapen man said, in bad English. “That you are samurai, and she your teacher with a blade?”

Dariole began to smile.

It was easier to see him as male. The hair, loose because he had lost his hat in the fighting, was cut short as no woman’s hair ever is. Wearing breeches, fighting—what woman *fighters*?

It was as if the world clicked into a different focus.

Not a young man heavy with fat, but an adolescent girl just filling out at the hip. The mouth, womanish on a boy, is plain on a woman; so also the arch of the eyebrows. The fashion of doublets does not display her breasts, and yet....

It was a wrench that split the world apart. Once I saw it, I could not stop seeing it. Could not understand how I had ever *failed* to see it.

“Thank you.” She inclined her head in a mock-modest bow; either to the “demon” from Nihon or to me, I was too shocked to tell.

“Messire Dariole.” My voice, embarrassingly, came out as a croak, all the after-shock of the fight and this revelation flooding through me. “Messire Dariole, you are a woman.”

Rochefort, Memoirs

8

The best of a man’s judgement may be overwhelmed when he has just finished fighting for his life.

The stink of warm blood came in waves off the sand, roused up by the wind off the sea. The minor wrenches and strains of physical effort began to make themselves felt in my muscles. I regarded her face, gazing at me over the ploughed sand—and felt my temper snap as plainly as if it were a ham-string.

“*You’re a woman!*”

I still had my sword in my hand. I felt my fingers clench on the grip and finger-ring, bringing up the blade.

The young woman took a precise pace back. What spread over her face was a wide, impudent grin.

“*You tricked me!*”

I hardly knew what I shouted, and I doubt any man who heard me could have understood the inarticulate roar. The sand betrayed me as I staggered forward into the churned-up hummocks and holes, stumbling past sprawled bodies, lurching against the grains that yielded and let me slip.

Ahead of me, she backed up, half-dancing, light enough to run over the drying surface without bogging down. A master of arms could have used the prints of her feet in the sand to illustrate a manual of defence.

“You made—a *fool* of me!”

I punctuated the words with flung stones and weed, kicking at the fore-shore in a fury, sending up clots and showers of wet sand. The wind off the sea snatched my voice and drowned it. Blind frustration and fury made me choke. I was heavier: she could reach the shingle and the hard rock before me. And then she would run like the sea-wind, and likely she could hide long enough for the tide and the *Willibrod* to necessarily remove me from this coast—

Drenched in hot sweat, I panted to a halt, the woman still five yards beyond me, poised on light feet to keep the distance open between us.

“Masculine whorish *bitch!*”

I wrenched myself round and called the stone horse. The stink of blood made him skittish. He—and any consequent advantage to me in pursuit—cantered off down the beach. I turned quickly back.

Her blades threatened.

The Italian rapier and dagger in her grip were smeared dark red, like her clotted doublet. She halted on the sand, lead foot forward, shoulders back and balanced, point raised, so perfectly in a guard position that she *must* be male, *could not* be the middling-tall young woman that I now saw.

Shifting her weight back onto her hip, Dariole pursed her lips and kissed the air at me, in perfect imitation of an effeminate young man.

“You didn’t know. You *didn’t know!* Messire Rochefort, what sort of a spy are you? You’re supposed to spot things like this!”

“*Catamite!*” I exploded. One of my boots came into contact with something more solid. I bent down, scooping a jagged basalt rock up in my left hand, and flung it with all my strength at her.

She skipped aside, laughing; turned, and sprinted towards the village.

“I *thought* I got away with it!” she crowed, her voice coming back shrill against the sea-wind.

I struggled against the clinging sands, came to firmer footing, and was suddenly filled with a hard excitement: Now I can run, now I can catch him—her—it!

The sand gave way to rocks, great slabs pitted with holes worn smooth by the tides and covered with glistening weed. I sprang after the woman. My boot came down on bladder-wrack and water. I twisted and lurched forward, and only by instinct kept my sword-blade up as my knee and left hand hit the rocks.

Cold sweat sprang out on my forehead. To lose control, and in such a disastrous manner—

She halted a yard or two away, her balance on the slippery rocks apparently perfect. The wind took her hair forward, catching her small ruff. She grinned and looked down. “I told you I could make you kneel to me.”

I heated, I think from my neck to my hair; I knew I must look foolishly red, and that knowledge enraged me still further. And at this worst of all possible moments, I felt my prick stir in my breeches.

I scrambled awkwardly to my feet, panting; salt water soaking my knee, hose, and boot. To be reduced to mere words almost made me weep, if a man may weep from rage and frustration. “I swear—I’ll kill you!”

“You nearly *did* kill me!” she yelped. “You were going to shoot me! I saw you. You were going to shoot me in the *back!*”

“You—*What right have you to be angry?*” I made a gesture that, if we had not become turned around on the beach, would have been directed towards the south-east and Paris. “You are a mere brat! My business is to put an end to risks to my master—”

“We were supposed to be *fighting*, Rochefort! Dueling! You weren’t even going to draw sword, you were just going to pistol me!”

“You’re angry because you didn’t get your *duel?*”

I saw her shift her grip on the hilt of her dagger, making it more secure.

“Let’s try it, messire. Sword against sword. Let’s *see* which of us is going to walk out of here!”

I fought for composure, bit back words, breathing heavily. Something of wit came back to me. I have at least the intelligence to work out that, if a young woman is passing as a young man for some reason, the last thing she will desire is to be treated as female.

“But no. Mademoiselle is a woman. Therefore I *cannot* fight you, made-moiselle. You are safe from me.”

A scarlet flush rose up her cheeks. I rejoiced.

She spoke steadily. “A woman showed you up in Zaton’s, Messire Rochefort. Where *you* wished you’d been safe from *me*.”

I felt as if I had been struck in the body, below the joining of the ribs: robbed of breath, and left gaping.

“I proved that you’re not a man of honour, Rochefort. Proved it! So long as you get to stay alive, you’ll stand there and take *anything*.”

“I should have shot you,” I said flatly. “You are a freak and a monster; a man would be doing the world a service to put you out of it.”

She broke into a smile, sword and dagger in hand, dressed in breeches as she was, and dropped a curtsy. “Careful, messire, I’m going to think you still fancy me.”

“Stupid bitch! You are a whoreson disgrace!”

She grinned even more triumphantly. “Oh? This from the man who had his prick up my bum-hole?”

The memory of what happened in the stables at Ivry drenched me in an abrupt hot sweat.

Yes, that too was Messire Dariole—and therefore that, too, was this young...woman .

“I...” I found myself blushing. “I would never have forced—I, who have never found it necessary to force a woman in my life—!”

She let out a peal of laughter.

The wind tugged at the tabs of her doublet. She was a trompe l’oeil painting. In one heart-beat, I could see the half-grown young man, a little plump and effeminate. And in the next moment, I saw a woman of a middling-tall stature, with her hair chopped monstrously short, her legs obscenely visible in breeches and hose.

I do not suppose there is a lady at Henri’s court who has not dressed as a page to see her paramour fight a duel, or to lend some spice to their later sexual exploits by wandering the safer alleys around the palace. Spurred by natural disgust, I thought: *At least they have the decency to abandon the pretence, once they have achieved their object.*

I stepped down off the unreliable rocks, boots going deep in the churned sand, salt water seeping around my ankles.

“You are a pretty piece for a jaded man’s palate,” I said, clearly enough that she could not mistake me. “Is that where you learned your whore’s act? Did ‘Messire Dariole’ turn tricks when she needed money? You will have been popular, with your boy’s arse and your girl’s cunny!”

She followed me to the edge of the rocks, stopping in primo, her chin up. Her gaze met mine. “I’m not a whore. I’m a duelist.”

I hoped to see her flush again; instead, she looked bright-eyed and pleased. I realised all her balance was in her belly, now, on this uncertain footing. Usually she walked as a man does, from the shoulder. I should have guessed when she fought me. *But men assume. . .*

“I learned that ‘whore’s act’ from a whore, of course, messire. The girls in Les Halles are very helpful. What, you think I want to get a baby in my belly?”

I managed to sound dry. “What we were attempting is certainly not the way to go about it!”

I have no natural brats, after a long career of fornication; something for which most married women of my acquaintance have been grateful. At this moment I did not in the least desire to hear Dariole speculate on the subject.

A harsh voice broke in, in accented English:

“You discipline your unruly servant, lady-sama! If he servant, and not you?”

The foreign man stared at me with what I would, in a European, have taken to be embarrassment or disapproval.

Dariole lowered her point.

“Arcadie-Fleurimonde-Henriette de Montargis de la Roncière.” She inclined her head to the foreigner in a young man’s formal bow. “You can call me Dariole; it’s the name I travel under.”

The stranger grunted, apparent comprehension coming to his face. “Women travel disguised as men for

safety. You are a rustic samurai family?"

She shot a glance at me, continuing in the badly accented English that he seemed to comprehend better than my Spanish. "What's that mean? Noble?"

"Hai. Noble, samurai, yes."

Who else but the nobility will have had money and leisure for instruction in swordsmanship from childhood on? I vaguely knew her family—as one of many: provincial, insignificant, little interested in court politics, and keeping their heads down as far as matters of Catholic and Huguenot are concerned. And from such a prosaic and conservative background—*what are they doing educating a daughter to be a duelist!*

The Nihonese man bellowed up into my face. "You are her servant? Bondsman? Eta? Slave?"

"I am *not!*" I exploded, with far more temper than caution. It was the last pack on the mule's back, and I confess I broke. I spat out: "I am the Sieur Valentin Raoul St Cyprian Anne-Marie Rochefort de Cossé Brissac and no man's servant, let alone servant to this ill-mannered bitch!"

The sallow man seemed not to like the intemperate outburst. Mlle Dariole, wide-eyed, said in French: "Oh, no man's servant—does M. de Sully know you've resigned?"

I ignored her barb. *There is one consolation*, I reflected bleakly. Mademoiselle de la Roncière is far too young to have heard of my scandal. It was before her birth. And this stranger is from far enough away that the doings of the French court twenty years ago are as distant as the moon.

I sweated, nonetheless. Dariole's brilliant eyes had skin creasing at the corners, and she wore the look of a cat with a plump mouse. *No matter that I have spoken in quick temper, she will remember the words.*

"'Brissac?' The Marshal has a by-blow?"

I shrugged, content to let her think so. He would not be the only Marshal of France to have a bastard at court, and I am long past the point where I care about slurs against my legitimacy.

"Won't *anything* make you duel, Rochefort?!"

"Go down the rue St Denis and look up," I said coldly to her—to "Mademoiselle Dariole," as I told myself I must now think of this abomination. "I have been responsible for more deaths at Montfaucon than in duels. My business is to see nothing threatens the Duc de Sully. How I solve such problems—I do not have time to play the gentleman!"

Her face altered at the mention of the gibbets at Montfaucon, where they hang traitors and criminals up for Paris to gawk at.

"Montfaucon's where you'll end up now," she snapped, "and probably Sully with you!"

I slitted my eyes against the wind, looking out over the oncoming tide at the *St Willibrod*. The pulse of apprehension that went through me took my attention from the boy-girl. For a moment I could only think: *Suppose I have not saved Sully?* Suppose the Queen's man that infiltrated the Bastille has killed him? Suppose all my warnings came too late? Suppose I have had the King killed for nothing?

I have been set running by the mere chance of M. Ravaillac's success. Now I have very nearly run far enough. Chance cannot rule all, after all; a man must make some shift to shape his own destiny.

Into the moment's silence, the foreigner gave a great laugh. He said gutturally, "You and she, you have a joke with each other, yes?"

"A joke," I repeated grimly. I looked down at the woman dressed as a man as she stepped onto the sand. It would take very little for me to keep seeing her as the pretty boy she was, in her close-fitting doublet, and the slops that curved around her hips. She was an icon such as one might see in a book: *Hic Mulier*, the Mannish Woman, or *Haec Vir*, the Effeminate Man.

I suppose that I should have been grateful—if she was a woman, my arousal when sleeping next to her was explained. I had not got a cock-stand over a young man.

And yet this is worse. I have been moved to desire a monster: a woman who dresses in man's clothes.

An experienced swordsman must expect to see younger challengers. To have been subjected to such acute humiliation by a younger man at Zaton's, to have felt such intense and helpless hatred for him—well, no matter how my reputation hung in tatters, I had at least the consolation that it would be considered *natural*. Older duellists in time meet the man who will defeat them, and sometimes it is a remarkably gifted younger man.

I have been beaten by a woman.

Fumbling to return my rapier to the scabbard, I dropped it. I snatched it up again, recovering it from the sand, and succeeded at a second attempt. I felt on the edge of vomiting as the realisation finally sank in.

"We must clear up," I said harshly, gathering my wits. "Drag the bodies into the sea. Take purses and any documents. The tide will make it look as if they are seamen from the wreck. And—you—wash yourself off!"

I turned away without looking at her again, strode down the beach, and reached down to grab the stiff doublet collar of the nearest man—Maignan's killer, all the front of his doublet sopping red. I heaved him bodily after me as I went towards the waves. As I went, I stooped to grab another still-warm man under the sweat-soaked armpit and drag him, rejoicing in the plain strength that allows me to manhandle dead weight. *She cannot match this! She nor most men....*

It is no exaggeration to say I was bloodied from head to foot. I let that be my excuse for splashing waist-deep into the oncoming waves before I let the bodies go. I dipped my head, and ducked under the surface; rising to shake wet hair out of my face, and shiver under the bright sun.

Whether or not it would rinse blood out of my clothes—and how long the stuffed and padded garments would take to dry—I did not know or care. I stood, chilled, realising that I inflicted cold water on my body because of its rebellion. Because when I look at the young man who is a young woman, my prick stands proud, and I would die rather than let her see that.

I gazed out across the shifting waves. The sea-haze would hide the beach from the ship: the *Willibrod*'s crew would have made out nothing of what went on here. They would not suspect the skirmish, or murders; however a man chose to think of them.

Can I be as obsessed with her as when she was a boy? Impossible. Unnatural. Perverse!

Fighting the under-tow of the waves, I splashed back into shallow water. Mlle Dariole abandoned a body for me where the incoming tide touched its boots, and turned to trudge back to the others—*let her do a man's work of disposing of corpses*, I thought bitterly, *since she is so ready to make them*.

I glanced down. The man's hair had been muddy blond even before the sea soaked it. He had a

close-trimmed beard, a doublet of plates, leather trunk-hose; all this along with a rapier that had snapped just below the extravagant pierced steel hilt. Sea-water turned all his clothing black. *I do not know his name, but here is an end to him.*

Dariole reached the remaining bodies, far over on the sand. The Nihonese foreigner was to the other side of me, poking along the weed that marked the upper tide-line.

He bent suddenly to the sea-weed again, disentangling something from the bladder-wrack. Metal flashed, and colour.

He scooped at the sand frantically, as if he expected there to be more; ran as far as the nearer rocks, kicking at the weed; apparently uncovered nothing, and fell down on his knees with a great shout of rage and misery.

I could not tell if the cry were anguish or aggression. Instantly, I drew my rapier and checked the beach.

Dariole—down-wind, and too far away to have heard shouting over the noise of the waves—stalked the Andalusian jennet as he picked his way across wet sand, leaving vanishing hoof-prints. She did not look.

No man else, except corpses, was visible out to where the sea-haze shut us in.

The foreign man cried out again.

I could not see his sword, or where he might have put it. Taking a firm grip across to my own hilt, aware that I had no certain guide to his reactions to anything, I strode wetly up the shore to the weeds.

A man with a sword is a source of physical danger; that is a truism worldwide. I judged his discomposure by the fact that he did not react to me walking up to him ready to draw steel. He got to his feet and brushed sand from his thin linen. I thought it as well not to comment on his lack of self-control, since he looked much embarrassed.

What he held was a helmet—the steel oddly coloured, and smothered in braid, but a helmet nonetheless.

He gazed up at me. Apropos of nothing that I could understand, he said, “You are very tall, even for a gaijin.”

“Yes,” I agreed, gravely.

He said a word that I did not comprehend; I had to ask him to repeat it two or three times before I properly heard it, and understood it to be his name. “Tanaka Saburo.”

“Rocheport.” There was no hint in his behaviour now about the helmet; he might never have howled. A helmet worn by a now-drowned comrade, I wondered?

“Have you found a dead body?” I struggled for the English. “Morte. One of your fellows?”

His expression was unreadable, a man of his own people excepted. He held up the sand-encrusted helmet. Made for a curiously deformed skull, by the look of it, but a helmet of war nonetheless. Out of instinct, I looked along the line of sea-weed.

“Hai.” Saburo nodded, sharply. “You are right. If there’s one armour, should be more, should be....”

He scowled, plainly searching for words.

“‘Cuirass?’ ‘Gauntlets?’ ‘Half-armour?’” I shrugged. “It’s a little old-fashioned to think so, monsieur, I grant you, but an armour should be complete. Is there no more of this?”

His features assumed an expression that could have been grief or fury. “The armours of gift are missing!”

“Armours of—”

“From Shogun-lord Tokugawa Hidetada to Emperor-English Iago!”

“James.” I corrected automatically, and with that, concluded he had learned much of his English by way of men whose first language was Spanish. Another potential reason for distrust.

“Why do you throw those men in the sea?” Tanaka Saburo said abruptly. “The water is bringing them back up the shore.”

“It will be supposed they were sailors. From your ship, the wreck.” I stopped, then added, “Other men will come looking for these dead men, soon enough, when they don’t report back to their masters. I hope to disguise what happened to them for at least a short time.”

“Was bandits? Clan enemies?”

It was difficult to read his alien face. He was as wet as I. His head was bald at the front, and surrounded by long straggling black hair, more matt-black than my own. He swept the sodden hair up together as I watched, twisting it into a knot at the back of his head. His second term puzzled me.

“Enemies of my master, Monsieur Saburo,” I said, “if that makes them ‘clan enemies’?”

“Hai.” He grunted. Squinting down the beach at the remaining dead men, he added, “We have time, or not, take and prepare their heads for viewing?”

“Heads? Take *heads*?”

I goggled at this, and shook my own head. I saw now that he had two thick, black curved sticks put through the cloth sash he wore as a belt, and that they looked solid enough to conceal a blade such as he had wielded.

Tanaka Saburo shrugged. “There is no lord here to view them. The heads. Roshi-fua-san, we do not look for their horses? Man who holds them?”

I frowned, having answered that query already in my own mind. “He—or they—could be anywhere in this countryside. There’s no way to find them. And...their masters will not need a warning, to know that something has gone wrong here. They’ll know as soon as it becomes apparent their men are missing.”

Saburo glanced down the beach, where the bloodied sand began to be nibbled away at by wavelets and foam. I did not know if he were a man of keen intelligence, or merely a foreign version of the troopers I had commanded in the northern Low Countries.

“You killed many man,” he said. “Only the lady-sama killed more.”

I am not sure, but I think my expression was incomprehensible to him.

He added, “Will there be a port official? A magistrate? Coming out from the village?”

Not too stupid, then . I nodded. “You are right, monsieur—if we are unlucky. If I am more unlucky, the master of these men here is close behind them, and expecting their report soon. Therefore, I cannot

afford to wait for the tide, to board my ship.”

Abruptly, Tanaka Saburo dropped down on both knees, bending his spine and touching his forehead to the sand. He held the helmet in front of him. I confess myself taken aback. I stood frozen, hand on hilt, as he cried out something in his own language, then sat back up on his heels.

He pulled at his wet hair and his cheeks. “You would second me, if I were worthy! I am not. I am dishonoured.”

I was all on edge for him to spring at me, or else to injure himself; I could not tell whether this distress was normal for him, or what it meant.

“I have failed my patron lord!”

A man may flinch at a remark never meant for him. As I did, then.

“Messire Saburo,” I began.

He stood up, with a suppleness surprising in his age, cradling the helmet. “I have failed my lord. It’s up to me now to atone. For me to go to the Emperor-English and say, here is what little I have. I’ll apologise on my face and beg to return again to Nihon, and complete this mission.”

“There are none of your ship’s company alive?”

He shook his head. “Down by rocks, I see Ambassador dead.”

I put the lack of perceptible care in his tone down either to his being foreign, or having conceived a personal dislike of the man.

The Nihonese man said, “I can’t have the release of seppuku until I have completed my lord’s mission to England. Therefore, also, Rosh’-fu’-san—I can’t allow you to kill me.”

I hid a rueful amusement. “Is it so obvious?”

“This.” He pointed. “This is clan warfare, and you wish it concealed. If I stay here, I’m a witness. Your lord’s enemies will torture me, if they are like my own lord’s enemies. So I must either be killed by you, for silence, or leave this ‘Franz.’ I will leave.”

I made Tanaka Saburo that inclination of the head that passes for a court bow among equals. A shabby spy, fleeing from the authorities, and a civilised ship-wrecked demon, are, I dare say, on an equal footing with each other.

He said, “You are too polite to a mere captain of ashigaru.”

I guessed *hashagar* to mean “soldier,” by his bearing. Speculatively, I said, “You go to England. Because your lord was, what, the ambassador?”

Saburo jerked his head in his aggressive nod.

As equably as I could, I said, “You are going to England, Messire Saburo—and so am I. I have contacts there among fellow nationals. I also know English noblemen at the court from when I visited there before, some six years ago. Messire, if I am disposed to let you live, are you perhaps disposed to take me as a guide to the English court?”

So that I may watch you, and consider if your death is necessary .

His features gave me no indication how he considered my offer.

“If I am to hire you as—” He spoke another word I could not distinguish: I thought I made it out to be “ronin.” “Then I want no dishonour brought on me. Roshi-fua-san, I understand that you will be working for your lord’s interests. I ask only that they do not harm *my* lord’s interests.”

The noise of the jennet whuffling came across the sands. I turned my head, seeing M. Dariole leading him back as easily as a stable-boy could lead him towards food.

Tanaka Saburo’s head also turned in that direction. As if it had just occurred to him, he said, “You have no peasants—no servants.”

“No, indeed.” I tried not to show any emotion, gazing at the young woman.

Dariole grinned, catching the Nihonese man’s comment as she came up to us. “Rochefort can play the servant! Where are we going now?”

Before I could decide whether I would silence the Nihonese man or not, he said, “We go to England-land.”

“England? Oh, but, yes! I’ve got relatives in England, on my mother’s side of the family. We can stay with them!”

“If you have family, that is where every spy will expect the missing Mlle de la Roncière to run to,” I said crushingly.

The girl bounced on her toes like a much younger adolescent. “Not hardly: the Markhams haven’t seen me since I was five years old! Besides, I’m not Mlle de la Roncière. I’m M. Dariole. And no one would expect *me* to be in the company of M. Rochefort.”

“Markham” is a name I recall, I realised. From my time in London—is there not treachery of some sort associated with it, against the English crown? Albeit, it is a common enough family name....

Tanaka Saburo grunted. I didn’t look at him. *I face the same decision with Dariole as with Tanaka Saburo: either she must be dead, or she must leave the country inside the next hour.*

Saburo spoke abruptly. “I will take you both as ronin. I owe you both my life. More: because you give me my life, I can complete my lord’s wishes. I have no—resources. Let me help in the way that I can.”

“I thank you, but—”

Dariole cut me off. “What’s a ronin, messire?”

“A man without a lord, who takes service with his sword here and there, for a day or a season, and then moves on. A wave of the sea.” He squinted at the water, then back at her. “You will have your own lord, and I don’t expect loyalty above your loyalty to him. A man must serve his rightful lord in all things.”

A certain amount of cold sweat went down my back, under my wet shirt. I kept my face without expression, which a man learns to do in the Duc de Sully’s service.

“On that basis, I will be a ronin, messire,” I said. “I intend to discover from men I know in London how my lord the Duc de Sully is, what’s happening in Paris at the court, and what the Queen Regent Marie de Medici is doing. If those matters do not interfere with your mission?”

I already knew they did not: I was confident enough of his expression while I named names to read that

he did not know much of the French court, and possibly cared nothing either.

“I know not them.” Saburo gave a scowl, but continued to sound contemplative. “I am grateful to be able to offer help, no matter is small. If the Emperor-King English gives me gifts, you will not lack.”

“The English King is a notorious tight-fist. Don’t thank me, monsieur. To speak the absolute truth, Messire—Mademoiselle—Dariole is the one who rescued you. I merely helped after the event.”

Saburo patted his belly. “I remember!” He pointed at the remaining bodies. “We were help to each other—all other, I think. There are omens. We are favoured together. Fated. Let’s not break the temper of the gods by leaving here separately. Your lord’s enemies not far off, I think.”

“Then we should take the ship, there, and go.”

“Is sea?” His dark eyes opened roundly. “Cannot go land road?”

“There is none.” Moved by an unexpected impulse, I added, “I will be honest with you. My master the Duke likely has little or no power now. His enemy the Queen Regent rules this country with a council of other lords. I...Monsieur, I intend to make her rule...uneasy. Her grasp on power is not as secure as her husband’s was. She has committed crimes. I warn you: she has men who will travel to England, to discover if I am gone there. And she will not have pity on any who appear to be my companions.”

Before Saburo could speak, Dariole broke in.

“Not running for the New World, then, Rochefort?”

“I am done with running.”

Something of emotion must have come out in my tone. She looked as startled as in the town square at Poissy. I reached and took the stallion’s reins from her.

“After these last few yards.” I pointed, with grim humour, at the offshore vessel. “*Then* I am done with running. M. Saburo, I confess, in your company, any traveller’s eye will usefully fall on you, and not on your two—ronin. For the rest...”

I paused, looking at his face, and then at the young woman. She was in everything but truth a young man still. Tanaka Saburo stood with an aloof dignity, for all his wet clothes. The sea-wind made him start to shiver.

“For the rest,” I said, “and since I suppose both of you as near destitute as makes no difference... The Queen Regent’s agents will soon be warned that something has gone wrong here. Therefore, I cannot wait for the ship to come in on the tide. I must be rowed out to her now. Therefore—I cannot take my Andalusian jennet. It’s as well he’s a deceptive good horse, and worth a fair price.”

Though not a man in this town could truly afford him .

It had not cost me a pang to walk out on my lodgings in Paris. The dun Andalusian jennet...he, for lack of a tongue, is a better servant to me than Gabriel Santon. *And I am leaving both of them at the mercy of chance, now.*

“I cannot leave witnesses.” I added, “Consider...that your ship’s passage to London is paid.”

The Nihonese man squatly bowed. “I owe you giri.”

“Paid?” Dariole wiped her short hair back out of her face, trying to tug the folds of her ruff into some

semblance of order, with a duelist's care for personal appearance. She scowled. "I'll pay *that* back. Don't think I won't. Cards, or dice. Or—better still, I'll play you, on the trip! Then your notes of hand will pay my fare!"

She bounded off.

Beside me, the samurai said delicately, "She is not your sword-tutor. Nor your lady-lord. Your master?"

"Neither."

"And you are not *her* lord-sama." He sighed, as I notice he had begun to, before a direct question, as if he did not like to use them. "What is she, Rosh'-fu'-san?"

"A devil!" I bit down on the word.

"Ah." He nodded twice. "In my country, we have a kami, a spirit, who witches men. She is called kitsune, the Fox-Ghost. Men die of her obsession with them. Most often, die when she leaves them."

"Do you believe in ghosts, messire?" I thought it a reasonable thing to ask.

"A man can be thrall'd. I have seen that." He shrugged. "The black-crow priests say kitsune are heretic pagan lies. You a follower of them?"

"Black-crow?"

"The Espaniards." He lifted his squat neck, looking up at me. "You have their face. Dark. They preach their executed criminal god in my land. Christus."

It was a moment or two before I understood his pronunciation.

"I don't think you need worry about my relations with Mother Church," I murmured.

"Hai." He nodded towards Dariole, where she had stopped to pick up pebbles and skim them with a boy's vigour at the waves, when she should be emptying purses. "She is your Fox-Ghost. No?"

"She is a child!"

It was less than true: women wed at a younger age than hers.

"How did you—" I broke off again. "Is it so obvious? To you? That she's a woman under her breeches, and I..."

"No man is so angry over a woman without killing her unless his inkei is busy with his thinking. You are beyond reason with her. If I have the right word, of the priests, you are passionate."

Between the passion of a man and women in sexual congress, and the passion of Christ, bleeding in pain, I had not necessarily seen a connection, until now.

The unnaturalness of this stranger's face eased the outrage of his daring to make comment on my life, almost as if he were the demon Dariole called him.

"A well-chosen word, 'passion,'" I said grimly. "As is 'thrall.' And we will leave the matter now, Messire Saburo, which if it were not for these extraordinary circumstances, we would never have spoken of."

The dun Andalusian stone horse nibbled at my shoulder, letting out the long sigh of a mount in the

company of a man he trusts. I reached up automatically to rub him under his velvet jaw. He gave me a shove with his head; only a hint of the power of his muscles, all that strength concealed.

“Let’s to London. The woman can go to her relatives; I’ll point you a way to King James; and on the way we can pray that the wrong man isn’t looking my way at the wrong time....”

Saburo looked toward the sea, and the fine fretwork of sun on it as the haze began to lift. “If I could write a poem, I would have write something for my men. They were brave and honourable and deserve a shrine. They were ashigaru. They died far from home.”

They may not be the only ones, I reflected with mordant humour, as I watched Saburo stomp, wide-legged, down the beach.

He stopped to talk to Mlle Dariole and point at the bodies.

I am relieved that I will not have to kill her.

It came suddenly, and out of nowhere, that wash of warm relief. It was a shock. My hands have not been clean these many years; I may regret my murders on behalf of the state, but I do not feel personal relief when opportunity lets a man live. Or woman, if it comes to that.

I am removing them from the country.

I watched how her chin came up as she threw her head back, laughing in answer to whatever it was the Nihonese man had said.

I can make more use of them alive.

True, judging by the skill of their hands, neither would be quick nor easy to kill. But am I only putting off the decision? And why?

The squat foreign man and the young woman seized each the foot of a man between them. They dragged the last booted corpse down the beach, its weight ploughing ruts in the sand, and Saburo’s grunt came floating back on the sea-wind, and a splutter of surprised laughter from the young woman. I scowled.

Scowled—and caught myself.

If she is pleased to be in his company...what is that to me? To me, of any man on earth?

A twist of coldness went through my belly. The thought came into my mind. *Dear God—I cannot be jealous?*

Part 2

Excerpt from the Report of the Samurai Tanaka Saburo to Shogun Tokugawa Hidetada:

Translator’s Note

This would seem to be the best place to put another of the miscellaneous documents found with Rochefort’s Memoirs. The second section of the Memoirs follows immediately after.

The Memoirs make extremely idiosyncratic use of respectful forms of address (dono, tonno, hime, etc.), which may result from a misunderstanding of the language. Therefore, in this translation I've substituted the more familiar (if not so authentic) Edo Period san and sama, to make the narrative more accessible to modern English and Japanese readers.

There was one, once, who had the misfortune and bad taste to live past the climactic moment of his life.

The best of deaths was offered to me and I missed it. My lord missed it, also, but had the fortune to die within two years, when some of the gold still clung to him and gave him the shine of glory. Lord Kobayakawa Hideaki. He was two-and-twenty years old when I stood at his grave. I was forty-seven.

The pinnacle of our lives, two years before, had been a battle, and a great one—the great battle of our lifetime. When one has had the privilege of fighting with and against all the greatest daimyos of the lands of Nihon, when one has changed the future for all time by a simple and decisive act, what else is left?

At Sekigahara, my lord and I fought. At the crucial moment of the battle, we went over to the side of the Eastern Army and your father, Lord Tokugawa Ieyasu, who by that victory was made Shogun. My lord Hideaki was rewarded with Chikuzen province. I was rewarded by being allowed to accompany him.

We took a part in the last echoes of the war, as the great Shogun subdued outlaw lords and rebels, but it was anti-climactic. My lord wrote poetry on the subject. How a cherry blossom, holding onto the stalk into the heat of June, goes brown and rotten; better if it had fallen in the fullness of its white glory, in May.

I have no place to criticise my lord Hideaki, and if the subject and treatment seemed hackneyed to me, I would have attributed it to his youth and excused it. On the field of battle, he was god-like. At court, among conspiracies, he did not shine. He turned from them, disgusted, spending more time with women, and gambling all night while emptying jug after jug of warm sake.

So death came for him and was timely—an illness, not treachery, so he need fear no dishonour. We interred him when the yellow leaves fell. I passed into the service of his cousin, the new lord of Chikuzen province. So things stayed for six or seven years.

I was a captain of ashigaru, under my lord's cousin, and no longer the companion of a lord. That was well, I argued to myself at night. What lord wishes an old man as his companion, when that man is not particularly wise, skilled, or devout? Passing into my fifties, I could expect in time to be replaced as captain of the foot soldiers, and I might hope to be retired to a small farm, with servants enough to work while I spent my days overseeing them.

On such nights I would patrol the grounds of my lord's house—which I could never think of as his cousin's house. I paced slowly, checking the sentries at odd times, and earning myself their respect and unmalicious dislike. I would walk by the gravel-garden, watching the shifting of the moon's light on the crags, and smelling the moss and trees growing around the raked expanse. Invariably I would end at the top of one of Chikuzen's low hills, looking north to the sea, as the sun rose out of the unknown east.

A foolish thing for a samurai to do, you will say. I agree, I concede the point. My fingers were not skilled enough to cast the colours on a scroll, and my poetry, when I attempted it, had nothing of the delicacy of

the masters. Perhaps I reached a point of satisfaction when I would strip off my armour and drill with my sword, there in the brightening light, celebrating the coming of the day with the only skill I have.

Whether it was this evidence of individuality that caused my lord's cousin to choose me, I do not know. He called me to him, ordered me to Edo with a small troop of soldiers, and told me to obey his son in the capital as I would himself. It was an unnecessary slight, but not enough to bring the total to a point where I might cut off the man's head. He was not worth my own death.

At Edo, I was given a place with the man's son: we were to go on a ship, and sail for the land of the foreign barbarians. He was to be ambassador. They so often come to us, merchants and priests for the most part: now we were to go to them.

I looked at the sea, when we embarked, and wondered if, on all those mornings, I had been watching my grave.

I was not sorry to leave Nihon. My dead lord Kobayakawa Hideaki rested, I had no obligations there. His successor was unworthy: I did not consider myself obligated to him, either. And *his* son was a man of nothing much in any quality: neither brave nor cowardly, rash nor wise, decisive nor cautious. If I dislike any man, it is the hesitant one who changes his mind according to whomever last spoke to him: a feather for every wind that blows. Such men, daimyo though they may be called, do not have the right to demand the service of honest samurai.

The sea inflicted me with a grave illness from the first hour that we set our sails and left port.

I know, therefore, very little of the first few weeks. By the time I had recovered, we had met with a Dutch ship, and hove-to, to exchange news—that there would be little more trading, as we of Nihon listened more and more to those who said foreigners were malicious and harmful. And there was more. But as I came out of my illness, that was what stayed with me. That here was another point of decision, that I might be part of: keeping Nihon open to the world, or closing it, pure and secret, within itself. What we brought back from the land of the Europeans would sway this, I thought. As decisively as Sekigahara, even.

I worked the ship, in the months that followed, taking time to learn from the ship's master in the arts of navigation and sailing. It is necessary for a samurai to add to his skills, so that he may be a credit to his lord. I thought my lord Hideaki would have approved. I made sure the escort that I led, as the ambassador's guard, made regular practise with their weapons on the swaying deck, and led them gladly against pirates when we were twice attacked.

Slowly the world grew hotter, grew colder; coasts appeared like grey ribbons on our horizons and faded away again. The ambassador had no interest in what might lie ashore: we collected food, news, and sailed on. There were lands where men were darker than the aboriginal Ainu of Nihon, and plague came in on every wind. And then one coast, much later, which the ship's master declared to be Espaine, the home of so many of the black-crow priests. I stared at it over the ship's rail, not regretting that we would not land there.

By this time, I had with my new lord's permission acquainted myself with all the languages of Europe that I could. The crew of the ship sufficed to teach me a few words of Dutch and Gaelic, much English, and also much Portuguese, which I understood (mistakenly, perhaps) to be much like Spanish. I puzzled out Latin in a holy book of the black-crow priests, liking less and less what I understood of it; their worship of a criminal who had been given an untouchable's death, and then became a kami whose place is everywhere and nowhere. The wise man placates spirits, he does not abandon himself to them.

Grey waters, cold mists, heavy wool clothing that we must wear at all times—this was the burden of the

next few weeks, while the ship fought to come north, turning and tacking again and again. The winds were against us. I found it more difficult to practise my sword drills on the icy wet deck, and whereas, as a young man, I would have welcomed this challenge, now I drilled with precise efficiency, and could not prevent myself longing for the heat of Chikuzen province.

The seventh or eighth week in those waters, the ship's master announced to me that we had made the opening of a great channel which had our destination—England—upon one side of it, and another country on the other. I was bold enough to ask my lord the ambassador if we should prepare for instant landfall. He instructed us that we were to stay on board ship: that we should sail further on, to the capital, and there be received as befitting a daimyo.

I would have cheerfully been received as the lowest of my ashigaru if I could have slept ashore. The sickness that had tormented me after leaving Nihon threatened again. After giving orders for the ashigaru to stand guard as usual on the gifts we had brought for the English Emperor, I went to my place below and attempted to sleep.

I woke to the crash of a rock stoving in the side of the ship.

No man who has been in a wreck ever forgets that moment. I jumped up, cast off my own armour, and made at a run for the cabin where my lord the ambassador kept his gifts. There, I ordered my ashigaru to protect the ambassador with their lives, and I put on one of the gift armours, believing that I could swim in it, were that necessary. I could not tell what to do with the other. For a moment I was near to despair, with men screaming and running, and the sea crashing loudly, and the suck and grind of the breaking ship sounding over it all.

After a few precious seconds had expired, I rolled up the armour plates and stuffed them in a sack, together with the helmet, and tied it all around my waist. That done, and my swords thrust in their scabbards down the front of the armour—which was too big for me—and tied there, I began to climb up to the deck with the intention of jumping into the sea.

Foaming waters broke down the steps as I attempted to mount them.

Holding to the rail with one hand, mouth clamped shut on what air remained, I determined to swim out of the sliding wreck. I had missed one good death. This was no substitute. If I were to die, it would be *after* bringing home the news which was required from the Anghrazi—the Englishmen—and not before.

I lived. But when I woke on the cold, solid sand of the shore, the sea had stripped me of armour and baggage. Unconsciousness took me again as I realised this, in the middle of swearing a vow to any god or kami that might be listening: that I would find the ambassador and whoever remained of my men, and carry out my orders, no matter what. My honour rests on it: there is nothing else that I can do.

Rochefort, Memoirs

9

The weather changing again to foul, it took us eight-and-forty hours to cross the seas to London, and the sun only opened his eye upon us when we stood well within the estuary of the Thames-river. I spent that time tormented with a jealousy I never wanted, nor desired now that I had it.

Watching Mlle Dariole as she clung to ropes in the teeth of rain, and conversed with the captain in a boy's cracked adolescent shout; or watching her in the cramped cabin, her face alive with enthusiasm as she questioned M. Saburo about his cattan-blades.... All of this is torment, I thought. That puts me out of mind of my duty.

The *Willibrod* moored at one of the many docks in the Pool of London, south of London-bridge with its houses and nineteen arches. I suppose that it took just under a hundred heart-beats for me to spot the spy watching the ship, but I do have the advantage of a career in such things.

He was no prime agent, in such a spot; merely the average tattle-tail maintained on a spy-master's books, making himself useful by seeing who comes in daily from abroad. He leaned up against the wall of a low-doored tavern that the morning saw busy with captains discussing voyages, and merchants complaining about the rot crept into their cargoes. He would hire himself out as the traditional travellers' interpreter, I guessed.

But not to me.

A very different arrival to my last, this; on the King's barge with my master Sully, after a journey up from Dover. Making sure all the way that the damned English treated a Duc of France with sufficient respect—after the lord of Dover cozened M. de Sully into bringing our whole entourage with him on a visit to the castle, only so as to take the customary gratuity for seeing over the place from each and every one of us.

At that time we had landed west of the City, upriver; not here in the poverty-stricken wards to the east. The London streets looked as cold as I remembered. And the horizon beyond St Katharine's Stairs was an endless procession of church spires, under a brisk May sky.

"There will be other spies," I warned M. Saburo. "In any city with a royal court, the ground is always thick with informers."

"Hai! Edo!" Saburo stood by me at the ship's rail, his arms carrying the folds of his cloak bundled in front of him. I assumed he concealed the Nihonese war-helmet. It did not leave his person. He made a raw sound like a guffaw. "No matter they're not looking for us in particular?"

"Quite."

Upriver stood the battlements of a great fortress, like the Arsenal that M. de Sully commonly inhabits, although the English use theirs also as a prison. Beyond that royal Tower is a great Gothic cathedral, the spire lost to fire many years ago. It made me momentarily desire, first Paris and Our Lady, and then the rich house called "Arundel," here in London, where all my master's entourage had stayed before.

"Saburo-san. Be good enough to put back the hood of your cloak."

It was, in fact, my cloak; my caped and hooded Spanish travelling cloak that I took off an unfortunate enemy trooper in the Low Countries. It has had more than a decade's wear since then. No man would mistake us for wealthy travellers.

Saburo reached up, yanked the hood back, and stomped down the gangplank.

I picked up the saddle-bags, swung them up onto my shoulder to hide my face, and slouched down the plank after him, stooping a little to disguise my height.

Tanaka Saburo was not strange enough that a man might immediately see anything wrong with him, but he was nonetheless apt to draw the eye. No man gazed at me as I disembarked. Nor at Mlle Dariole, I

saw, as she followed after in her men's clothing. The English spy watched only the man of Nihon, tongue-tip caught between his teeth like a child memorising Latin grammar.

Suppose I go now to Sully's man here, Beaumont? But he may have been recalled. Arrested, even. No: first one sounds out the ground....

"The Medici will soon have agents here, if she does not now," I observed, moving up beside Saburo. "And, if I know London, English spy-master Robert Cecil's informers will be in the streets and taverns, along with other local amateurs."

There will be agents of Spain, known and unknown to the English government. Turks. Slavs. Agents of the Netherlands republic, who are more like to be economic spies—unless they're from the French exiles at the court of the Archduke and Archduchess. One might find a few Jesuit priests in deep cover. And any one of them might be in disguise as any other!

I cannot use the name of Rochefort. Or Belliard. Ravailac will have talked days ago.

"Quick, now, but do not appear hurried." I ushered Saburo through the busy press of men on St Katharine's Stairs, avoiding sailors unloading cargo, conscious of Dariole following.

Where I would have led us up into the streets, towards London-city and away from these out-parishes, a group of men luckily rolled out of an alley into our way. In the course of the scuffle avoiding them, I successfully lost the informer. I squinted behind me, seeing him borne back among lean men with the look of merchant-adventurers, towards the taverns. Thirst won out, or perhaps he waited thirty heartbeats too long. I had us away and lost in the crowds before he could catch us up, sweat hot under my shirt and falling bands.

Dariole caught up with a swagger, careless of the length of her sword behind her swatting at men's calves. "That way."

"I hope your memory for cities is better than for languages, mademoiselle...."

She shot me a look, and strode out in front, leading us by ways I dimly recalled from my more unofficial wanderings—by Hogges Lane to Tower-hill, where we walked between women laying out washing on the turf to dry, and then north-west into the city by Marck's Lane. I lost my bearings somewhere south of More Gate, inside the city wall.

"You here, before?" Saburo's sentence ended on a rising, interrogatory note as he looked at me. "We stay where stayed then?"

"The Duc de Sully was an honoured guest of the English King." I shook off my thoughts, smiling grimly. "I don't suppose us likely to be invited inside any great lord's house, Messire Saburo. We must shift for ourselves."

Leaving Paris ten days ago, I had been short of funds. Now, a week's expenses after that, and passage on the *Willibrod*.... When a man is self-evidently leaving the country ahead of the authorities, he frequently pays over the asking price. The fee for a horse's passage on ship is, by old custom, two and one half times the price of a man. The *Willibrod*'s captain, knowing a man in a cleft stick when he saw one, swapped me two passengers' fares for the Andalusian jennet plus a little of my remaining silver.

I will have no more than two English pounds by the time I have changed coin .

Saburo grunted. "Go to court soon?"

“For any hope of success at court, you need money enough to grease the courtiers’ hands, and a suit of decent broadcloth at the least. I would say satin, save that this is the English rather than the French court....”

He looked at me shrewdly. “You’re thinking, you should leave us now we are in London, Rochefort-san. Exception is, we’re still a difficulty for you.”

Saburo made a wide shrugging motion.

“How long before it’s no matter whether some lord-sama tortures out what I know? And she know? Or, always matter?”

“That,” I admitted, “is a question I’ve been asking myself, Messire Saburo.”

I had a momentary analepsis, seeing again the decapitated head that thudded down into the sand beside me. It was not that I trusted the man of Nihon, or took him to be honourable as I would understand it; more that his ways were strange enough that I thought it difficult for an enemy to suborn him without it being obvious. *He will follow his own interests, true.* And I ought to be cautious of developing too much sympathy for this foreign duelist, destitute, and far from home.

I said, “Monsieur, I would not have blamed any man for seeing odds of twelve to two, or twelve to one, and deciding to make up thirteen or fourteen on the other side. Even I cannot kill twelve men in a fair sword and dagger fight. I admit that, if not for you, I would now be dead back in Normandy.”

He first smiled, and then inclined his head in admission; both gestures very small and subtle.

I added, “As it stands, I’m currently committed to the foolishness of not having killed either of you. So much is at stake that I can’t trust you from my sight.”

It was a relief to speak at least this much with no double motive—to treat him with even this much of a gentleman’s behaviour. It has been many years since I could behave so. *And why do I think of that, now?*

“What about me!” Dariole demanded.

My mood shattered. Chill wind whipped the ends of my hair into my face, undeterred by the hat brim. I looked down at her where she walked with her arms folded across her body.

“What about you, mademoiselle?”

“I—hey! You ought to still call me ‘monsieur.’”

“You expect to pass for a man, here?”

“Why not? *You* do!”

I could be thankful, I reflected as I watched Mlle Dariole wheezing herself into incapacity at her own jest, that M. Saburo’s grasp of French was as yet poor to non-existent.

She added finally, “Messire, I’d have thought whatever’s the local equivalent of Les Halles would be where you wanted to go.”

The equivalent names came back to me effortlessly after six years: Southwark, and the Liberty of Bankside, on the other side of the river.

“You’re right, Monsieur Dariole. That is the type of place that an agent would hide. For that very reason...let Marie de Medici’s agents search Southwark while I’m in a respectable quartier of London.”

She responded only with a sound like a mare’s soft snort.

I had spoken no more than ten words together to Mlle Dariole during our crossing of the sea that the English call the Channel. It irked me to realise that she did not notice this, or notice that I was again addressing her—that she was so beguiled with her new “demon” that M. Rochefort was quite abandoned.

That both moved me internally to sardonic laughter, and angered me.

I should not care what this sexually lax young woman does or does not do! I should not find myself—as now—watching her lithe, epicene figure as she strides through the London mud, pushing between apprentices, shop-men, clergy, and women out to shop; gesturing as she floods the air with her chatter to the samurai. Least of all should I look at her weather-stained linen doublet and consider that it contains her woman’s white paps, which I have never seen, and now will not....

I am bedeviled by women!

I found myself chewing at my lip as I walked behind the woman and the man of Nihon.

Ten days, and all I have of Paris is ship-board rumour . I must make contacts, as soon as I safely can. I can take no action until I have sound knowledge.

The two curved short scabbards of the foreigner’s swords stuck out, making an odd shape of his cloak; I had noted them jammed through the cloth sash that wrapped his waist, in such a way that they did not fall. To a man used to the long scabbards of rapiers, he might seem to be unarmed. Dariole was not dressed richly enough to be a magnet to the cut-purse. I myself would look to be nothing more than any other street-ruffian with a Saxony rapier and hat worn in the French style.

Mlle Dariole came to a halt, where three narrow and two wider roads opened into a space. We were among better houses, now, with the ground floors of stone and only the upper of brick and plaster, and a fair way from the agues that would attend being close to the city’s river.

She frowned. “I remembered it bigger....”

“You will introduce me as ‘M. Herault.’ A good Huguenot name. For now, M. Saburo and I will await you here.”

“Giving orders, messire?” Her voice sounded mild, but her eye glinted white, turning towards me. “You want me to hand your ass to you again?”

The coldness of the Normandy shoreline came back to me with fierce impact. I found I desired to slap her, as one does a woman, not strike her as one does a man.

“Mademoiselle...was I ever truly defeated?”

“Were you—”

“You must admit: you are a woman.” I raked her up and down with my gaze. She stood no higher than my collar-bone.

I decided to speak of what I had been considering on board ship: *I could break her with my bare*

hands. “Mademoiselle, think: some part of me must always have sensed that—and held back. How else, despite any skill, could a weak woman defeat a strong man?”

“Held back.” She repeated the words flatly. “Messire, you’re an idiot. Is this why I didn’t find you sneaking up behind me at the ship’s rail and pushing me over? You actually think you can beat me?”

Her eyes were bright with mockery. My breath came harsh in my chest. The insolence of her look made me clench as if all of me were a fist. “I must have known!”

She shifted her stance—and I moved. Moved as a man does by habit, to put himself and his sword in the most advantageous place. Her eyes creased into slits in the brilliance of the May sun. Her face spoke a taunt she did not voice.

I subdued my temper, with difficulty. “Go! Go get your cousin!” I added, in French, the brief codicil, “No need to alarm him by first turning up on his door-step with an armed thug and a ‘demon.’”

Her mouth turned up at the corners. For a moment, she was neither boy-girl nor hic mulier. I could not put a name to what she was, wearing that gamin grin.

“You wait here!” She loped across the junction of streets.

These were all private houses for the most part; a merchant shop far down on the road to my left, but that was all. The streets were quieter, with few men walking past us. I subtly drew Tanaka Saburo back under the shadow of the nearby eaves with me.

The smell of London is different to Paris. Always the sea-estuary in the background, and the odour of cow-dung from the close fields. The sun felt warm on my back. The kennel or water-channel in the middle of the road was choked with slops and offal thrown down from above, and plainly it had rained of late. Water spilled out of the kennel and over the rough paving in places. Saburo and I trod through an inch or two of water to reach dry standing.

I glanced back and saw Dariole striding between a couple of Englishmen in servant’s blue, to the door of a building on one corner. It looked sufficiently well-to-do; built in the reign of some earlier king, and with upper storeys built of oak timber, jutting out into the street, all but meeting across the way with other houses. In my quarter of Paris it might have been broken up into lodging houses. Here it was plainly one family’s residence.

The Spring sunlight slanted down, raising steam from the cold muck of the road between her and us. I caught Saburo’s expression of disgust.

“Filthy gaijin!” he muttered.

“It’s a large city,” I temporised. “There will be fifty thousand souls here in London, messire; their waste must go somewhere.”

“And in Osaka, five hundred thousand!”

He will have lost track of his English numbers, I thought.

“Half-million in Osaka—no filth! This garbage, it’s lain here *over-night*. For days!—What is that?” Saburo’s face screwed into anger, or perhaps only puzzlement. I followed his gaze.

Dariole stood in front of the great oak door, facing the Markham servants. Her voice came shrilly across the street as I looked:

“—see Messire Guillaume Markham!”

Guillaume. “William.” *No*, I realised. *One “Griffin Markham ” is the man I am remembering.* They may be kin, or not, and if this continues, I must make investigation—the said Master Griffin being one of those traitors to the English crown of whom I recall hearing, on my last visit here.

“I want to see him!” By her emphasis, it was not the first or second time Dariole had said it.

The elder of the two men sneered, “I bet you do, boy!”

Merde! I thought, wondering what remark I had missed in the moment it took me to speak with Tanaka Saburo.

“I’m his cousin, you imbecile!” Dariole glared up at the man, barely far from stamping her booted feet. “His cousin, from France—”

“Sure you are,” the second, more burly man cut in. “And I’m the Pope, amn’t I?”

“Bless me, Father!” A skinny Englishman slipped out of the doorway to join his fellows, with a rapidity that led me to guess he had been listening at the crack. He was another one in dark blue doublet and trunk-hose. There was a livery on his sleeve, but it did not match the one carved in stone above the door. So: new money. This third man wiped his nose on his cuff. “Who’s the whoreson brat?”

I read stiff outrage in Dariole’s shoulders.

“I’m Arcadie-Fleurimonde-Henriette de Montargis de la Roncière! And now call out Monsieur Markham!”

The older man had cropped white hair showing under his wool cap. He chuckled. “‘Arcadie.’ A girl, are we?”

The skinny servant leaned forward as if to get his nose into the discussion. “You can’t tell with the French!”

The familiar tension that begins a fight made itself felt down my spine. Nothing more than lackeys quarrelling, but she will skewer one or two, or all three. And the English are squeamish about their servants, so this will make a visible scandal, which I should not be associated with.

“He looks enough of a girl, don’t you, girlie-boy!”

“Maybe he is a boy—a French bum-boy!”

The older man and the burly man crowded Dariole physically, one to either side, grinning. The insults were casual, but not, I thought, good-natured.

“But I’m *Arcadie!* Get Monsieur de Markham or you’ll be sorry! I’ll make him have you whipped!”

It is her accent.

Shrill, and almost comic in the distortion of her rage.

And a man or boy who loses his temper is always a figure of fun....

Dear God, I should never have entrusted anything to him—to her!

“Why do they treat her disrespectfully?” Saburo muttered, at my elbow. “Is there a quarrel inside her clan?”

His squat body was peculiarly relaxed. In a European, I would have thought him as far from a fight as from the moon. With the beach in Normandy in my mind, I recalled vividly how he had gone from stillness to strike, all in a second. From just such relaxation as this.

I would have put a restraining hand on M. Saburo’s arm, but I thought that unwise. “Leave this to her to settle.”

“Get—my—cousin!” Dariole bellowed with her head down, like a farm bull at the charge. On the last word, her voice went high and ragged. Her hands made fists at her sides, nowhere near her sword and dagger. “You’re servants—cochon! Get out of my way!”

Even from these ten yards away, I could see her face shine with sweat and temper. In Paris she would have drawn her rapier by now. And she would not have lost her temper. Which she has: she has lost her composure completely.

Why is she not fighting?

It came to me suddenly: *She has forgotten who she is.*

Who she is, now, is not who she was when she was last here. When she was a child. . . .

“Cousin Guillaume!” Dariole shouted, lifting her head and staring at the casement windows of the first floor. “Wil-li-am! It’s Arcadie, your cousin Arcadie, Therese’s child—come down here!”

Her body was poised between male and female. It did not surprise me that the three men-servants laughed. They must see her (as I had) as something monstrously ugly: a combination of effeminate boy and a plough-horse of a girl.

She bellowed, “Come out here!”

The nail-studded oak door opened again. I moved my hand towards my sword-hilt. Another man came out.

By his bottle-green satin doublet and trunk-hose, and the fine lace on his ruff, this must be the master of the house. He did not look at Dariole at first, but snapped his fingers at the burly servant.

“Thomas, what’s this?”

The man looked instantly contrite. “Sorry, master. We were just having some fun.”

“Have it quietly, and not on my doorstep!”

“Sorry, master.” The servant bowed his head, and turned back to Dariole.

I tensed, waiting for a brawl to start—and she did not draw sword: she merely stared at the man in green.

“Cousin Guillaume?”

In clear London English, he prompted: “And you are—?”

“Arcadie de la Roncière.” The line of her shoulders altered. Discouraged? Puzzled? “You must

remember! I came here with Maman. I was of five years of age—”

“‘Arcadie’ is not a boy’s name.” The Englishman was older than the satin made him look. His point-cut beard was dyed an improbable chestnut. He did not wear a sword, nor did he carry a cudgel in his belt like his servants. A man of the middling sort, at peace in his own house, and now disturbed by this... *by this what?* I suspected him to be wondering.

The shadow from the eaves was not enough in itself to keep me from their notice. What does, as I have long had cause to know, is utter stillness. It surprised me to note the same motionlessness in the man of Nihon.

“Arcadie.” The Englishman’s voice was ironic. “And your servants are—where?”

The young woman’s head dipped again. I tensed, in case she should look towards us. I read in the line of her shoulders and stiff spine: *she has forgotten us, forgotten everything except this man in front of her.*

“I don’t have any servants with me.”

“Or baggage?”

“*Or* baggage!”

“And—let me guess—you require my hospitality and a trifling loan?”

I swore under my breath, not knowing whether to be angry, or applaud this man’s shrewd unwillingness to be cozened or tricked.

The man folded his arms. I saw Dariole open her mouth, and shut it again without finding anything to say.

“Thomas, see to this.” William Markham turned, and walked back into the house. The oak door closed behind him.

I only focused on Markham for a split second. The burly servant already had his arms clamped around Dariole’s upper body. The older man, together with the skinny man, neatly and simultaneously plucked out rapier and dagger from her scabbards, and I thought, Dear God, they have disarmed her! And with such ease.

“Guillaume!” Dariole didn’t struggle. She only craned her neck to see past Thomas, to see the closed door of the house. “Guillaume, I’m your cousin—”

She broke off on a high-pitched squeal.

“Ere, she *is* a girl!” The skinny English serving-man laughed. “Or he ain’t got no prick; one of the two!”

“Woman turns up in man’s clothes, no servants, no baggage, wants to borrow master’s money, says she’s master’s cousin—aye,” the man Thomas grunted, with a wealth of scorn. “Likely, ain’t it? Sorry we can’t oblige yer French ladyship!”

“Cochon!”

I watched her thrash about, arms pinned to her sides, still trying to get to the closed door. There was more shrill disbelief in her voice than fury. I caught a breath. This is not M. Dariole, this is not the duellist—

I watched as she clawed, scratched, and kicked like a child or a whore.

The men shoved her from one to the other, all but sick with laughter.

“Rosh’-fu’-san....”

“They’re peasants.” I put it into terms I thought Saburo might understand. “They tend to use cudgels. No man ever gained honour from fighting servants or apprentices.”

“We should cut, walk away.” His hand came down on his silk-woven hilts.

“No. It’s her fight, messire.”

And besides, why should I stop it?

I hid a smile.

All plans will have to be re-made, but for the moment....

For the moment, why not enjoy what I see?

The thin man held her rapier and dagger high over his head, out of her reach. She struggled in the burly Englishman Thomas’s grip, jerked up on her toes to grab—and slipped, comically; swept back into his embraces.

“Son-of-bitch!” she yelled in English, kicking up behind her, catching Thomas in his groin.

“That does it! You! *Out*. And don’t come back here! I’ll have the parish constable whip you out of More Gate!”

He shifted his grip to the back of her collar. The stained linen doublet was not a garment any respectable man would wear, not now; let alone any respectable woman. I tensed, waiting for her to hit him.

He placed an expert kick in the crease of her knee.

She instantly fell as her leg involuntarily bent; and dangled in his grip, choking.

He gave a great laugh, lifted her by her doublet collar, and I saw him grab the slack material at the seat of her breeches. Her arms flailed at him without the slightest effect. She dug the toes of her boots in: they skidded across the wet cobbles.

Saburo exclaimed something in the language of Nihon. I found myself with my hand gripping my rapier hilt.

The servant yanked the material of her breeches up, and she squealed as it caught her in the fork of her legs.

He ran her out across the street, and threw her.

She was off the ground completely for a heart-beat: I saw the sunlit mud underneath her as she flew.

A great wave of brown muck splashed up as she hit the ground—hit the surface of the kennel that ran down the centre of the street, rolled, and measured her full length, face-down, in the shit.

Rochefort, Memoirs

10

She was up in a heart-beat, screeching and spitting—up, drenched, her clothes running with evil brown and yellow liquid, rivulets of excrement flying off her into the air.

“Cochon! *Bitchfuck!*” This last in bad English, and she broke off, spitting and blowing repeatedly; loud gobs that I thought must be the most foul-tasting of muck.

Steel flashed.

Rapier and dagger, idly tossed by the thin servant into the kennel beside her.

The three men walked back, not particularly quickly, to the Markham house, and went in and closed the door.

Dariole lurched forward, slipped; jerked herself up onto her feet again, from one knee, and ran across the street. I could hear her boots squelching. She banged the pommel of her dagger on the door, sobbing and yelling incoherently. That she could leave her rapier unnoticed was sign enough to me of the rise of hysteria in her.

She looked small against the great door. I watched her pound on it. Mlle Dariole: all slime from hair down to boots. Her linen doublet was drenched brown from tabs to collar; her Venetian breeches first soaked and bagging, and then—as filth drained out of them—clinging wetly to her thighs and buttocks as if glued.

She stinks, even from here.

Morning rain had made the kennel a river, clotted with unidentifiable lumps; deep, maybe, as a man’s arm is long. Shit soaked her, head to foot. Strands of her wet hair flew and splattered as she yelled and thumped on the door.

A casement window briefly opened over her head, and emitted a burst of male laughter, and the contents of a chamber-pot that splashed across the cobbles.

They will come out again, and silence her.

I watched her soaking, spoiled, weeping with fury; and was, for a moment, in a quandary. Is it so easy to reduce her to this? How could I not do it myself!

Her hat lay in the mud, a hefty footprint crushing it irrevocably out of shape. Her sword was half-sunk, neglected, in filth. *That will need swift cleaning, if it is not to rust.*

Saburo hitched at his cloth belt, under the cloak. I shook my head.

“Wait.”

“For what?”

For me to finish my enjoyment of this spectacle . I did not say it aloud. I caught him frowning out of the corner of my eye.

“Men will come, will look at us,” he protested.

I was far from sure that he had been thinking just that. Still, I saw a pair of apprentice boys stop, down one of the side streets, and turn to look at the shit-soaked youth battering on the door of the house. And London has a city Watch.

“Giri,” Saburo stated, his voice harsh, moving forward.

Obligation? Honour? Something of the sort. *It seems he is not a man to forget his debts.* I paused, undecided for my best move.

If he lops off a head or two, there’s enough notice paid to any man; we become embarrassingly public....

Dariole slammed the flat of her left hand against the nail-studded door, hard enough to bruise bone. Stained palm-prints overlapped on the wood. Her right hand banged her dagger pommel against the door, leaving dints and depressions in the grain. In a cracked voice she called out, “Open it! Open this fucking door!”

She had forgotten her English. It was angry French, and with an admixture of the lowest Parisian French, at that. Her brown cheeks were streaked, blubbered with tears, in an utter lack of control or dignity.

I smiled, becoming wry.

The truth is, as she said, that I should have sought the dark of the night watches on board the *Willibrod* and cut their throats, and put the bodies overboard.

But, since I have not done that....

I walked up beside Saburo, catching him easily with my longer stride. “You get her sword.”

His brows came down at the order. For a moment I thought I would have a duel to fight. Then his mouth tightened and he nodded, once. As he bent to pick up the rapier from the kennel’s shit, I walked forward to where Dariole was slamming both hands against the oak door.

I grabbed her dagger hand neatly. That done, I rapped her knuckles smartly against the wood. The dagger dropped out of her hand. I left it to Saburo. I twisted her arm up behind her back, grabbing her around her sopping-wet body with my other arm, and lifted her up off the ground bodily.

She squealed. “Don’t you *do* that!”

Shifting my grip, I got her cradled: one of my arms pinning both of hers to her sides, and my other arm clamping her thighs and knees together. I felt myself to be holding a bag of live eels. “Dariole! Mademoiselle!”

She fell utterly still and limp—could almost have fainted, except that her breathing felt too rapid, against my chest.

Saburo caught me up, the dirty weapons swathed distastefully in his cloak. My cloak, rather. I walked briskly off, taking side-street after side-street, getting us far enough away from the area that would attract the curious.

Why—why in the name of the good God am I doing this!

It was almost more disturbing that Messire Saburo did not question my action.

Automatically, I turned my face south by the sun, weaving a way through the more deserted alleys towards the Thames-river. I looked down at Arcadie-Fleurimonde-Henriette de Montargis de la Roncière, in my arms. She made a hot, wet, and heavy bundle. Shit soaked through her breeches, and caked her boots. Her drying hair might have been mud-soaked, if it were not for the vomit-inducing smell. Yellow-brown excrement soaked wetly through her doublet—and into mine.

There was shit all over the front of my red velvet doublet, which I had put on as best suited for meeting English relatives. My point-ribbons and the lace of my cuffs were stained, and the ties of my ruff. Where her forehead rested against my chest, she was getting shit into my hair, also.

She could not move, since I gripped her tightly, but she did not attempt it in any case. Her head rested forward; I could not see if she wept or not. Her breathing against my chest felt ragged. Chill wetness soaked through the elbow-creases of my doublet.

I could, of course, gloat .

Her scabbard dangled from her hanger, irretrievably broken in two places; the wood veneer cracked right through. Only the leather covering held it together. I shot a glance at Saburo, stalking along beside me. He clasped Dariole's rapier and dagger distastefully in one hand.

"Kitsune," he grunted. "You would not leave her."

"Nonsense! Preposterous!"

Dariole seemed deaf and blind to comment. The faint quivering I felt throughout her body indicated her lost in humiliation, deep as the sky. But I did not care to reflect on the impact that the samurai's words had on me. *I am holding her, in my arms.*

The stench almost made me gag. Clouds of flies buzzed around me. Early in the season, but I could not fault their taste. The Spring sun brought out the stench of shit even more strongly. I felt the young woman quiver suddenly in my grip. Misery? Shame? Or anger, at being carried bodily, and by M. Rochefort, and not being able to prevent it?

"Is there public bath-houses?" Saburo said.

"Not inside the city, since syphilis grew so strong."

His face might be alien, but it spoke volumes of disgust. "Where we clean?"

The roofs grew less crowded ahead. I felt pleasure that my memory for direction had not played me false, for all it must be six years since I had last trodden London streets.

"There." I saw a narrow way between two buildings, and sun on the water beyond it.

He grunted. "If her kinsmen turn her away, she has a right to be angry. To show it so—that is the stupidity of youth."

The hic mulier was no light weight in my arms. I tightened my grip as I carried her down the alley.

Saburo added, "A wise man would keep his silence—and go back tonight, and burn down the house, and not be caught."

The unpredictable mixture of his honour and pragmatism caught me again. Out of habit and fatigue, I spoke in French, and it was just as well. "Somewhere to the east, dear good God, there is a whole

country entire of men like you!”

We came out of the narrow alley to the banks of the Thames-river itself. An old broken-down quay had mostly collapsed into the river. Pilings jutted up from the clear water, beyond what remained of the board-walk. Fish darted against a background of gravel—I could see them under my feet, between the wooden boards, as I walked out onto the quay.

“Pardon me, mademoiselle.” My heart began to thump in my ribs at addressing her; I could not have said why I felt that sudden apprehensiveness.

Her clotted, thick voice muttered, “Fuck off, Rochefort!”

She was a sullen weight in my arms, wet, soggy, and warming in the sun, and breathing out a stench quite unbelievable. Her head stayed turned away from me. I could not tell if she looked around at the river, the boats, the houses. I braced my feet apart on the ruined quay and used my strength to straighten my arms, so that I held her right out from my body, over the Thames-river.

I opened my arms.

She dropped like a stone.

“Rochefort!”

I turned away from the subsequent splashing and language, the loudness of it telling me that she could swim. I had wondered.

This was a deserted backwater—side-water, rather; it being at an angle to the main river, and hidden between buildings. I took the opportunity to unbutton and un-point my doublet, and take it off; likewise to untie the strings of my cuffs and ruff, and see what I could do to clean my linen. The wood was cool where I knelt. The man from the Japans sat back on his heels in a way that looked painful. He set about cleaning Dariole’s rapier and dagger in the river, with an expression of extreme distaste—which I thought effeminate for so stout a soldier: no man loves shit, but no man can avoid contact with it.

The man-woman reached and pulled herself up from the river, sitting herself clothed and soaking on the boards at the end of the quay. A pool of water grew around her. I found myself checking distance, just as I might if she were still armed, anticipating that she might think about revenge. The memory of Zaton’s stung me, as it habitually did.

But not, I realised, as much. What is this?

She wrenched off her boots, rinsing them in the river. A passing wherry-man gave her a look and called out something in an indistinguishable English. She ignored the tone. I watched her discard sword-belt, broken hanger, and garters, and rapidly unbutton the forty or so cloth-covered buttons down the front of her pale doublet.

I became aware that I was frozen in position, no longer cleaning the mess from my clothes. The stables at Ivry came back to me with an intensity that made me feel dizzy. The smooth warmth of her skin against mine; the flex of muscle under it. The hot, tight, dirty wetness of her arse encompassing me.

She slid doublet and Venetian breeches and hose off together, leaving them in a sodden heap on the planking. The May wind blew cold. She rubbed her hands up and down her arms, rucking the linen of her shirt—and lifted up her shirt-hem, stripping the garment off bodily over her head.

Men's linen netherhose or under-breeches were still tied at her waist, covering her down to just above the knee. The sun shone brightly on her pale flesh. The flare of her hips, the indentation of her waist, all with the puppy-fat curves of the young... Her breasts were small and round, tipped with small brown-pink nipples. They had the same luxurious flesh of middle adolescence, when life has not hardened flesh to the angles of the body, or childbirth slackened it.

Instant desire stiffened my prick.

She grinned widely enough to show all her white teeth, and leapt off the planking, hitting the river with an immense splash.

I returned to sponging and dabbing at my doublet and hose, and took advantage of that to shift my aching flesh to where it was not so easily noticeable.

"This was not conduct I was aware of," Saburo remarked, nodding towards the pale, swimming young woman as she dolphined about in the water. "Gaijin in the Japans are shamed by naked bodies."

"It's considered sinful." I finished what cleaning-up could be done, concluding that I had been left with a doublet fit only for rag-pickers. More steadily than I felt, I said, dry-mouthed, "She does it to provoke, messire. Ignore her."

The young woman swam back and pushed herself up in the water, hanging on to the edge of the jetty with her fingers. All except her head and hands was underwater, and her hair was slicked back, making her look like an otter. She made blowing motions, as if she shivered. She nodded at the pile of her clothes, and lifted her face to me.

"Rinse that lot out, will you, messire? You're supposed to be the one playing servant!"

I stood.

I could not prevent myself from staring down through the clear water.

The river-bottom was ochre gravel. Between that and the rippled surface hung Dariole, her body foreshortened, and her skin made unnaturally white by the water, but her bare upper body plainly visible. The curve of her breasts made me think, all in a second, of how cold and water-dappled her flesh will be when she leaves the river, and how my hands would feel, large and warm, if placed against them.

I could have taken her out of the water and fucked her instantly, releasing the desire of my swollen flesh.

She gazed up at me with an expression of boyish camaraderie. I could not be sure if there was a glint in her eyes or not. Boy-girl or hic mulier....

"I thought you didn't like girls, messire?"

Her teasing note was unmistakable. Saburo did not appear to be attending, since we spoke in French. Irresolute, I stared down for a moment.

Deliberately plaintive, she said, "I'm *cold*, messire!"

With no small amount of awkwardness, I turned and walked to her clothes, first throwing her the relatively-dry linen shirt that would cover her from neck to knee.

Impossible! No, impossible, I thought. Impossible—I cannot wish to spare her embarrassment!

Her clothes were beyond any repair save a wash-house and competent tailor. I undid my baggage, and

searched out the spare doublet I would have loaned Saburo—were it not for his unexplained refusal to wear it—and the woollen breeches she had borrowed from me in the stables at Ivry. With the touch of that wool, I could not keep the memory of her skin against mine out of my senses.

As expressionless as I could appear, I walked back to give her the spare clothes, and stood watching her dress. The shirt made her decent. The too-large woollen trunk-hose, and my doublet made her a figure from a fair-ground. The collar came up to her ears; the sleeves covered her beyond the nails of her fingers.

“You could get three of me in here!” she grumbled.

“God forbid there should ever be more than one of you, mademoiselle,” I said gravely. “God He knows, one of you is so very much more than sufficient.”

She opened her mouth to speak, closed it, looked at me oddly. “You made a joke? Messire Rochefort made a joke?”

Without comment, I set about packing my baggage again.

“We shall hope,” I said to Saburo, “to have enough small coins to take a wherry across the river, to Southwark.”

He nodded. Unseen, behind me, Dariole began to sing under her breath—the events of the past hour apparently gone out of her mind; both the humiliation, and how she had wept like a mere child.

Impossible, I repeated to myself, doing up the final buckles on my saddlebags.

She may have been a physical infatuation—may still be one—but she is nothing more. Jealousy proves nothing at all!

And that you have seen her manhandled and humiliated, now? a voice in my mind prompted.

That you were glad of it, so very glad, and then—were not? Have just been willing to let it pass without ironic comment? As if you had been her comrade, and not her enemy?

That thought made me sit back on my heels, my hands on the leather saddle-bags, and the panorama of the London river before my unseeing eyes. A week ago, two weeks ago, if I had seen her similarly treated in Paris....

I would have used it against her unmercifully. I would have taunted her with it until she had no option but to draw sword. And now I do not—worse: it never *occurred* to me to do it. How is this?

The weight of her in my arms. Wet, stinking, and unprotected. A nasty experience, for the stink and muck of it. But since I have held her, since I have carried her in my arms, dependent on my strength....

Dear God. The heart has gone out of my hate.

The city’s clocks struck the hour a couple of times while we cleaned and refurbished ourselves as much as possible. I could speak nothing to her. If I needed to, I made it seem as if it were a remark addressed to M. Saburo as well.

Behave like a green boy! the voice in my mind hectoring me—that part of me that looks clear-eyed at a man’s faults and small hypocrisies.

By an hour before noon, I made the decision to move, walking along to a pier not far from the

backwater, and paying a wherry-man to take all three of us over the river. Dariole did not wear my doublet buttoned up; she had lapped it left-over-right as tightly as it would go, and buckled her belt over it to hold all fast. She still looked like a small boy dressing in adult clothing as she set foot on St Mary Overy Stairs, close by the Bear Garden.

Fool! I thought. I attempted instead to concentrate on what I had learned of Southwark the last time I had been in England; to think where a man might take lodgings without attracting attention from the authorities.

We had walked some distance, and I was not sure of my direction, when a badly dressed man on a horse bellowed, "Give way!"

His grey stone horse turned about and about in the narrow street. I moved back to avoid him, becoming separated by several yards from M. Saburo and Mlle Dariole.

The crowd that shoved in on me, breathing into my face and jostling me with their shoulders, was explained by the wall of the building up against which I found myself momentarily pushed. It was built like a tower with blank-faced walls outward, but much wider and more squat, and in the form of a polygon rather than a round tower. It is a thing the English call a play-house, they not having the sense to build a true theatre.

Looking across the heads of the crowd, between plumes and the crowns of hats, I saw the boy-girl and the samurai pushed close together in the press of Englishmen.

As I endeavoured to join them, a chance congregation of the audience flooded in through the play-house doors, coming between us. Another cursing rider on a badly behaving bay gelding pushed me back a pace or two, by merest chance.

A woman in blue stepped out from beside the theatre wall and moved in front of me.

I had my hand instantly back and gripping my dagger: there was no room in this crowd to draw a rapier. I have in my time become familiar with all varieties of whores. This English one could be much of an age with me. *Not a plump piece now—she will be a distraction for a cut-purse.*

She spoke again. I scanned the nearest men and women in the press of bodies.

So low that I could hardly hear it above the chatter of other people, she said, "I wish to speak with you, Monsieur de Rochefort."

Did I hear....

Her gown and bodice were wool of a middle-class blue; she had black hair under her coif, with grey at the temples, and an Irish mist complexion. I stared into her eyes, expecting blue there also, but they were dark brown. I switched my dagger to my left hand; moved my right hand across my body to my sword-hilt.

"Who is it you want?" I answered, as if stupidly bemused; meantime scanning the men around us alertly.

"My name is Aemilia Lanier. You are Valentin-Raoul Rochefort." Her low voice spoke passable Parisian French. "Don't be concerned, monsieur, I do not come from Queen Regent Marie."

I stepped sideways, swung around as much as I could—and a wooden cudgel took me on the point of my shoulder, numbing my right arm down to the finger-tips, and my hand dropped away from my sword still in its scabbard.

In the same moment, a second cudgel tapped me on the skull, behind the ear; and another man took hold of my dagger and fumbled it out of my grip.

“It worked!” a man’s voice exclaimed at my side, in what sounded like wonder. “A tall man of his hands, but look at him now!”

I did not lose consciousness but my legs went limp as string. Two or three men gripped me, under the arms and around the torso, and the woman in blue—“*Lanier?*” *I don’t know that name*—nodded in sharp satisfaction, and moved away. I stumbled, three-quarters into unconsciousness, in their hands, my feet hitting the cobbles as she led us off from the playhouse and into the narrow streets of Bankside.

I am much used to being the man of violence, existing outside of the world where violence does not customarily happen. These two men who supported me now, one arm thrown over each of their shoulders as if I were a drunkard, and the three others who crowded close, did not look like fellow ruffians and duellists—but like shop-keepers, I thought dazedly. English shop-keepers. And the woman? Might more credibly make a shop-keeper’s wife than a presentable whore! What is this?

The swipe under my ear had been shrewdly given. I choked back a desire to vomit, which commonly comes with head-injuries.

Ill luck, I thought, dizzy. And luck is what it is: these are not professional robbers and thieves!

I have under the crown of my hat what the English call a *secret*: a steel frame, made to fit inside, which reinforces the crown and serves almost the function of a helmet. It was doubtless invented by a man who had been coshed on top of the head once too often. It does not help, of course, when one is hit on the flesh below the brim.

I stumbled more than was perhaps necessary, waiting my chance to break free. It may seem odd that I was not more concerned or surprised. The advantage of a large frame is that, so long as face and hands and the cod goes unhurt, a man may take a considerable beating and be none the worse for it. I know I can absorb damage.

However, a man, once made prisoner, may be dealt with in a way he does not like. I swayed one way, stumbled the other, watching for a likely moment to crack these men’s heads together and free myself. They have been foolish enough to leave me my sword; I can draw, recover my dagger in a moment, and then—for all they have English rapiers and broadswords at their belts—I do not think I shall face much I cannot deal with.

But the woman knows me by name.

I let my head hang, taking in the sight of this further street through which they hustled me—only in a few places does Southwark have more than a single street, running beside the Thames-river: south of that it is immediate open country and farmland.

Will Mlle Dariole and M. Saburo think to wait where we last saw each other?

I missed a step on the mud ruts, independent of any desire to cozen my captors. *Why is my first thought of them? Of her?*

We left the sight of open country; came to a more busy street that ran crosswise, north–south.

One younger man glanced up, as if at some landmark—and punched me with surprising strength below the joining of the ribs.

I strained to get in air. It is a profoundly terrifying sensation: to desire to breathe, and not to be able. My vision faded out. I do not know how much further we went. I felt my legs dragging; finally could just realise the sensation of earth under the balls of my feet.

They dropped me.

Onto grass, I felt through my gloves. Wet grass, from the night's rain, not yet dried. It smelled of the viridian strength of Spring. Down on my hands and knees....

I began to see again. No man moved to stop me as I lurched back up onto my feet. They had drawn back, I saw as I gazed stupidly around.

Hedges enclosed a plot of ground filled with grass: some of it overgrown, some trimmed close. A man faced me, his hands resting on what I thought might be a marble tombstone, and then saw was a sundial. The gnomon was dark with verdigris.

The man lifted his gaze from the gnomon at exactly the same moment that I looked into his face. Fair-haired. He might be a hand of years younger than I—in his middle thirties—for all he wore an old man's scholar's gown.

"François Ravailac is dead." His voice sounded resonant for a scholarly looking man. His beard was close-cut, English fashion. His blue eyes fixed on me.

"You are Monsieur Valentin Raoul Rochefort, although that is not all of your name, and you are the man who killed the King of France and got clear away."

I stared.

"I will not be refused in what I ask of you," he said, removing his naked hands from the stained marble sundial.

He looked me in the face with a smile.

"I am Robert Fludd. You are Valentin Rochefort. You have already successfully assassinated one king—and now, I desire that you should arrange the murder of another."

Rochefort, Memoirs

11

Ravailac is dead?" I repeated stupidly.

I had better have said: *Who is this man Ravailac?* but given what this Robert Fludd appeared to know of me, I thought it not worth the gambit. I could wish to have sounded less stunned, however.

"Ah—I should say, he will die, in three days. On the twenty-seventh, by your calendar; the seventeenth, as we would number it here. He will die without a single word of confession. No man will ever know who gave him the opportunity to kill King Henri."

What had been a moment of overwhelming relief curdled to disgust. To be taken in by a prophesier and

astrologer, such as haunt the courts. . . .

“And this you saw in the stars, doubtless?” I said, taking the opportunity to establish in my mind every man’s position around me. “Calculated by the ephemerides? Or did you see it in Doctor Dee’s black mirror?”

The man smiled. It did nothing for him; he was a little scrawny in his face, and his teeth were not good. “Indeed, I saw it in the stars. I cast the horoscopes of the Unborn. The unborn future.”

To my surprise, I heard a rumble of agreement from the group.

Aemilia Lanier spoke up. “We found him exactly where you said, Doctor Fludd.”

Besides the woman Lanier, there were three men in their middle years, who might have been shop-keepers, school-masters, or clerics of the English heresy. And besides that, a pair of men in their twenties—one of whom, a dark-complected man, seemed the only one at home with his old-fashioned broadsword. And who had been, I thought, the man who struck me. Even he nodded agreement with the man Fludd.

Fludd said, “I foresee much, Monsieur de Cossé Brissac.”

So. Not an astrologer. A spy.

“That is not my name,” I said.

Nor is it, since my father disowned me these twenty years past. He had his reasons; I do not quarrel with them.

“‘Rochefort,’ if you prefer.” His eyes fixed on me. Most of the bulk of his body was his gown. He might put on girth when he came to later middle age, but for now, he was a skinny scholar, reminding me of peasant priests who roam the countryside preaching heresy, and come to the stake in due course.

I nodded at the woman in the darned blue gown. “‘Doctor’ Fludd, she said. Doctor of what?”

“I am a physician. A doctor of medicine.” He smiled, apparently openly. “And, as you surmise, an astrologer—of a particular kind. I calculate the conditional probabilities of an event coming to pass. And here you are.”

Conspiracies against kings are two a penny; every corner has its traitors and malcontents, and they often utilise astrologers or black magicians.

For my part, I care nothing for the health of the Scottish King of England one way or the other. But a man who can speak the names “Ravaillac” and “de Cossé Brissac” to my face—this is a dangerous man to me. No matter how he has managed this, I should be rid of him.

I realised that I began to feel what I suppose to be the common superiority of a man of violence among the sheep. It is a thing I guard against. Because my days are passed among interrogation, ambush, murder, and other rough pursuits, does not mean I may not come across a man equally as tough-minded in any sphere of society. I kept my eyes on the man Fludd, in case he should be such a one.

“I’m not here to be robbed,” I acknowledged, with a nod around me. “What do you want?”

Evidently this was too self-composed for his taste. Fludd nodded.

All five of the men came forward, surrounding me; I felt myself taken by the elbows. A light blow hit my

kidneys. A razor grated on the mail links in the lining of my doublet. I had the suddenly light sensation of sword-belt and suspensor-strap falling away from waist and hip.

“These are Master Hariot, Master Hues, and Master Warner; mathematicians to his Grace the Earl of Northumberland, all three.” The man Fludd spoke civilly enough, walking up to me. “And my lord Northumberland’s servants John—” A nod towards the darker of the two men. “—and Luke.”

Northumberland? He’s in prison, still, surely!

I managed not to blurt out my surprise.

Even the common people of England know the dubious reputation of Henry Percy, Earl of Northumberland, called “the Wizard Earl.” I have reason myself to remember him before his imprisonment in the Tower, my master Sully having made a conduit of information out of him when we were last here, in ’03—opening the conduit by having me take him a stupendous “present” of gold late one night, after which Northumberland sent his voluble secretary back with me, and the Duc and I interviewed him to some purpose.

I concealed any knowledge from my expression. The Earl of Northumberland had been notorious, along with Sir Walter de Raleigh, and a few other men, such as Griffin Markham. They had been regarded by the Duc de Sully as the most factious men at the English court. And, moreover, regarded so by reason of conspiring for their own interests, not being bribed by Spain or the Low Countries. All these lords repaid Sully’s judgement a twelvemonth later by being arrested in a conspiracy to kill their King, and although James eventually executed none of them, they would be in no position now to begin fresh conspiracies.

Conspiracy likes to associate itself mendaciously with the great, I thought. But still . . .

This man Fludd knows my name and my business with Ravaillac: How? What else does he know? Can I discover from whom he has had it? This may be a chance. He may let something slip.

A wrench at my arms and shoulders took me lurching down—the dark-bearded man “John,” I noted, suppressing my natural temper and not resisting him. *Give the older men no reason to take the sword and dagger away from here, out of my reach.*

I permitted the two younger men behind me to force my arms behind my back and pin me down on my knees. It is better on some occasions to appear cowed. I stand four inches over six foot; such height can be both imposing and threatening, and they were thus helping me to conceal it.

Metal glinted in the sun. Two of the older men indeed held pistols. Dog-locks, rather than the more effective wheel-locks—*however, mail in my doublet lining will not save me if one elderly mathematician decides to blow my kidneys out through my belly.*

I saw, under pretext of gazing around in stupefaction, that this was some riverside house’s garden. The walls might give me easy escape, being only six or eight feet high. The house was shuttered tightly for so bright a day—if it was inhabited. Best assume the house doors locked.

The man Fludd trod across the tight camomile turf, into the longer grass, and stood gazing at me, his hands folded together in front of his black robe. Fludd wore boots; they were visible under the hem of the gown. He shifted his weight. I braced. Dignity, self-worth, pride: these are all things a man needs in interrogations. They are, therefore, things which an interrogator must attempt to strip off.

Fludd kicked, hard, where I knelt—kicked my right knee outwards, and shifted his weight again to kick my left knee similarly, so that I knelt, legs splayed wide, thigh muscles straining. All my balance went: only

the men behind grabbing my arms held me upright.

With neither pleasure nor distaste in his expression, and before I could close my legs, Fludd kicked me between my spread knees. The toe of his boot squashed my testicles.

For a searing time, there was nothing but pain.

I found myself, when I could take stock, laying on my side in the long grass, curled up, hands clamped to my crotch. A hot cannon-ball of pain rested in my belly. I moved, and pain shot as high as my chest. I vomited a trickle of bile, gasping, not knowing if I were more overwhelmed with pain or rage.

“Now you are tame, as I knew you would be.” The sun-darkened Fludd bent over me, his face obliterated by shadow. He spoke again, too quietly to be heard by any other man. “You will remember this, but not for the pain.”

He straightened up and added more loudly, “This was the first time we might make your acquaintance, Monsieur Rochefort. Sir Robert’s men could have taken you at St Katharine’s Stairs, and you were not alone in More Gate. Now you’ve come to Southwark, and me.”

There was muttering among the men which pain caused me not to follow. Lanier caught my eye as I glanced up, and I felt myself heating, unre-minded until now that a woman witnessed my subjugation.

It took me all my concentration to roll up onto knees and elbows, and to gain, eventually, my feet. I could notice nothing more. I sweated, looked around for my hat, and no man present stopped me when with difficulty I picked it up, and rubbed the marks of dew from the crown. All stepped back as if I were a bear tied to a stake for baiting.

Through the ebb of pain, I thought: The garden doors are closed with a beam through iron sockets, but the wall is not so high that it might not be rapidly climbed—

By a man whose balls are not presently burning holes in his belly.

“Sir Robert” will be Robert Cecil. I remember no “Doctor Fludd” from when I was here with Sully. But six years is long enough to come from nowhere and set up a network of intelligencers and spies. He knows somewhat of me; what will he do with it? He cannot think I will kill James I and VI! This is absurd!

The urge to discover the truth fought in me with the urge to take my rapier from the mathematician who held it, pistols or no. Pain is apt to make a man rash in his behaviour. Sweat rolled down my face. I folded my arms, and stared down at Doctor Robert Fludd.

“I have nothing to hide from you, Monsieur Rochefort.” Fludd shrugged in a way that convinced me he had spent some time out of England, perhaps in Italy. “I’ll tell you what it is that I do. As Oresme said, by astrology we may discover plagues, mortalities, famine, flood, great wars. He goes on to add, ‘but only in the most general terms. We cannot know in what country, in what month, through what persons, or under what conditions, such things will happen.’”

He finished his evident quote, smiling.

“But that’s what I know, monsieur. What country, what *day*, which person, what exact conditions. As Bruno the Nolan said, all worlds exist in the mind of God, because everything which is perfect must already be conceived of by God and therefore must exist. Our Fallen world is imperfect, but it can be aligned closer with the Ideal by the manipulation of events, so that things which are unlikely in our mortal sphere—because of our human nature—can be brought into being.”

I gave him a jaundiced look. “Monsieur Nostradamus had better patter, as I recall.”

“This is a stupid man,” Aemilia Lanier’s higher voice proclaimed over the indrawn breaths of the men. “He doesn’t understand what you’re saying, Doctor. He’s just a murderer: you know how unintelligent such men are!”

Fludd looked up at me again. He stood half a head shorter than I. His expression seemed mild.

“Not ‘just’ a murderer, I hope, or we shall have been wasting our time. But certainly *a* murderer, and the man who set Monsieur Ravaillac on to kill his king. Going under the name of ‘Belliard.’”

My stomach, that had been hot with pain, went suddenly cold as January. I have been under surveillance and I have not known it—but how? He is no Frenchman. If he is the Medici’s agent here, how has information come to him about when and where I would land in London, when I could not know that myself?

I kept silent. The worst of all possible things has happened: very well. If a man does not speak, there is nothing they can make of it. Except make you fearful about how they will shake your tongue loose.

I have been party to too many interrogations. I smiled ironically, sweating, my balls continuing to throb. This is perhaps wild justice.

“Come with me,” Fludd said.

Cecil, I thought. The true news of the assassination may easily have come to London as long as a week ago. This Fludd may in fact be Cecil’s man. *No. He is too much of an alchemist-charlatan!*

He took my arm. I was shocked by his grip—by the closeness he would dare to a man he had just harmed. He drew me into a walk, at which I found myself less pained, but took care to stumble.

“You’re naturally sceptical.” Fludd didn’t sound aggrieved. “I think Mistress Lanier is in error to call you stupid, but of some things you *are* ignorant.”

We went a few paces towards the sundial and its marble flagstones, and the short camomile turf surrounding it. The sweet grass bruised under my boots. Gulls cried over the river, past the bottom brick wall of the garden.

“I’m ignorant of how to cozen the gullible out of their money by scribbling lines on a star-chart,” I said dryly. “So much is true, indeed.”

“Being ignorant is no disgrace, if you haven’t the opportunity of learning.” Fludd stopped as we came to the sundial, and squinted up at the blue sky. “You won’t have read the works of Regiomontanus, especially his *De trianglis*, which deals with spherical trigonometry. I doubt you know the Bishop Nicolas Oresme, whom I quoted earlier, nor the hints of analytic four-dimensional geometry in *his* works. To see precisely which improbable things must happen to bring about the correct future, I have to perform complex astrological calculations in high-dimensional—perhaps infinite dimensional!—space, taking into account the different harmonics of stellar and planetary motions.”

I winced as pain nagged at my groin. “I take it back. You have a superior patter to Nostradamus....”

Irrelevant details presented themselves in front of my eyes, as they will at such times. Sunlight casting a shadow from the gnomon onto the sundial’s face. The time, something past noon. And the worn letters cut into the bronze: ME UMBRA REGIT VOS LUMEN . *I am ruled by shadow, you are ruled by light.*

Fludd loosed my arm, and traced the words around the dial's edge, his tenor voice reflective. "It is true, Monsieur de Cossé Brissac.... *You* will be the light to lead us."

The intensity of the fanatic blazed in his face. I gave him as stupid a look as I could manage, hoping to untangle clews from any words he dropped in his enthusiasm.

Fludd said, "I see further ahead than the necessary death of James Stuart. It is necessary so that certain other, more vital, things come about."

He rested his ungloved hand on the sundial's warm bronze.

"The old astrologers used to calculate disasters from the appearance of comets. There will be one such comet, in half a millennium from now, and when it appears in the sky, all human life and all human works will be...made extinct. These great extinctions have happened before. We are a new creation of God's. He has destroyed others before through the power of the comet."

Irreligious of you to wish to prevent it, then, I thought, but didn't say aloud.

"Now we're given this way to help ourselves," Fludd said. "What we do, here and now, changes the future. Your part in this is that you will kill King James."

"That was tried." I could not help a sardonic look. Rubbing ruefully at my crotch, I said, "If you are further Powder Conspirators, I am not about to play the part of Guido Fawkes. I do not like the end he came to."

"Nor you will not have it."

"And you know this, how?"

Every heart-beat that went by, the pain faded and my strength came back to me. Anger burned under it, though I kept it within strict discipline. I could break his thin neck in a moment, now.

"I cast the horoscopes of unborn futures. You will not kill me." Robert Fludd spoke loudly enough that every man present must have been able to hear.

"Is it so obvious what I think?" Usually I have more confidence in my ability to hide my thoughts. "Or is it only that such a thing is the obvious thing to think, under these circumstances?"

"You aren't a follower of the Art." He shrugged. "I see in Time's perspective glass. At a distance, at half a millennium, only the greatest and most significant catastrophes can be discerned. Close at hand—close, in Time—I can by this science tell what every man has done and what he will do."

It felt theatrical to me, as if he and I put on a play or masque for the bene-fit of these mathematicians (if "Hues, Hariot, and Warner" were truly so) and their companions. The darker one of the two younger men, with the close-cut beard, watched me with unnervingly brilliant eyes.

"And so you know I will not kill you. Why am I here, messire?" I echoed Fludd obediently, calculating how I might best break out of this situation. Time to learn who M. Fludd is when I'm out of his company.

Kill Fludd, disarm the men with the pistols, take my weapons back; kill the others if necessary—

Fludd spoke. "I know I shall not die at your hands, Monsieur Rochefort. I have cast all calculations, and I know. The man who is to aid us in killing James Stuart, who is to strike the blow, is you. Aided by

myself, and these men here.”

“Calculations.”

Political and religious conspirators are one thing, and God He knows I have falsely taken my place among many to spy them out. Such conspiracies when mixed with astrology, necromancy, prophecy, and prediction....

“You will excuse me,” I said civilly. “I had enough of this in the court of our late third Henri, as a young man.”

That King’s mother, Caterina de Medici, had—as well as her pet poisoner—her pet astrologer, and that hapless man Nostradamus. These things haunted my sleep when I was a boy newly at court. I have since learned to be more sanguine.

Each man present looked at the other.

That remark was expected, I thought suddenly.

“We have time,” Fludd observed. “It’s as yet only May the fourteenth.”

If anything could have raised a momentary shiver on my skin, with all this talk of prophecies, that would. It is mere coincidence that the true Gregorian fourteenth, ten days ago, marks the day that King Henri died.

“On the fifth of June, James’s eldest son, Henry, is to be declared Prince of Wales. It is his sixteenth year. He has his own court, Monsieur Roche-fort,” Fludd added. “We of his faction require King James dead so that his son Henry can ascend the throne. As soon as possible after Henry is made Prince of Wales, you may kill the King.”

“Oh, may I?” I attempted not to appear sardonic. If Marie de Medici can procure men to kill her husband, it is no great surprise if Englishmen think they can again attempt the death of their sovereign. This time on behalf of their Prince—if he even knows anything of it!

I can accept, leave, make my way back to the out-parishes and the river, I thought, gazing as honestly down at M. Fludd as I could. But if I face having to search the whole of Southwark for Saburo and Dariole before I may leave, and pursue my plans against Madame the Queen Regent....

Then I must leave alone.

As if cautiously allowing the scheme credence, I ventured, “I do not see how it is to be done, sir. I’m a stranger here.”

“Naturally.” Fludd beamed, and there was a stir amongst his men.

Again, I’ve said something that was expected. I kept my gaze on Fludd. Expected, or predicted? But these are words such as any man in my position might say!

Fludd added, “You will need some days to plan. To search out the necessary details. You have a very few days: you must not delay.”

His stern voice lightened to confidence. “However, your business is spying; you’ve been at court here before. You will not have difficulty in getting access to court now. Then you will return and tell us how you will do this.”

Tell you how I will take wing and fly south with the pigs for the winter! I reflected, allowing none of my incredulity to appear on my face.

“Take my purse.” Fludd undid the strings of his purse with a quick tug and held it out to me, open. I saw more silver than copper, and at least one gold English rose-noble. It was hard not to blink in amazement. *He is serious? Mordieu! Who knows from where manna will fall!*

I put the purse away inside the pocket-bag of my trunk-hose, where thieves would not cut the strings.

All seemed plain enough in my mind. This Englishman and his fellow conspirators hold no hostage by which to blackmail me. They have given me more time than the few hours that Madame de Medici did. There is no constraint on me but physical threat. This Robert Fludd is, besides, as mad as a boar-hog in the springtide. Is he really fool enough to let me walk out alive, now?

“A spy must pay coin for intelligence, and you had none. I understand that.” Fludd’s eyes showed clear and intense under the spring sky. “I have calculated the day on which I will see you again; we need not arrange it.”

This stinks like three-day-old fish.

I let my gaze travel around the group of Englishmen. They stared at me with varying degrees of hope, expectation, and suspicion—although less suspicion than I would have displayed in their place.

“You are too trusting, Messire Fludd. I might take this money and vanish.”

“You might. You will not.”

I like this flummery less and less . I pulled the purse out of my pocket and tossed it back to him. “I wouldn’t put it past you to be an agent provocateur, Monsieur Fludd, setting up this assassination to take all the genuine conspirators in your net.”

No man among them flinched.

“I will not be bait and be arrested with your money on me,” I concluded.

Fludd nodded thoughtfully. “Naturally you will not believe without proof. I have been at some pains to devise a proof that you will believe. I aim to convince you that I have calculated—precisely—the events of the future.”

Fludd began to fumble at his breast, undoing his long gown. It fell open. I saw him to be wearing an Englishman’s usual knee-length, voluminous trunk-hose, and a doublet of matching pattern, which made him not as poverty-stricken as I had been assuming. Fludd looked to be of a thin build, and of average height, which made his body appear slight. He had the hands and calf-muscles of a man who does not work for his living.

He struggled out of his gown, giving it to the small man he had called Warner. That done, he held his hand out to the dark-bearded younger man, who instantly drew his English broadsword. It was plain in construction; no guard-rings on the hilt. I could not prevent myself reflexively stiffening at the presence of a drawn blade.

Fludd took the broadsword, his hand sliding easily under the knuckle-bow and closing around the grip.

One of the mathematicians—the man in his late middle years: Hariot?—frowned. Both servants of the Earl of Northumberland got very similar expressions.

The woman Lanier and the remaining two scholars gazed at us with expectant smiles.

The difference between them is that Hariot, and this Luke and John, know what they're looking at. They see, as I do—by the way Fludd holds a sword, he's a man averagely good in a knock-about at a London School of Defence. But even in a Paris salon, he would be outclassed. When it comes to a duellist of the top class....

Robert Fludd looked up at me.

"I'm no tall man of my hands, Monsieur Rochefort. You can tell that. But I'll give you your German rapier, and you may try to fight your way past me. If you win through, no man will stop you leaving."

Rochefort, Memoirs

12

I've heard *that* before," I murmured—but not too loudly, in case he should think better of giving me a sword.

Doubtless he thinks himself well-lessoned in one of the local salons. He may even be something of a local champion, some clumsiness put on for effect. And he has his men here. Which will make no difference, I reflected. Look at him. And I am Rochefort.

If he cannot fight, there will be some trick in this. Pistols, likely. But I will not wait to discover it.

Fludd gestured. The three mathematicians moved back, away from the gate. I opened my mouth to comment, and the two younger men lifted the bar out of its sockets, and pulled the gates ajar. The woman, her arms folded across her bodice, gave me a look I could not interpret, and stepped slowly to stand with the man Hariot, the hems of her gown and petticoats catching up and springing loose from the overgrown grasses.

"You need to know that I foretell everything." Doctor Fludd spoke as an actor does, to me and to his small audience. The sun beat down from above, the heat of May paradoxically warmer in this England than I had found it in France, and I was grateful for my hat-brim sheltering my eyes: a man does not wish to be dazzled with a sword in his hand. I smelled the grass, the dew drying on it, and heard the sound of bees.

There is too much of "everything" for any one man to foretell it.

Strike through Fludd, kill the dark man John if needed, out of the gate and away, I resolved, and stood very meekly while Aemilia Lanier took my rapier and dagger and harness from Master Hues and brought it to me. These being gentlemen, they would suppose me unwilling to attack a woman. And since I perceived no advantage in it, I did not.

The cut leather belt I mended by the temporary expedient of knotting it, since it was thin and long enough. The suspensor-strap needed considerable adjustment. No man was within five yards of me. Every part of my body tensed, alert for when whatever the trick was would happen—but I put my belt and hanger on, and drew the Saxony rapier, all without interruption.

The feeling of the solid hilt within my hand was immeasurable comfort.

Not out through the gate. I revised my decision. Since I cannot, from here, see what's on the far side of it, and it is too inviting. Over the wall, there to the side, where they will not expect it. . . .

"I foresee everything," Robert Fludd repeated, his intense eyes fixed on me. "You don't know that, monsieur, or what a burden it is. Monsieur, tell me, what good does it do me to know that, half a millennium hence, in the same place where you took ship from France, the Normandy beach will run red with so many thousands more men's blood?"

I did not openly flinch. *Normandy.* Has he spoken to the ship's captain of the *Willibrod*? This nonsense of the future aside, this man is far too well-informed for my comfort. . . .

Fludd's gaze didn't waver. "Thus you see, I *know* what terrible years will come if King James stays on the throne, what English civil war. . . and what a disaster the rabble of Parliament will be—to England, and to the world. I know that the only hope we have is that James's son Henry must begin to govern early."

Sardonically, I put in, "Guided by such mentors as Doctor Robert Fludd?"

He flinched. That surprised me.

"Every man will say that, I suppose." His chin came up with determination. "If the late Queen of England had listened to Doctor Dee, monsieur, we would not now be in these terrible times. There was only one John Dee. There's only one of me."

"There will shortly be one less than that," I murmured, and without warning thrust straight in with a long forward pace, skewering his heart—

He was not there.

He moved to one side as I moved, not particularly gracefully. My counter-cut batted his heavy blade away by instinct. Simultaneous with my failure came the thought—*there's my chance, gone; I missed it*—and I went seamlessly and smoothly back through guard and into a two-handed cut to slice his skull-bones apart.

At the same time, I let my field of vision take in his minions: who would draw, who would aim a pistol, which way I should dodge, who I should attack and overpower by storm—

No man moved. No woman neither.

Robert Fludd's blade licked up and took mine, deflecting it just past his ear.

A lucky parry, I reflected grimly. Every man is entitled to the gods on his side once.

Across the unkempt garden, my gaze met that of Hariot. He had a tough-bitten traveller's look to him, and had cocked his pistol—but seemed content to rest it and watch.

I might bet my well-being on the throw of hazard: Messire Hariot's skill at pistol with mine at hurdling the tall wall. Or disarm Fludd. Use him as a hostage, rather than killing him—no: they'll kill me if I do. He may be elf-struck, but I see loyal men here.

It disgraces me to put me in a position where I must butcher an incompetent!

Biting down on my temper, I lifted my blade again, engaged his wavering sword, twisted for a fast disarm that would wrench his wrist and remove the weapon—

He pulled the blade straight back towards himself, out of the way, barely avoiding the pommel hitting him in the stomach, in the tabs of his embroidered brown doublet. He slipped out of the disarm.

I bared my teeth in a grin. Very well, monsieur—that is *all* your luck for today.

I attacked without warning, a rapid flurry of thrusts: threatened heart, throat, eye, two more feints, and whip the blade out of his hand—

My point thumped into the ricasso of his blade.

He lifted his broadsword just in time to send the point of my rapier skidding off to one side.

My feet moved without my thinking: back a step into the camomile grass. In the warm spring scent, I stared at Robert Fludd. *There is something wrong here.* My body, if not my wit, screamed it at me.

“I never learned defence.” His tone sounded genuinely apologetic. “Al-though, when I was in Italy, I did sometimes go to see the masters play for prizes.”

“You studied defence in Italy?”

“No, monsieur. I have never studied to fight in general.”

“You have not? But no. You handle a sword too well for that. Merely—not well *enough.*” I made a cut at his arm, feinted, drove in over his blade—and my point skidded off his pommel as he just barely managed to interpose the shaped steel.

He should not have got there. *Something is wrong.*

That realisation crystallised decision. I burst into attack, all skill subsumed into that unconscious and total state of reaction; the hand and the eye controlling the duel, not the mind. The Saxony rapier, every facet of weight and balance familiar to me from long use, moved seamlessly, too quick for conscious thought. Men who live as duellists are apt to have sharp reflexes; I am no exception.

The blade skidded, thumped in my hand. My cut glanced off Fludd’s knuckle-bow as he held his sword, at the precise right moment, to his side.

My point scratched his blade, six inches from the hilt.

My final cut deflected up as he put his sword in the way of it—blocking with the very tip of the cross-hilt, where the steel is no more than the width of a fingernail-clipping.

I could have sworn he moved his blade too slowly to get there. *He has every lucky chance of fortune, every one in a million parry that a swordsman ever sees, every narrowest possible escape and turning of the blade—*

Deliberately, I stepped forward and lashed out without science. Coldly, with a two-handed grip; flailing like a peasant thrashing corn: hack, hack, hack.

The Saxony rapier’s inch-wide blade did not touch Fludd. He heaved his English broadsword up, not to directly block the cuts and thrusts, since he had evidently not the strength, but to deflect each harmlessly away.

The sun lay hot on the grass, pennants gleamed over the Southwark roofs, spring sun shone. I had the time to think, *This must be what it’s like to be an ordinary swordsman...*

But unskilled men do not duel in this manner. No man handles a weapon like this! Whatever my mind might think of the matter, every reflex of my body, every shift of muscle, every reaction, knows his movements to be wrong. Timing is everything in a duel, and his timing...

Not off by virtue of being slow, the realisation was forced on me. His timing is off because he is moving *first*.

Always moving to counter a heart-beat *before* I strike home.

Fludd's point jabbed lightly into my upper arm, passing my guard as if he knew to the breadth of a hair where my sword would be.

That he should touch *me*, Rochefort—!

Anger and panic bubbled in my veins. I confess the panic freely. He chose that—*chose* not to kill.

Ferocity rose up in me; I forced it down, and sliced his blade out and away, as he moved his steel back.

That left me momentarily forward, my weight distributed wrongly. I couldn't shift back; my legs felt as if I stood in quicksand. It is a dozen years since I have been put so off-balance in a duel.

Fludd stepped in quickly, reaching for my hilt. For a moment I felt his gloved hand on mine, on the wire-bound grip. Caught wrong-footed, I put all my strength and quickness into yanking my blade up and back—and made a slicing shallow cut up his hand, as I wrenched free of his grip.

He swore, wrung his fingers, and took my sword with his other hand.

I felt the grip slide out of my hand, twisted in the exact wrong way for me to hold it, or even catch my fingers in the guard-rings—and he stepped back, lifting both rapiers away together.

My chest heaved, breath and blood pounding together. I stared. My empty hands shook.

“Pardon me if I don't continue longer,” Fludd said, panting. He looked down at his hand; his expression rueful. “I have the knowledge, but not the strength. Similarly with the death of King James. I can *know* anything; I cannot *do* everything.”

I said nothing, only staring at him.

“I didn't study how to fight.” Robert Fludd's breath hissed in his throat. “I cast my calculations, many times, over many years, and studied *this* fight.”

The meaning sunk through to me as I breathed heavily and stared at my sword in his hand. If a man could calculate what guards and thrusts and shrewd cuts another man will make in a particular fight—why, then, he might rehearse to counter them how he pleased. As many times as he pleases. A man with no skill at swordplay, a man who handles a sword as if it is a walking stick cut fresh out of a hedge, might defeat the greatest master, armed with foreknowledge of how that master will fight.

“Ridiculous!” My voice failed me. I nodded at the stain on his glove, where his cut hand bled.

“Ask any man of the theatre—one may rehearse a hundred times, but still...” Fludd looked, for the first time, sad. “Still, extra blood must be spilled, before success.”

I have no idea how long I stared at him: this man who has both injured and defeated me. Fludd held out my sword to me, hilt forward.

I took it, and for all the ache in me to see the blade curve brightly in the air and scatter his blood across the grass, I did not do it.

“We have one chance only.” Fludd’s breath rasped. His face had gone white, and the skin under his eyes a blackish-green. “One only. I don’t think only of today. Half a millennium, or a little more, or a little less...and a comet will appear in the sky, foretelling the extinguishing of us all. We’ll be wiped out by the hand of God, and justly so, the world then being ruled by warlords, despots, and tyrants. I’ve spent many years with these calculations, Monsieur Rochefort. I’ve only one way to avoid that disaster—to put Prince Henry on the throne, create a college of Hermetic advisors to him while I’m at his side, keep the line of Stuart kings *always* on the throne, and build up a society of peace and industry. Then we may work to spare ourselves the comet. Truly, monsieur, I don’t like it any more than you do that we have to begin by murdering James Stuart. But if we don’t, his son Charles will become king in less than twenty years, and then endless civil wars begin.”

The woman Lanier spoke, her voice apologetic. “I don’t like to call it ‘murder.’ Doctor Fludd, it is a righteous killing on behalf of the country. Like Jael killing Sisera with a tent-peg.”

I thought I caught a note of discontent in Aemilia Lanier’s tone. Jael is female, if I remember my Old Testament. I saw her companions did not like her putting herself forward. Fludd need not call on outside murderers: he would have at least one volunteer. And so...

“Why me, monsieur?” I said, as levelly as I could to a man who has kicked me in the balls. That his sword-hand might move in advance of mine, I put firmly out of my mind.

All three older men in this “conspiracy of mathematicians” made to speak at one time. Robert Fludd held up his hand for silence. He finished wiping his forehead with a clean-looking kerchief.

“Because I have calculated, Monsieur Rochefort, and—you *are the only man who can succeed.*”

There was silence in the garden.

“Why else would I have sought you out?”

Because you’re a madman! I thought, but did not say. My arm stung, painfully, where he had pushed his sword point a half-inch into the flesh. It swamped the residual pain in my groin. As well as the bone-and-muscle-deep memory of how wrong his movements were, I must now carry (along with the fear of it turning bad) the knowledge of how purely easily he had inflicted the wound.

And how easily he might have made it a killing stroke. Being mad, as he is.

“Here.” He pressed his purse into my hand again. I merely held it. I am practised enough at not letting my thoughts show on my face.

“King James must die, and as soon after his son Henry is made Prince of Wales as is possible. I should prefer the other children, Elizabeth and Charles, to survive: therefore, no Powder Conspiracy petards. Prince Henry *must* live, and rule. This is all you must bear in mind, Monsieur de Cossé Brissac. We will see you again as soon as you have selected the ground.”

The man that he called John heaved the heavy oak gates open a yard or two more, and stood back from them. I looked at the way out. A yard, opening to an ordinary enough street. The trodden mud underfoot was yellow; the houses had been given a coating of lime-wash sometime in the reign of the late Queen. For Southwark, it was respectable.

If I step out of the door, I thought, will I have an assassin’s knife in my ribs, or a constable’s hand on my

shoulder?

“You need not say when or where we will meet,” Fludd repeated, busying himself smoothing down the folds of his robe. “I have foreknowledge of it. It is soon.”

He looked up at me, his eyes narrowed against the sunlight.

“And when you meet with Tanaka Saburo and Mademoiselle de la Roncière again...you will find them in the cemetery.”

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13

Walking away down the empty Southwark street, I found myself suddenly missing the company of Gabriel Santon.

Perhaps because a gentleman should have his servant here at such a time, to bandage his wound, refurbish his spoiled garments—and debate with him the wisdom of certain decisions.

But Gabriel is either captured by Marie de Medici, a prisoner along with M. de Sully, or else fled sensibly into the countryside. One hopes, the latter. And there are no trusted agents here in London that I might seek out.

I lifted my head, the growth-laden breeze of Spring blowing into my face. Roaring sounded from the distant bull-baiting pen. The wheels of a score of ox-drawn carts screamed, sounding to be west of me—we had crossed over the main high-road to London-bridge, I guessed; Robert Fludd’s house must stand on the opposite side of it from the play-houses.

Glancing towards the river confirmed it; I saw myself opposite the Tower. East of here will be Deptford; Greenwich; ships that leave for Europe, the New World, the far East....

I felt a stab of wrenching regret for the contents of my lost saddle-bags, that held, among other necessities, a spare sword-belt.

There are enough men in my profession whom I have seen caught because they could not walk away from some treasured thing. I pride myself on my ability to walk away from all, great or little, without remorse.

Mill-houses rumbled at the bank of the Thames-river. Here, small bridges in the road crossed streams, stinking like the open sewers they were. I took my way over them, doubling forward and back into Southwark, heading towards Bankside itself, and stopped at a bath-house that was also a whore-house, both being common in these suburbs where the law does not run.

You will find them in the cemetery, I heard again in my mind, as I trod up the creaking stairs to the upper rooms. I swore under my breath, causing the old woman with the dirty pinner to narrow her eyes at me; and put the nonsense firmly out of my mind.

I should rather be concerned with how shockingly well-informed this ‘Robert Fludd’ is about the

recent past, never mind the future!

Who can have told him what he knows about me?

And—who *else* is privy to what he knows?

My wound I had washed out with wine and dressed. It was nothing, but the soreness kept Fludd present in my mind, which I supposed to be his intent. Gabriel Santon would have dressed the wound better, I thought.

This room under the gable-end of a row of Southwark houses was not so different from my lodgings in Paris. Were it not for the street-cries sounding in English, it would take little to believe that I might step outside onto the peculiarly ineradicable black mud of the Paris streets, and find myself confronted by Queen Regent Marie de Medici's horsemen....

If it still endures, her Regency. I am cut off from all my usual sources. There's nothing to be got here but gossip!

Gabriel Santon would not only have dressed my wound more precisely, with the skill that comes of soldiering; nor only have listened to tavern rumour. He would have provided a background presence that, no matter I cannot discuss such things with him, aids me to put my silent thoughts into order.

I cleared of food a cast pewter dish deep enough to have served as a buckler in a bar-brawl, the last nausea of Fludd's kick evaporating as I did so. *The Queen Regent is my business, not Doctor Fludd.*

I drank down sour English beer, and could not help pacing the length of the room, tankard in hand. Sully, I thought. Sully. And Marie de Medici, who is Great Henri's widow—what may one Messire Rochefort do against her, for all his fine words?

Well, let us see. I might blackmail her, I thought coolly. Since I *do* know who set me on to have Henri murdered. But then I must contact her, and she may more easily find and kill me. At home I was a man of powerful friends; here, the English lords will have their own interests, which will not be easily engaged—although that is one possible road....

In France there will doubtless be men who already seek to depose her, and I may in time make use of them. But she will have supporters; not she alone will have desired the Regency. Many members of her household that she brought from Italy will be flying high now: Madame Leonora, Messire Concini....

In the days when the Queen listened to M. de Sully as a friend, he somewhat counteracted the influence of those two, but now...France run by Marie de Medici, and she run by her favourites, dear God!

I might kill her myself. Or find another Ravaillac, I thought grimly. That would be amusing.

I drank down the beer and gazed unseeing out over the roof-tops of Southwark, wishing that it were the Arsenal, or even Les Halles.

The best and only way is honesty.

That made me smile.

But it is. If M. de Sully retains even one fraction of his power—and if I can free him from the danger in his household—then I foresee that he, himself, may be the one man who can legally arraign her for her crime, with myself as witness. Who else would be believed, except Great Henri's incorruptible Sully? Every other man at court has his own interest, but not Sully: all men *know* he cares only for France and

his King.

And I must confess to him that I am responsible for Henri's death; that I chose, rather than endanger his own life, to endanger the King's. Confess, and withstand his most bitter anger, for my stupidity. His hate, for my failure. My catastrophic failure.

I sweated. *I failed, but I may make it right.*

It is the true way, the best way; more likely, the only way. If *Sully* makes this claim, and verifies it, men will believe. Parliament will take the Regency from the Queen. They may even choose, as new Regent, M. de Sully....

The Medici knows that. If Sully hasn't fallen from power already, she will kill him as soon as she can do it without suspicion. Not in days—but not months, either. A matter only of weeks, if not sooner.

It is certain.

“Merde!” I threw the tankard at the wall, denting both pewter and plaster, and followed it with a punch that stung from my knuckles to my shoulder. To know how very badly she must desire his death, and mine, and to know nothing of how things now stand at home!

And, just when I begin to think I am successfully lost to all men's sight—then comes this Doctor-Prophet Fludd, whom *someone* has briefed very well. Very well indeed.

Who knows I am in England? Who knows I am de Cossé Brissac? Who *else* knows that I am the man who caused Henri's death?

Slowly, I sat down at the table, and counted out a few extra coins as payment for the damage to the wall.

For all the shock of the madman Fludd's words, I thought, there is one sensible and urgent conclusion that I can come to.

Whatever I do—it is not to be done in the same country as this lunatic astrologer who knows too much of my business.

From the whore-mistress, I bought a sailor's carry-bag, and—it surprising me greatly to find one—a suit of doublet and trunk-hose in the English fashion that was large enough for me to wear. The man had been fatter than I, although of my great height, but it could be made to fit well enough; a dull mulberry broadcloth, nothing to draw the eye. Fludd's purse settled the account.

I further changed my appearance by being bathed, and shaved again of all but a point of beard and small moustaches, although I kept my hair long to my shoulders. To this, I added a low-crowned and wide-brimmed hat, my secret transferred inside. *Just so that I look sufficiently different from the unshaven thug ushered from the house of Robert Fludd, and can avoid his intelligencers....*

With an English shilling and an English sixpence, I might hire a post-horse down to Rochester, which is a good small port, and less likely to be watched than London or Dover. Six years ago, however, I remember the natives of Rochester as unfriendly to Frenchmen—the English King's officers made marks on house-doors, so that as the Duc's entourage travelled up from Dover, we should know at which houses we could eat and drink. In Rochester, the men of the town went around beforehand, and wiped the marks away. *But I need not of necessity travel as a Frenchman.*

Impatience drove me on, now—but, were Fludd's men watching for me to run, they would expect it

immediate. I stayed at the bath-house and took a woman, so as not to appear particular, but the blow to my testes left me painful and slow to perform. I let the woman believe I was angered with her on that matter, and stormed out, throwing down a few English coins.

The hot sun scalded my cheek. For all it was gone midday, a lot of the houses remained shuttered here. A dog trotted past me. As I registered the loping orange form I saw it was not a dog, but a fox. Which indicates but few men here. *Plague?* I wondered. *It is early in the season, as yet.* I swung south away from the river and set about shaking off any man this Fludd might have set to follow me.

Crossing back eastward over the road of Long-Southwark, with only a glance for the entry to London-bridge, I walked on through the suburbs towards Black-heath. The earth was sticky under my feet. Above, the sky cleared. A haze dogged the horizon. It was only when my breathing eased that I knew how alert I had been, passing the district that held Fludd's house. My doubling-back and taking of alley-ways would have shown up the most determined follower, I judged, and my experience in these matters is considerable.

A few more coins would not have hurt this 'Fludd': I might have bought a mount, no matter how sway-backed. Smiling wryly, I set about thinking myself into the role I would play for ship's-masters in Greenwich. A Dutch deserter from the Low Countries wars; such will account for the lack of horse or much baggage. Anxious to go to the Scandinavian countries, or Poland, say....

Where I may look at the situation in France, myself remaining unknown, and decide how I might best act next.

Glancing up at the sun for direction, I found it no more than a left and a right turn to put me on the true road again. A man with sword and dagger will not be defenceless crossing wild heathland, but as I walked down a quiet side-street, the great river on my left, I bitterly missed the pair of wheel-lock pistols in my saddle-bags.

Although it is a true remark that a sword does not hang fire—

All in a second, I was overtaken by tactile memory: the splintering of the flint in my wheel-lock pistol, Dariole's smile glimmering out of the dim light of the Paris stable.

They will not be in a cemetery! M. Saburo has his ambassadorial visit to court to make, he will not let anything dissuade him from duty. Mlle Dariole... is likely playing at hazard in some tavern, with shaved dice.

I cannot stay: I cannot spare the time to search half of London!

A blind man tapped a long stick against the house walls, coming up from the Thames steps. A veteran; the lid of his left eye sewn shut with ragged black linen thread.

"Alms!" His blind face lifted. He heard my boots on the earth. "Money, mistress or master, for a poor blind man!"

If superstition had moved me, or I had thought Monseigneur God might answer me in kind, I would have given him money; a voyage to the cold north deserves all the luck it can get. I have, however, a dislike of opening my purse on a public street. Particularly since pick-pockets and thieves have been known to disguise themselves as cripples and blind men.

I glanced down the street; looked back over my shoulder. Another man limped down the road behind me—I had been turning to check doorways, windows, but his lurching gait came on fast enough to have

me dropping hand to dagger. It was a Bedlamite. One of those madmen who sits drooling in doorways and hearing voices, which, if they truly are God's Saints, show the Saints to be not as wise as we have been taught.

Or rather, it *may* be such a man.

The blind man's stick lifted.

Instinctively my feet moved into a duelling position. I backed a half-pace, as if I needed room to draw; thought, *Fool, will you be jumping at shadows next!* A blind man and a drooling madman—

“Master!” The blind man's stick traced arcs in the air. The tip sought me, slowly. “Please, I've got nowhere to sleep tonight. The Spring nights are cold enough to kill. I'm a sick man. Just a penny, sir; just a penny.”

I put my hand across to my sword-grip—and a stunning weight struck my head and right shoulder from above.

I fell to my knees, cracking them against cobbles set amongst the mud. My head swam from the blow. It felt like a man's full body weight.

I writhed, eel-like; forcing my hand to my rapier, and hauling it out of the scabbard. A hob-nail boot stamped down on the back of my hand, catching it between the hard grip of the rapier and cobble-stones. Everything from my fingers to elbow on that side exploded with pain.

A heavy weight grabbed at me with human arms; I seized the wrist of the man's dagger-hand with my free hand as we rolled on the ground. I caught a glimpse of beam and plaster above—and an open lattice, where he must have jumped from the overhanging window.

The dagger fell and vanished. Both his hands grabbed at my wrists, digging in with ragged nails. I could reach no weapon. Another hand slashed down; the blind man's stick laid open my forehead.

The Bedlamite kicked me as I rolled, scrambling and brawling with the other two.

I got half-up on to my feet—was hit one-two-and-three!, as more ragged men hurled themselves on top of me in the brawl. Three more impacts punched me down. I heard the scabbard of my rapier crack. The grip on my wrists bit in with a lunatic's strength; I could reach neither of my hilts.

Blood stung my eyes. I found myself buried under a rolling mass of men. Men with crutches, that they lifted and brought down on me; men with bandaged arms, with wild red eyes gazing out of flour-whitened faces.

No madmen, no poor; but sturdy beggars! My initial instinct not to strike at cripples and the feeble-minded vanished: I began to fight back.

They were not ever where I grasped.

I could neither catch hold properly to wrestle, nor dodge the punches and kicks. I landed, thrown on my face, on cobbles and mud; groping back to find no dagger, no sword.

The tip of a boot caught my lip, pain sparking down my jaw. Blood poured out over my hand and the earth. I grabbed: no man was there. Wherever I grabbed.

It is...like fighting Robert Fludd.

In seconds I was pinned; spread-eagled face-down. I found, heaving and shoving, that I could not move out from under the weight of eight or nine of them, tall and strong as I am.

The “blind” man squatted down in front of me.

“Now you listen, friend.” He grinned, showing the wrecked stumps of his teeth. The black linen threads rose up, glued to his eyelids, and his pupils gleamed at me.

I made a lunge: the sheer weight of bodies bore me down, and I could not reach eyes to gouge, or grab a man’s testes, to twist. A kick caught me on the side of the head, and started a high-pitched whine in my ear.

I wanted to think it a robbery. How ironic to lose a purse an hour after having been given one! *But this dream-like ease with which they evade and subdue me....*

Fludd has sent them. That *he* could do this to me, and that these men should find me so soon, it can be no coincidence—

“You—listen—to—me!” The blind man punctuated each word with a punch to my face; I felt my cheekbone split. I have not been so handled since I was a boy. Thrash and struggle as I might, he had too many accomplices. Their weights crushed my ribs, making breathing laborious.

I made experiment: slashed a random bite at the Bedlam beggar where he held my shoulder.

He leaned back out of the way a half-heart-beat before I moved.

The false blind man spat. “You listen. I’m the Upright Man here. What I say is ben—what I say, goes. You can see we’ve taken your sword. We can beat you as hard as we like if you won’t listen to us.”

“So?” I managed every ounce of contempt I could muster. It is many years since I had a right to feel offence at being manhandled by the canaille, it being equally many since I was a gentleman; still, a man does not lose the habit. “All this for a purse? Nine dogs onto one true man?”

He reached forward and stuck his fingers, with their black jagged nails, up my nostrils.

He pulled.

My head jerked up. I roared. There is little enough way to disguise true agony in a man’s tone.

“No chat-back to my face.” He grinned widely, looking madder than the madman. “We know who you are. Here.”

His other hand fumbled down inside the front slit of his shirt. Water ran in my vision; I could not see what he drew out. My body thrashed under the weight of the other men, without result except that one of them hit me a sharp, stunning blow over the right eye.

The blind man made a crumpling motion, closing his fist on something in his shirt. He clamped his other hand shut over my nose. Blood frothed and sputtered as I struggled to breathe in, opened my mouth to shout—

The blind man stuffed what he held into my mouth.

I choked, breathing in the obstruction, catching it against the back of my throat. Weight shifted, lifted off me as I choked, helpless in a paroxysm of coughing. Bare feet slapped away over the cobbles and mud. A tiny sound compared to shod feet. I couldn’t tell which way they went.

Shaking with rage, battered, bleeding at the nose, and in a coughing fit, I reached up and yanked out what had been stuffed into my mouth.

Paper.

Scrunched up, soggy, marked with blood, and with sharp edges, and black ink running...

I sprawled across the cobbles and recovered my rapier and dagger, kept my sword point out in front of me, pushed myself back into the nearest doorway, with stout oak at my back; and stared out at the street.

False beggars. Abraham Men, the English call them. Wandering the countryside in gangs; infesting the cities.

No doors opened, no shutters came off windows, as my breathing quietened to normal. Men will mind their own business in Southwark.

Blood dripped down onto my ruff. I pressed my hand to my nostrils, stopping the flow, but getting blood on my sleeve and the crumpled ball of paper.

Religious tract? Genuine madmen?

Who were not there when I moved. Slid away like eels from my grip. Always a breath in front or behind my punch. *Well-rehearsed.*

Pain stabbed down from my forehead to my eye. The sun made one eye weep. My hat was gone, laying upside-down on the far side of the street. I trapped one corner of the paper between ring-finger and rapier-grip, and used my other hand to flatten the paper out across my knee:

'To M. Rochefort.'

The feeling that went through me was compounded of anger, fear, shock, and rage that I had been taken in. That I could be such a fool as to let myself be followed, after all my precautions—after all my years acting as Sully's intelligencer.

"*Twice, in the one day?*" I raged out loud, incredulous.

Dear God, what am I! Am I Sully's agent, these fifteen years; am I the Duc's spy? Have I entirely lost whatever little wit I ever had?

"Whoreson, useless, lack-witted fool!"

I crushed the paper in my fist. And then, bitterly, spread it out again, to read:

'To M. Rochefort. You will do this as many times as pleases you, until you are convinced. When you are convinced, you will sleep with the dogs until it is time for us to meet again. You will not leave London. The sooner you begin your work, the more fortunate it will be for you.'

It was not signed. I did not know the hand. I did not need to. M. Fludd thinks he and his men can follow me wherever I go in London, does he? Very well, we will see.

I will be out of this London before three in the afternoon.

I threaded my way back past Southwark cathedral to the great and only bridge across the wide Thames.

As I set foot on the flag-stones of London-bridge, under the crowded great gate, a man shifted his shoulders off the wall where he had been leaning and made his way between the people towards me.

I recognised his face. "John."

The dark-bearded man nodded curtly. "I am to say, 'cross over if you wish, but the end will be the same.'"

"I thank you for your advice," I remarked in a tone that would have made a Frenchman draw. He merely nodded, walking away between workmen and riders, back into Southwark.

That is too easy a trick for my English astrologer. Any man might be supposed to cross the Thames by London-bridge if he did not take a boat. Easy to put a man there.

And —I saw as I climbed the side of Tower-hill, and looked down on St Katharine's Stairs—*it does not require great cognition to think a man might seek a ship again where he first landed.*

I faded into the low buildings before one of Fludd's mathematicians and what looked like a dozen swordsmen could notice me.

Let us see what they do when I pick one of the thousand small boats, and change my destination when the wherry-owner is mid-river.

I displeased my water-boatman much, having hired him at Strand Steps to go to Saint Paul's, and then directing him first to Bankside, and then without landing back across the river to Westminster, and changing my mind and having us suddenly land before that at Whitehall.

I added an extra sixpence to his fare. His curses about "bloody Spaniards!" cut off. The cool wind from the river made me wish I had bought a cloak from the whorehouse-mistress, as well as a doublet. As I stood conjecturing whether I should walk back to the city and the shops at Cheapside, and the water-man's oars splashed as he rowed away, a neatly dressed page stepped out of the group of Parliament men debating on the corner of the square.

He took a step down to the stairs, looked carefully into my face, and said, "Monsieur, the good Doctor Fludd says, 'You may go about and about as you please; you will end in the same place.'"

He was a brat of about thirteen, with a pearl in his ear; in Versailles, he would have had his peach-arse taken long before now. I found his English blond and white colouring too rapid for attraction.

"What else, boy?"

"Nothing else but that, monsieur."

I reached out and put my hand on his shoulder in what would, to any of the men of the Lords and Commons passing by towards Westminster Palace, look like a friendly gesture. I closed my fingers hard into the meat above his collar-bone.

"Ow!" He scowled, his expression resigned, making no public fuss. "No, nothing more, he didn't tell me any more!"

"Are you sure?"

The grip of my gloved hand must have bruised him by now. He did not look in the least surprised. He let

out a breath as I freed him.

“I’m certain, monsieur!” He first rubbed at his doublet shoulder; then flushed a boy’s crimson. “I hope whatever he has you do, somebody hangs you for it, Monsieur Frenchman!”

I could have caught him, no matter how quickly he darted away, but I did not try.

Can it be possible: that Fludd can calculate what I will do at each and every step of this day?

I am not a fool, to lose my nerve at the smell of superstition. Is it not still more likely that Fludd has a large enough intelligence net that he can cast it over the city, and catch me wherever I go?

And yet, I thought. Even if there are men watching the river with spyglasses, landing agents whenever I come ashore. . . it would still take them longer to get into place than that boy needed.

No—Fludd will have merely outguessed my landing-place. I will not fall for whatever conjuring trick it is he uses to bemuse lesser men.

I signalled another boat to pull in to the steps. The breeze having picked up, towering white clouds glided east over the city sky, reflecting down into the clear waters of the Thames. I landed on the far bank, at Falcon Stairs, upriver of the bull-baiting and close to the Bear Garden. There I paid off my boatman—and snarled at the comment that the Master Mathematician Warner would have made to me.

The scholarly little man, who stood waiting on the river bank, jolted in shock. I strode off past him into the Southwark crowds.

When I found myself scrutinising faces as I passed, I stopped at the Bear-Pit to gaze unknowingly at the listed afternoon’s fights, and consider what I could now do.

How might they end in a cemetery? A rash word by M. Dariole; an occasion upon which M. Saburo might give offence, not knowing this country. . . or simply their water-boat might capsize while shooting the piers of London-bridge, and they be drowned. . . any one of these things may be a man’s fortune.

And any one, not.

I have no way to prevent it.

They are lost in a city of fifty thousand men.

The shelter of the houses increased the warmth of the Spring sun. Men filing past me into the stadium did not wear cloaks—although, this being Southwark, they may have pawned or never owned them. I kept my face turned to the parchment and brown ink, while letting my gaze drift off to the side. Half a street south from here, earlier today, the woman Aemilia Lanier had come out of a theatre.

A woman might be more easily questioned, especially if she is alone.

I turned and sauntered that way, making no particular attempt to hide either my height or the length of my stride; those two things that may identify a man at a distance in a crowd. When I came to what I now saw was under the sign of The Globe, the play-house doors were shut.

Of a sudden, a yell went up from inside, then a concerted gasp; a piece of ordnance fired off, and three thousand men cheered. I raised a brow. I cannot imagine my master the Duc de Sully frequenting such a place—although, low as his taste regrettably was, King Henri would have loved it.

The play being full, the road was comparatively empty. I asked the man holding horses for sixpence if he

had seen a woman in a blue gown; he had not.

And a French youth and a cloaked man?

Nor them, it seemed, neither.

Turning back, I made my way into the alleys of Bankside. There would be a room for hire, evidently, at the taverns-come-whore-houses that—under the Bishop of Winchester's disposition—so thoroughly infest these suburbs. I paid less than I imagined, having no horse to stable and no desire for a harlot; and fell to wondering while I ate if I might make my way to one of the southern English Cinque Ports, and go a-ship from there.

Tomorrow. I will leave London tomorrow. He cannot have agents enough to cover every ship from here to Greenwich, I reflected. Or are the anonymous roads better?

The matter was not settled in my mind by the time the sun set, between a half-seven and eight of the clock. I set about sleeping—which I did intermittently, with grim humour, in the noise from the streets and the darkness that stank of grease and tapers, with my bare sword in my hand.

Nothing worse than fleas came to me from my night on the pallet; the straw so elderly that generation must have succeeded generation within it. I rose around five of the clock, and threw open the window. A gust of warm wind blew in, making the room under the eaves more palatable. Gazing down from the rear of the building, I saw the sun staining the Thames-river bright scarlet.

And this is a Wednesday—no, a Tuesday, and the fifteenth, by this land's reckoning.

At home, it will be close on the end of May; the twenty-fifth, and did Fludd not say Ravailac would die the day after tomorrow? Die without ever opening his mouth about who set him on to kill King Henri?

That would be a test of any man's foretelling, I thought, also grimly, and roused myself more thoroughly to wash and furbish myself up, telling the landlady that I was going out in search of a sword-seller where I might get my scabbard repaired.

I paid my bill, left, and walked down towards Long-Southwark, passing two or three churches of the Protestant persuasion on the way, and finally Southwark's great cathedral—none of them seeming discommoded that their buildings and bone-yards were flanked on each side by whore-houses and other stews. There was little in the way of artisans' workshops; for those, a man has to wait for London-bridge itself.

Better if M. Ravailac *does* confess, I concluded, my head clearer after even so little sleep. *In fact, I think it may be essential.*

The irony made me smile sardonically.

They will execute the man who killed the father of France soon enough, but, if he is to confirm my part in what he did, then I—and M. de Sully—need at least his testament to the interrogators. He must be witness to my part in the affair, and so, I *need* Ravailac to betray me. Which, given the torture they will have been subjecting him to, is just as well. . . .

My steps slowed without my willing it.

I stared, coming back to myself.

A church of grey stone, with a carving that made me suspect its patron Saint was Botolph, sat under the

shade of an oak tree to one side, and a livery stable in front.

The side of the church with the oak looked less frequented, and had sheds, or mere lean-tos, backing up against the church wall; I guessed for spades for digging graves, and other such tools.

A white shape stood outside the further shed.

Another, smaller shape stood up beside it.

Mud squelched under my boots as I entered the graveyard, striding over the morning-wet grass between the low stones. The white shape—the shape of a man in his night-gown, or else another garment all of linen—put his hand down with a gesture utterly familiar.

A curved length of steel flashed into the air, bright as polished jewellery.

The second figure knuckled eyes that, now I came close, I saw were grit-filled and swollen with sleep. She held an oversize doublet wrapped about her against the morning's chill, her fingers barely protruding a knuckle's end from the sleeves.

She—they—most certainly *are* in a cemetery....

Having, judging by the straw in the lean-to, spent the night here in a shed, among the sexton's or grave-keeper's gear.

Tanaka Saburo returned his curved sword to its sheath, and spoke to Dariole in the tone of a man explaining something. "Roshi-fua. Rosh'-fu'-desu."

Dariole closed her mouth from the yawn that distorted it and lifted her gaze. A smile tugged up one side of her mouth, and that curved lip was as familiar to me as my own appearance in a mirror.

"Messire Rochefort," she said, and suddenly frowned. "Hey, what happened to your face?"

I could scarcely get my voice. I managed finally to speak, startled to find myself sounding normal, even urbane. "Another plot to kill a king."

"A king—another?"

Since we spoke French, Saburo only looked bewildered.

"The English King James." I inclined my head to her in a short bow, and made the same gesture to M. Saburo, switching to English speech:

"I apologise for my absence. I was being approached by English plotters, to help them kill their King."

Dariole scruffled her hand through hair that was spiked up by sleep, finishing by yawning jaw-crackingly wide for a second time, and looked at me with something like bewilderment. "Kill the English King James? What is it with you and assassinations, messire? Occupational hazard?"

I should never have spoken the truth so freely, in my first excess of enthusiasm at seeing them. Paradoxically, it was all I could do not to smile. I contented myself with a grave nod, unaccountably cheered. "Precisely, mademoiselle. Conspiracies are my occupation. Having assassinated King Henri of France, I am evidently much sought after!"

"Merde!" she exclaimed.

I stepped back by instinct in the same second.

Tanaka Saburo's hand fell on the long, curved, braid-bound hilt of his sword; he brought the blade out of its scabbard, gleaming round and up into a cut—

Dariole, as if she were armoured, stepped straight between us. "Not his *lord!*"

"Mademoiselle!" In that heart-beat I saw she had her sword, belt, and dagger clutched in her free hand; the rapier, now in the broken scabbard, keeping it straightened by virtue of being there. She held all up in a clutch, as if in defence.

The curved sword stopped, held motionless above Saburo's head.

"His King isn't his lord! *Sully's* his lord! The Duc. On the boat? Remember? I told you?"

"Eh?" The samurai grunted. Every line of his body spoke swiftness. Taken so thoroughly by surprise, I thought, I cannot draw before he cuts; I cannot draw before he kills her, is he *mad*—?

"We *talked* about this. On the ship?" Dariole dropped her makeshift de-fence to her side and looked at Saburo, her expression both fearless and gloriously patient. "King Henri wasn't Messire Rochefort's lord. So it's not like he killed his *lord*. It's like...like when you and your lord went over to the Eastern Army? Against your ruler? And Ieyas' won?"

In one sliding curve of hand and opposite thumb, Saburo returned the sword to its thick scabbard. "Hai!"

His eyes hooded. I realised that, had he been a European, I would have taken him at this moment to be embarrassed. Between my startlement, and the diminishing speed of my heartbeat, I found no word to break the moment's silence that fell.

I had not even time to draw sword, I realised. *After the beach, I should know better*—

Saburo made a grunting noise in his throat and bowed his head curtly. "Sorry. Thought, dishonour. Cannot have *ronin* who dishonours me. I sorry apologise."

I bowed, as one does at Fontainebleau or the Louvre. "Monsieur, I accept."

Self-evidently, while I had been spending my time on the *Willibrod* in cogitation, Mlle Dariole had found some way to tap the taciturn man's speech. I wondered, suddenly, what else they might have spoken of.

Dariole swung about and began to put on her weapons. Her cold-whitened fingers busy, she lifted her chin and met my gaze. "Well? This conspiracy? I guess they tried persuading you the hard way?"

Every man and his dog knows my business: why not you! Touching my face and nose, that still throbbed, I inclined my head in agreement. For all he stood scowling, and for all her importunate questions, I confess it a relief to me to know these two lunatics yet lived.

Speaking more unguardedly than even I expected, I said, "It appears I am a failure in one respect, mademoiselle. I cannot plainly and unequivocally run away, without being turned back...."

"Oh, so *that's* what you've been doing." Dariole grinned up at me. "So—what are you going to do now, messire?"

The answer came to me with the moment.

“I believe I shall do the obvious thing,” I said, “and immediately betraym. Fludd’s entire conspiracy to the English government.”

Rochefort, Memoirs

14

Mademoiselle—*Monsieur* Dariole.” I corrected myself appropriately to her dress. “You are...less noticeable...than either M. Saburo or myself. Will it please you to take my purse and find appropriate lodgings? Since I doubt you wish for another night in this cold churchyard.”

She finished strapping on her belt, hanger, and rapier. “You’ve got money? And you propose to trust me with it? Messire, are you sure you haven’t been sleeping in moonlight!”

“I’ve been sleeping among too many fleas even for Southwark, mademoiselle, and seek to change my lodging.” *Because who knows but Fludd may, or may soon, have knowledge of it?* “But if you’re not willing...”

She showed me her teeth. “Oh, I’m willing to have your money!”

I made a show of reluctantly removing my purse from my belt and handing it to her. It contained no more than a quarter of what Robert Fludd had given me. The rest I had equally distributed among my boot-linings, the bombast of my doublet, and between the silk and leather of gloves bought new for the purpose.

“Tell me a place here that you will know,” I said, “so we may meet again when you’re done.”

Dariole shrugged; a movement that both conveyed her emotions and settled her sword-belt about her waist. She thrust the purse into the breast of her—rather, *my*—crimson doublet, that wrapped around over-large on her.

“One of the Ordinaries up by the bull-fighting place. I’m starved. I’ll find you!”

She took off, showing her heels to myself and the man of Nihon as she splattered dew from the grass all across the churchyard. Saburo made a rumbling sound, which I could not decipher. His odd black eyes darted from her, back to me.

“Rochefort-san.” Saburo mangled my right name, as he did two times out of every four. Roshi-fua, Rosh’-fu’. “Conspiracy. Betrayal. You, I, must *talk*, ronin. Is not so...easy...as you make it sound, to Dari-oru-sama.”

“Not at all so easy,” I agreed. “And I would sooner be off the streets before I speak to you of it. Come.”

We—or rather, I—ate from the common dish, in the Ordinary closest to the Bull-baiting pit. As with all English cooking, I was given cause to wonder if they had merely stewed up the remains of the defeated animals.

“Matters are urgent for me now, Rosh’-fu’-san. I can’t rest until I have spoken with the Emperor-King James.” Saburo’s pronunciation of the English King’s name was at least recognisable, now. I could have wished that different. Very well that he speaks as would-be ambassador. Does he have the sense not to mention conspiracy while we are elbow-to-elbow with other diners?

Saburo declared abruptly, “I swear! I’ll neither eat, nor sleep, nor bathe, until I have prostrated myself and made the apologies of the Shogun Hide-tada to this King.”

I looked up from the food, a little startled. “I wouldn’t make rash vows if I were you, monsieur. If the last time I was here was anything to go by, gaining audience with the King can take some time. He may not even be in London. The court may be at Newmarket, or Hatfield.”

Saburo’s face was not readable. “Then I will eat and sleep, since I must reach the Emperor alive.”

He picked among the remnants of the common dish disconsolately, and, finding nothing apparently to his satisfaction, fell to eating bread.

“I will not bathe,” he announced. “*That* is my vow. I will stink like a gaijin.”

He might make whatever strange foreign vows he liked, but I was unwilling to allow certain inaccuracies to pass.

Ignoring the glances of Englishmen sat about the table, I said stiffly but quietly, “You will find a Frenchman does not stink. As to these English, yes. They do. But they are barbarous.”

“You men and women of Franz eat meat.” Saburo shrugged broad shoulders. “You stink like a graveyard of dead animals.”

Possibly I still resented his over-keen drawing of his blade in the churchyard, at any rate, I dropped my hand to my dagger pommel. “I do *not* stink!”

“You do. Dari-oru-sama, too.” He shredded bread between his fingers, and inhaled the odour off his skin. “It offends a civilised nose. In my land, we only take meat medicinally. Some broth when we are sick. When I first meet gaijin, I think all of you must be sick all the time, to need such amounts of beef.”

Some man further down the long table laughed. I thought what Saburo said ridiculous enough that I might lose my dagger without loss of honour. I took the chance to seem offended with the local company, and move the samurai and myself to a table furthest from the others, and the hearth. I had the pot-boy bring us ale. From the little I could hear of other men’s conversation over the noise in the crowded room, I judged it safe for us to speak.

“*And* you do not ever wash!” Tanaka Saburo eyed his pitch-lined leather jack much as a court lady looks at a louse. “Rosh’-fu’-san, I wish to be done here. This city is filthy. I cannot bear the stinks of it. It makes me ill.”

“London turns my stomach more than somewhat,” I concurred, as I eased myself down on the bench beside the samurai, hitching forward the scabbard of my sword beside my hip. In a more salubrious establishment, I would have taken my Saxony rapier off, and hung it by the hanger’s hook on the back of the door. *I misdoubt I will see it again if I do that here.* “If Paris is no better, well, every man prefers his own stink. Now, M. Saburo—”

“You are my ronin.” Suddenly he broke into a broad smile. “My shinobi, ne?”

“Your *what*?”

“Shinobi-no-mono—assassin-in-secret!” As I would have objected, he became instantly serious again. “But, Rosh’-fu’, you are now hired to kill the man I am sent to see!”

“I am not hired,” I said grimly, “and I have not the slightest intention of concerning myself with this conspiracy of fools: you may be assured of that! King James’s Secretary can have the knowledge of Fludd and his fellow assassins that I have, and put a stop to them.”

Saburo grunted, it seemed thoughtfully. “Hidetada sends me to see *this* king. Not a land...a land made into age of battles. Wars for succession.”

I thought of the sea, to the south, and what might lie across it, in France.

“In any way,” Saburo added. “If you do have to do this, Roshi-fu’-san, my advice is, be careful only to mutilate. Do not kill king. Blind him, or other kind of maiming, and send him to a monastery or shrine. That way, if his son a fool, you can bring first king back to throne.”

I took a drink of ale, thin and bitty as it was—the English living up to their character.

“I don’t believe they have monasteries in this heathen land,” I said, regaining my composure. “Nor can I imagine any conspirators leaving their quarry alive for your reasons. I would suppose things to be different in Nihon.”

He nodded. “Never know what man is like until he is Emperor or Shogun. As well to have...alternative.”

It might be possible to send Marie de Medici to a convent outside France, I suddenly thought, if the Council of the Regency found themselves unwilling to execute a queen. *For my part, her exile would please me, if not as much as her death.*

“I am, in any case, having no part in Fludd’s conspiracy.” I repeated it, in case Saburo might not have understood me fully. “I have—other business in London.”

I felt the common unpleasant tension that comes of not knowing whether you may trust a stranger, no matter that you think you have known him long enough to judge. It is the bugbear of the spy. At these moments I have often wished that I had some way to see inside the heart of a man. Or at least, to see his future actions.

If I could do what this fellow Fludd pretends....

“You must first do what you swore—you are my ronin!” Saburo glowered at me, not drinking of the sour ale. “Or I think, no namban is honourable!”

Of his various terms for Europeans, this one he spat with venom enough that I knew he meant it for an insult. I judged him too mature a man to be sounding like a boy-duelist in his first fight, but evidently something touched him deeply. And although I might harbour some curiosity about his style of fighting, and how I might exploit what I take to be flaws within it...*this is not the morning to begin a quarrel for the sake of it.*

“You hired me as a guide,” I said mildly. “Is that not what ‘ronin’ is—a guide? I’m willing to help you to court. I merely have other matters that I must deal with first.” I added, with some humour, “And, I remind you, you haven’t yet paid me!”

Saburo’s eyes were both dark and brilliant in the low-ceilinged room. He spoke, and I was startled at the severity of his tone.

“I hired you on credit, as is usual! You are a bad ronin, Roshifua-san. If I didn’t think of you as mad gaijin, and a ronin who will turn good, my way into Anghrazi court now would be to betray your name to as high an official as I find, as a murderer from Franz.”

Mordieu! I thought grimly. *I both under-and over-estimate you, my friend.*

If I can stop seeing you as less than, or more than, a man, my judgement may return to me.

He added, “You are not loyal!”

I confess I all but outed with my rapier, and demonstrated once for all that I might take off a man’s head with it as easily as he with his Eastern sabre.

“I am loyal: I am Sully’s man!” I spat.

The irony of that—*the murderer of Sully’s King protests his loyalty to Sully’s person*—took the anger out of me even as I heard myself speak. Deflating, I held up an empty hand, palm forward.

“Let us not quarrel, messire.”

Saburo’s deep brows came down. “I am he who serves! Samurai! You, also. You are servant.”

Incredulity almost made me speechless. “I am no servant!”

“You serve your lord. I serve mine. You are ronin to me, samurai I have hired. You do my concerns first!”

“That was not clear to me, in Normandy.” I drank again, looking down at him. “It is not so surprising we should fail to understand each other, monsieur. I am...willing to keep to the bargain I thought I made, if that contents you?”

He has little enough choice if he wants an ally in England. But it is my habit not to make an enemy where I can make an ally, unless it is advantageous.

Saburo held my gaze, looking up as if it were a challenge. “You swore oath of trust, Roshifua-san.”

“No.” I shook my head. “I merely agreed—”

He touched the silk braid on the odd, curved hilt of his cattan-blade.

“The sword is the breath of the samurai. Breath—no. *Soul*. I explaining to Dari-oru-sama on ship. You swore on soul for the trust between us, ronin and master. I swore on sword.”

“Did you?” Despite myself, I was blackly amused. “But then *I* would have had to swear on something, Monsieur Saburo. And I have nothing. I have been a disgraced gentleman too long to expect any man to accept my word.”

Any man but one. And he is in France; perhaps in Paris, perhaps gone to the provinces. Perhaps dead and in need of revenging.

“My sword is *not* my soul,” I finished sardonically. “The age of chivalry is long over, here.”

He heaved his shoulders, and after a long moment made a sound between a grunt and a resigned sigh.

“Roshi-fu’-san. You do what you say you will. I see this from Franz on. If you not swearing in Franz, still,

you gave me your say.”

“Word,” I corrected the Nihonese man, startled and concealing it. “I gave you my word.”

I supposed that, true, he may have gained an uncharacteristic impression of Valentin Raoul Rochefort in Normandy and on the journey since.

Saburo glared at me. “You give me your say. Your word. You *are* my ronin, bring me to here—I owe you half-horse!”

Unexpectedly, a laugh spluttered its way out of my belly. I sat back on the bench. ““Half-horse!””

If he had not had that strange-eyed and round face, I might have been able to confirm, to my own satisfaction, my suspicion that he also was amused.

“Well, then!” I shrugged. “Yes. I gave you my word, one supposes, even if I did not know for what.”

A pleasant melancholy touched me for a moment, before turning sour. When I was a boy, I made a great fuss of giving my word; I would have died before going back on it, once given. Indeed, I fought several quite unnecessary duels on that account. The melancholy turned bitter as I thought how simple such things were, then, and how regrettable it is that the life of an intelligencer shows them for the sham they are. I am Sully’s man: I will betray M. Saburo without a second thought if it becomes necessary.

“It appears we have both failed our lords,” I said softly. “No matter how inadvertently. And both work to redress that state of affairs.”

Tanaka Saburo nodded. “Hai. But this man who kills king is not so important as I go to English court.”

“Let me be frank with you, messire samurai.” I glanced between him and the room, alert for listeners. “You will then understand why this...astrologer...conjuror...Fludd and his plot can be a petty, foolish matter, and yet still a danger, perhaps to all of us. Firstly, because he knows both your name, and that of Mademoiselle de la Roncière—”

“Should kill him!” the samurai interrupted.

“I attempted it,” I said dryly, ignoring the pang in my belly at the memory of Fludd with a sword. “Whether he has occult knowledge or not, I—*I!*—found him impossible to kill with the sword.”

In the shadow of my cloak’s hood, Saburo raised the hairy black brows that dominated his face, looking interested. “He is kami?”

““Kami’?””

“Spirit. Ghost. Cannot kill kami.”

“Ah. No. There will be some way to make a ghost of him,” I said. I pushed aside the unease that thoughts of Fludd brought, and beckoned the pot-boy to me again, ordering ale; good wine being mythical in this uncivilised country. The leather jack refilled, I turned back to Saburo.

“Whatever his knowledge, I will not be interrupted in what I do by this pox-doctor Fludd. My lord remains in danger. My letters may have been lost, or never arrived. Or not trusted—he may think *I* took Maignan out of the house, and am responsible for his murder! He has no proof there is an assassin still in his household, waiting for the signal to kill him. There are reasons why it may not be long before the signal is given. I intend to prevent that, and to bring down his enemy.”

“Killing lord’s enemy is a good thing.” Saburo nodded sharply. “Run away is dishonourable, even from kami.”

In younger days I would have taken exception to that. With the scratches and bruises of the Abraham Men still stinging my face, I did not feel inclined to contest the matter.

I said dryly, “I ‘ran away’ because, however he knows it, this physician Fludd knows far more than he should. And I need to give such information as I have into my master’s hands before it’s too late to make use of it, and to keep him alive so that he may use it.”

Saburo investigated one of the jacks of ale and tasted it with his finger. “Ah? Stay in London?”

“That’s the question. Monsieur Saburo, I can progress no further without accurate information of what passes at home—in ‘Franz.’ I’m cut off from my other agents, but here I know more men in places of power than in other countries. Even if it is unwise to confront them directly.”

“Hai!” He attempted to drink, it seemed to me, without touching the leather jack itself. Seeing me look askance, he lifted his broad shoulders. “Dead animal cup!”

Leather, I realised, after a bewildered moment. “Yes. One supposes. After a fashion....”

He wiped his wet mouth. The noise of conversation rose and fell in the middle part of the room. Benches scraped on flag-stones. A waft of new cooking-smells came out through the hatchway as the cook opened it.

“Now come to business. Men in power here. You want *me*, go to these people.” The samurai’s voice dropped, becoming deeper and more quiet. “Ever since Franz-place, I have thought that Fate wants us together. I’ll help what you want me to do, here. Condition is, I must see English Emperor. You must...rescue me if I’m imprisoned. Or bring me way to make seppuku if I can’t escape before executed.”

I remembered the term; he had used it prostrate on the beach in Normandy. Now I thought I understood it. “You want to *kill* yourself?”

He cocked his head sideways, evidently searching his memory for words. “My time is...borrowed. I was dead as soon as the ship sank. I have only to beg pardon of the Emperor-King here for failure, and return to report home. When I’m lucky, Shogun Hidetada will allow me to kill self.”

“These moods that come with failure...” I shrugged, taking a drink myself, and gesturing expansively. “They’re common to all men, but they pass, messire, they pass! And then we must do somewhat, must act.”

He grunted, I thought, aggressively. “Death’s not an honour, for gaijin?”

I shrugged. “Death in battle is for gentlemen too stupid to survive it. And honourable death in a duel is for those too unskilled to win the fight.”

After a moment, he said, “What, Rochefort-san?”

“Nothing. A thought.”

For those too unskilled. Or facing a man who appears to know every motion of their skill.

I looked down at the man next to me, swaddled in foreign linen and good Spanish wool. A “charlatan

astrologer” might make all the political predictions he pleases and impress no man. But the memory of Fludd’s timing: my sword lifted out of my hand. . . .

“Twice now Fludd has fought me. Once himself. Once his hirelings. And. . . those did, indeed, end exactly as he foretold.”

“Sword-kami?” Saburo grunted. “Tengu?”

“Tengu?”

Saburo waved his hand. “No matter. I am ally. You too. As ally, what must we do?”

In a tone pitched not to carry beyond him, I said, “It is not wise to show my face overtly, to Cecil or any man else at the English court. Someone may remember me from my last visit here. Queen Regent Marie *must* be still searching for me, in France and beyond, much as she would prefer me forgotten. There is d’Epernon as a witness, and des Vernyes and Bazanez if they live. She will not be allowed to ignore a witness, especially if the murderer names me under torture. She *must* have me dead.”

Saburo inclined his head, with that grunt that can mean *yes*, *no*, or *perhaps*, in different contexts.

I went on, “Out of my experience, I can provide you with the knowledge of who to approach as Ambassador at the English court; who to bribe—”

“Bribery?”

I gave him a sardonic look. “Does a man approach nobles in your court without presents?”

“Ah. Gift-giving. Is politeness.”

I nodded. “We shall need some of the politeness left in Robert Fludd’s purse, to get you to a position to gain audience with the King. It is no easy thing, since, unlike Sully when he came here, you have no diplomatic papers, but it can be done. You, in return, need do nothing for me but carry a letter to the minister that you will have to see, Sir Robert Cecil.”

“Robuta Seso? Seso-sama?”

“Cecil!”

“What I say. Spy-Seso?”

It was beyond me not to smile. “Yes. Spy-Cecil. I will detail all I know of Master Fludd’s conspiracy, and Mr Secretary Cecil may do what he likes with both conspiracy and Fludd. I hope, also, out of that, to gain the answers to some questions that I will write to him, if he will give them verbally to you.”

“And my head? Chopped off?” Saburo’s blunt-fingered hand made a motion that told me he had, at the very least, seen the stroke used before in his life.

“Unlikely.” I put my jack down and looked into it, the better to observe the Nihonese man without appearing to. “But there could be some danger, true.”

He might expect imprisonment and torture if it were known he kept company with an assassin. *But I do not think I am known, yet.*

I said, “If you have half the wits I think you have, you’ll have no difficulty mimicking the ignorant foreigner delivering a letter, the language of which he cannot even read!”

Saburo gave me a look which I found incomprehensible, and I could not tell whether he doubted me, or if he were demonstrating his ability to look suitably ignorant.

“If I carry a letter, I will know what is in it.” His voice rumbled, flatly, with an emotion I could not fathom. “I am alone here, Roshi-fu’. Suppose *you* are in Edo. I give you a letter for a minister of Shogun Ieyas’. I tell you it is about conspiracy. I do not tell you other thing! Whether Ieyas’ or his minister think you involved, or whether I write them to execute you! Now you tell me of this namban doctor. I tell you, you write letter, and leave without sealing. I will take. And I will think.”

I caught the glance that he shot me, his weathered face set. “Well...I cannot blame you for that, I suppose. It is information you would, perhaps, be safer not knowing.”

“I’m not *tell* anyone I know!”

Whatever reaction I expected, it was not that he should slap his thigh, under the thin linen robes he wore, and guffaw loudly enough to stop all conversation in the Ordinary for a moment. Heads turned towards us, and I had reason to be glad I had insisted on his wearing my cloak, hood up.

“You have but one ally in this land,” I said, somewhat acidly. “Do not get him arrested!”

Saburo leaned back, his hands on his belly. “*Two* allies, Rochefort-san. You. The lady-sama.” He paused. “You make her go away before you tell me this things.”

“Dariole?” I complied with his turn of the subject, taking it to be a way of giving himself time to think whether or not he would agree to go to Cecil. “I consider that she is in danger enough, in the company of...who she is with. Add to that, this Fludd, his ‘conspiracy’.... Better to let her roamaround Bankside playing hazard, than hazard a worse thing.”

“Dari-oru not help fight?”

I wondered if he truly saw her as female. Irritated, I said, “She is a woman, after all, Messire Saburo, and a very young one. The last thing I need is an impulsive boy charging into the mess, albeit he’s a girl. Messire, if I write the letter and give it to you unsealed, to be sealed after in your presence, will you agree to carry it to court?”

Saburo, it seemed to me, must feel remarkably isolated in England; his fellows dead, and any Englishman who saw him plain likely to take him for a freak, or a fool after the fashion of the Spanish King’s dwarfs. In this country he would meet no Jesuit priests familiar with Nihon. That might account for his scowl. I considered how I might move matters so that they pleased us both better.

“I am in no good bargaining position,” I began, with a faint smile. “Even a captain of *hashagar*, who is not a spy, can likely predict one thing—I will be much better positioned if I have you as friend, rather than enemy! I have every reason to feel gratitude for your joining in the fight in France. You have every reason to be grateful for having your life saved. If we trust each other no more than sensible men do, we can still act as allies, at this moment. Therefore, I am in any case likely to help you enter the English court, no matter if you refuse my request.”

“I take your letter.”

If he had possessed European features, I might have read them for his motives: whether or not he gladly seized on this way I had given him of consenting without loss to his pride.

He glanced up.

A slight figure banged the opposite bench, the trestle table, and slammed down onto the seat beside the samurai.

Mlle Dariole looked both dusty and foot-sore, which I guessed to be from searching every Ordinary from Falcon Steps to London-bridge. This establishment, although close to the Bear Garden, I had chosen because it was neither conspicuous, nor much frequented by Londoners visiting the stews.

“Be easy,” I said, cheerful. “You might not have found us at all...”

She fetched me a glare that ought to have melted both the glass panes and the leading out of the windows, and put her boots up on the table. “Suits me just fine!”

The dust of the street covered her riding boots. If I had been moved towards irritation by her clamour, I was as suddenly moved to smile, with the realisation that, of all three of us—duellist, captain of infantry, and spy—no one of us would sit with our backs facing the door.

Like three crows on a fence!

Dariole wiped her forehead, swiped Saburo’s all-but-untouched jack of ale, and said wetly, “Found lodgings. Took me less time than finding you! What are you two so serious about?”

The Nihonese man gave a grunt, whose nature I could not interpret. He pointed a stubby finger at me. Before I could fetch him a kick under the table—little though that might have done to dissuade him from spilling my secrets—he spoke.

“I am telling Roshi-fu’-san. He is bad man. He is not doing his honour-duty. His honour-duty demands he commit seppuku, immediately, as he is a danger to his lord!”

Saburo pointed at my rapier.

“With that. Or a dagger, like woman. Kill yourself, Roshi-fu’. Is the best thing to decide to do.”

“Kill myself!” I could restrain neither eyebrows nor voice from shooting up.

Dariole whooped.

Saburo, for all I could tell, spoke in complete seriousness. “You’re a danger to your sworn lord. If *you’re* dead, who can prove the chain between you, he, and murder? None! That is what I say. Kill yourself, honourably. Now as possible!”

“As soon as possible,” I corrected him automatically. I could not tell: it had superbly distracted Mlle Dariole’s question, and yet he seemed utterly sincere.

I shook my head. “That solution is a *little* more drastic than I will contemplate, monsieur! And besides, while it might serve to exonerate M. Sully, it will hardly help reinstate him if he is still in the Bastille...”

Before Dariole could interrupt me, I added, to her, “Take us to these lodgings. We can do to be private.”

That took us out of the Ordinary, at the sign of the Silver Martlet, and into the stuffy mid-day streets. Thrusting through the crowds after her brought me at last down a side-street, and to a three-storey house in much the same style as the one in More Gate, if older and in much less good repair. It occurred to me, as I followed Saburo and Mlle Dariole up the dark stairs inside the house, that for three of us conversing in a language which was native to none of us, we managed competently enough. Especially since

Portuguese was now better avoided completely; too many of the monoglot English being prone to take it as Spanish, and hang us as spies or traitors.

Dariole entered the rooms in front of me. She called back, “*You* can pay the score when it comes due again, messire! I’ll be damned if I’m spending another night in that shed.”

“Undoubtedly you *will* be damned,” I returned in French; since her expression suggested that she expected something of the sort. She laughed, and it was an oddly pleasing result.

I stopped, and sniffed.

I became conscious of a stench, and a great belling and clangour outside the back of the building.

Crossing the room to open one of the mullion windows, I found myself with a view across the back yard. I looked down into a court, surrounded by what I would have thought were horse-stalls, if they were not each so small. Frantic noise came from them, and the stink of excrement.

“Mademoiselle Dariole!” I protested.

“Rooms are cheap here for a reason, Rochefort.” She joined me at the window, also gazing across at the big yard. “Nobody wants to rent in Dead Man’s Place.”

Seeing my blank look, she indicated the Bear Garden, its thatched roof just visible over hedges and trees beyond the yard.

“The dogs for the bear-baiting, messire. This is where they kennel them. If I’m spending your money, at least I’m doing it on the cheap!”

Her raillery went straight past me. I felt as if I had ice in my belly.

‘You will sleep with the dogs until it is time for us to meet again.’

It is not a matter of a man’s fallible memory. This I have written down on a spit-marked sheet of paper, crumpled and kept in my purse. *With the dogs.*

“Robert Fludd.” I spoke his name aloud.

The boy-girl frowned, while the samurai’s face duly stayed blank of expression. I might at least trust his looks, I concluded.

“It’s difficult to see how any man might bring about a chance meeting by way of a such shipwreck as yours,” I said. “Therefore I have never suspicioned you Fludd’s ally. But Dariole—”

“Fludd?” Dariole demanded, seemingly bemused.

“I had told you his name. The astrologer-conspirator, who would assassinate James Stuart.”

Unless she could blush to order, her expression of annoyance with herself seemed unfeigned. Gazing down, I met her wide-set eyes.

I am not a man to mistake a steady glance for honesty.

“You have not known such a man?”

She shrugged. “No.”

“In Paris, perhaps?”

Her lips pressed together, whitening the skin around her mouth. “Messire...don’t be more stupid than even you can help. Do you *really* think I knew I’d have to leave Paris if I met you, that morning?”

“And yet you found these rooms.”

“What’s *that* got to do with anything!”

I handed her the crumpled note. She began to read it aloud.

Is it not extraordinary, I thought, that I, by instinct, should treat her as the young man she resembles and not the young woman she is?—Woman being as incapable of honesty as she is incapable of chasteness; indeed, in England they use the same word for both.

She is too feather-witted, surely? Too careless to keep up a part? Except—that she has already befooled me once, in her part as a man.

“That’s...” She held out the paper, her face unusually serious.

“You will not speak of this. Either of you.” I waited for both their nods.

I will by all means watch—but she is no agent of Fludd.

It was not her apparent innocence that convinced me, but her sheer lack of realisation that suspicion might touch her. A man grows used to seeing the guilty, in my profession.

She is not given to lies: she allows others to deceive themselves. By her looks, her dress, her manners.... But Dariole herself has no interest in the common deceptions of a spy.

I made my report for Mr Secretary Cecil after the manner of my common reports to M. de Sully; putting a covering letter containing, if not my identity, enough detail to make it obvious the author was familiar with the spy-networks of Europe and England.

Let Mr Secretary Cecil believe, if not in this conspiracy, then that there is such a man as Robert Fludd, and that he is politically dangerous.

Then let Mr Secretary Cecil provide me with answers: how stands France near ten days since her King was killed. Then perhaps I can begin to act!

I passed the documents unsealed to M. Saburo. If the barking dogs upset me that night, I let both Saburo and Mlle Dariole put it down to unreasonable temper on my part.

Unravelling the social maze of who had the entrée to Mr Secretary and to King James, and finding the quondam Nihonese Ambassador his way to court, was more difficult. On the second and third days of our presence in London, I toured Saburo around the taverns and inns of Eastcheap and Cheapside, searching for sign of little Edmonds, a man who was once spy and diplomat to Queen Elizabeth, and who the Duke my master used in a matter of some delicacy. There was no word. I spoke to such other men as I thought might be useful. I could not find Beaumont, either.

“Recalled. Or under guard. Little Edmonds may be dead,” I observed as we came down Dead Man’s Place that night by the fattening moon. “Such things happen.”

I held a lantern up high in my left hand as we walked, so we should not be dazzled. By common unspoken consent we carried our swords drawn, and walked down the middle of the muddy street, just skirting the kennel. If any man should come out of the disreputable houses or the alleys between them, they must cross open ground to come at us.

Despite his refusal to wear ought but linens under his cloak, M. Saburo seemed to find London more congenial now that a day or two had elapsed. He threw back the cloak's hood and swayed as he walked, although to my mind he had drunk little.

"Man!" He pointed with his cattan-blade.

In the lantern light, a thin, small figure stood up from the doorstep, and became a page in black velvet, an armed man in livery standing dutifully behind him.

I sheathed my rapier and took the letter he held out to me, his gaze fixed on Saburo's un-English face the while.

The yellow light showed me the seal of the Earl of Salisbury, Secretary of State, Lord Treasurer—Robert Cecil.

Saburo gazed after the guard and page, who had slipped most professionally off again. I read swiftly.

"Listen, Messire Saburo. You are to see Lord Cecil. Friday morning, on the hour of ten... which is tomorrow."

M. Saburo demonstrated his ear for picking up the language of taverns, and remarked dreamily, "Catso!"

I fretted, that following day, while the sunny and otherwise blameless hours passed. Caution on M. Saburo's behalf kept me from shadowing him to Whitehall-palace and Cecil. Lack of occupation left me nothing to do but listen to the dogs bark in the yard, and put France and M. Sully out of my mind.

How it is that Master Fludd performs these conjuring tricks of his?

How many more men does he have rehearsed? And for what?

Does he guess I have betrayed him?

He'd be a fool not to. Still, a man may be no fool, and yet blind to things outside his desire.

He knew the names of Tanaka Saburo and Mademoiselle de la Roncière.

Dariole herself I saw only as a sleeping lump in the lodging's cot-bed. When, an hour or so later, I took it upon myself to follow her surreptitiously and see if she met with Fludd, I discovered that she spent all her time at the play-houses, the bear-baiting, and the local Schools of Defence.

"All that is missing from the 'young gentleman's education' is the whore-house!" I said aloud, after I returned to the echoing empty room that smelled of dust, and whose floorboards creaked when I paced.

"Roshi-fua-san!" Saburo's deep voice and the door opening came at one and the same time.

He was alone, I saw as I spun about. Perhaps it was not urgency in his voice. *He is the hardest to read, of a man and a foreigner, that I ever met!*

"Well?" I demanded.

“I am to see the Emperor-King. Soon.” What Saburo took out of his sleeve, I saw, was my letter; crumpled and with the seal broken. At least read.

“You.” He spoke as if he thought exactness necessary with his words. “You, Rosh’-fu’-san, tomorrow, are to see Lord Seso-sama.”

The dawn wind off Thames-river blew into my face. I brushed heavy coils of hair back over my shoulders, and straightened my falling bands over the collar of my doublet. The wherry-man rowed us slowly past moored herring-boats, in sun that flashed back in prick-points off the water.

“You are—happy.” Saburo appeared to choose his words carefully. “A man doing what he doesn’t want to do is...happy?”

I shrugged and smiled, and stared further down-river into the light, making out the shape of on-coming barges in the white dawn haze. “I had little enough expectation of it not coming to this. And...this is my trade.”

I had still as much necessary apprehensiveness as suffices to keep a man alert. And, truly, not very much more.

Saburo demanded, “Those. There. Are the barges?”

“Yes.”

London has not changed so much in the six years since I was last here. The cries of street-sellers on the banks; the puff of smoke and moments-later boom of artillery announcing a noble visitor to the Tower; the wherry-man’s monologue in an obscene English that it is my dubious privilege to understand... It would take little to imagine myself going back today, after this meeting, to the sun-bright sandstone of Arundel-house and Andre, Artaud, Maignan: all of us about the Duc’s business.

I had not, this morning, dressed particularly well, being in the now dust-stained English burgundy doublet and trunk-hose, and having badly disguised scuffs to my boots at toe and heel. That, I thought, assorted well with playing the broken-down spy for Doctor Fludd. I had no desire to tell him of my status as Sully’s first agent and best blade if he did not know it. There are times when an appearance of mediocrity aids a man. *Now I must trust that Mr Secretary’s sight is acute enough to pierce a man’s disguise.*

I must take this risk. Whatever else Monsieur Cecil knows, he will know what is happening in Paris better than any other man in England. And I am blind, without that.

The wherry-boat turned and ran parallel to the starboard side of the slowly moving and highly ornamented barge. I stood up, careful of scabbard and spurs. The barge glided up the river under the power of many oars, the bows passing well above the level of my head, and I had several moments in which to glance up at the velvet, silk, gilding, and paper-and-lath ornamentation.

With a skilful whirl and flourish of his two oars, the wherry-man struck across the rear of the barge; Saburo and I jumped together in one leap to the firm wooden railings and vaulted over onto the deck. I tossed a purse back to the boat-man for his skill. *I had just as soon not appear on a royal barge with any part of me dripping wet.*

As I turned about, Saburo dropped forward onto both his knees on the warm planking of the deck.

Rochefort, Memoirs

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It crossed my mind, in the split second before I saw the small dark man approaching us, that I must at some point ask M. Saburo the meaning of such prostrations in his own country. Here, one kneels to royalty, to nobility, to one's master; kneels by way of course in appeal or supplication; kneels in church. But the Nihonese man commonly falls forward on his knees and his hands in submission, and bows his head until it touches the earth. In this case, the planking.

"Milord de Cecil." I contented myself with removing my hat and going down on one knee, which made me still an inch or two taller than he. "Monsieur the Earl of Salisbury, is it not, now?"

M. de Sully and this man had, in our last visit, fallen out with each other with as much open discourtesy as is possible between the King's Minister of one country and the King's Secretary of another. *Like oft hates like*, as the proverb goes.

"Master Tanaka Saburo." Cecil signalled and the Nihonese man sat back up on his heels. The King's Minister ignored me as much as if I were Saburo's servant in truth—which, under the circumstances, one expects.

I rose to my feet, thinking that he might have done with myself as well as Saburo prostrate. Robert Cecil, first minister to King James, stands no higher than my breastbone: an inch or so over five feet tall. But I also guessed he would, in any case, have had too many sycophant English courtiers making fools of themselves, trying to bow themselves lower than King James's "dwarf."

Cecil spoke carefully and clearly to the samurai. "It is pleasant to greet you again, Ambassador. This is the royal barge, rehearsing its part in the investiture of our young prince, Henry, as Prince of Wales, which we have done here time out of mind for the eldest sons of kings. If it please you to see it, after you have writ some more of your far land for King James to read, then I will show it you."

"Hai!" Saburo's grunt was unreadable.

"Do you favour me, and speak more to my secretary about this land of Nihon," Cecil said briskly, a man running across the deck as he lifted his hand. "I thank you, Master Saburo."

The secretary put a sheaf of papers into Cecil's hand before leading off the samurai.

Robert Cecil, this most powerful man in England, had also the affliction of a humped shoulder. He showed a long, sad face, always with a white pallor, and the lined eyes of a spaniel-dog. I had no doubt he could, equal with my master the Duke, sign execution warrants with no change of expression.

"I apologise, Milord Cecil." I made a bow in the English fashion, which I fancy I may manage with some style when called on. "For appearing to you under cover of a false name."

He had a copy of my report, I could read at least so much of his papers at this distance. I took care not to be doing so as he folded them together and glanced up.

"A Spaniard-looking man, two yards high." The English minister spoke as if he quoted—and probably

did; I dare say he had had all Sully's men reported on, six years since.

"'Rochefort' would be your name, Monsieur Herault, I think?"

"I was baptised so, milord." I can be sure of honestly seeming to speak the truth if I say so, even if "de Cossé Brissac" does come after it in the church records.

We spoke together too quietly to be heard over the noise of the workmen, or the wind from the river. The barge rocked as it glided upstream, the coxswain yelling at the oarsmen. No man would be admitted on board without Mr Secretary's office having first examined him, and no other man might approach over the water. An admirable thought for a rendezvous, M. Cecil evidently as familiar with the use of agents as my master the Duke.

He said, "It has been over two weeks since your King's death. Why are you not at the side of Monsieur de Rosny? Did he send you to me?"

I did not correct him to *Sully*. Maximilien de Bethune, Baron Rosny, was made up to Duke of Sully some two or three years before Robert Cecil, second son of Lord Burleigh, was made Earl of Salisbury. *Evidently it still stings*. I allowed nothing to show on my face except respectful attention.

"No, milord, he didn't send me. I was passing through London; this—" I gestured at the report he held—"came to my attention. Forgive my presumption: I remembered your office, Milord Cecil, from when I was here before. I did not expect that you would speak directly with such a man as I."

"I remember you from Rosny's entourage." He regarded me for a moment. His sad-dog eyes might appear vulnerable if you did not know the man. "Also, monsieur, I happen to have heard your name recently."

I expected to find him knowledgeable about rumour. It made me sweat, still. *He may have declared himself for the Queen Regent before now....*

"I flatter myself," Cecil said, "that I know something of M. de Rosny. I never met a Frenchman so scrupulous of ceremony, so honest, so hardworking, so incorruptible—and so aware of his own virtues and status! For all that, he is not one of your Catholics. As a Huguenot, he needed Henry's protection daily. I can no more think he would order your King's death, by any man's hand, than I think he can fly."

"Thank you, monsieur." I bowed again.

"Come." He turned about sharply, and led me down the deck. Workmen lowered their heads as he passed, then resumed hammering, pegging, and painting. Aides came up, and he issued orders in a rapid, crisp under-tone. He seemed smaller in the white sun than I had remembered him indoors, in the jewelled splendour of James's court, where he stood out like the only shadow. Here, Mr Secretary Cecil merely looked hot and uncomfortable in black trunk-hose, doublet, robe, and hat.

His small steps put me in the way of either outdistancing him at every stride, or halting between them. I compromised by appearing to take in, as I walked with slow admiration, the carving and gilding of the barge.

"Sit, Master Rochefort." Cecil indicated a joint-stool, placed below a dais. He stepped up onto the dais, and seated himself in an armed chair covered with red velvet, and backed by curtains that further shielded us from watching eyes. It would be for the King, or the young Prince. Cecil's small shoes did not touch the carpet. But it put him where he might gaze down at me a little, and exposed my face clearly

to the sun.

He did not bid me put my hat on again. I sat, uncovered, the morning light warm on my head.

“What have you to tell me of this ‘Master R.F.’ and his conspiracy, Master Rochefort?”

I shrugged. “By the man’s own words—a deal of star-struck nonsense, milord.”

Cecil’s doll-feet touched together. “It’s a poor salesman declares his wares to be unsaleable.”

Is he amused? I wondered. At court, six years past, I remember M. de Cecil to be sinister, always in black, always with his shoulder bunched up, like a spider in the dim corridors. Men had not liked him before Great Eliza died, in ’03; rumour said they liked him even less now James succeeded, and Cecil became a figure of power. The bright sun, here, made him look small and dusty in his black velvet and great white ruff, and hardly greater in stature than a twelve-year-old boy.

He’s twin to M. Sully in so many things—that being why they quarrel—let’s hope he shares the same appetite for blunt honesty.

“Tell me what’s happening in Paris first, milord,” I said. “If I speak of ‘R.F.’ and you throw me out, then I’m no better off than before I came here.”

His thin, defined brows lifted. I could not tell from his serious face—it was barely a warmth in his gaze—but I thought, *Dear good God, I believe I have amused M. de Cecil.*

“Is that so?” His voice was rich in texture.

Yes: amusement. I sighed in relief, and hoped it was not visible. In another mood he might have had me flung overboard.

Cecil shuffled his papers, holding them to the length of his arm. I judged him ten years or so older than I. And not wearing eyeglasses yet, although it was evident he needed to. “Ask me your questions, Master Rochefort.”

“Has Ravailac confessed who set him on to kill the King?”

Cecil put his papers in his lap, and linked his elegant white fingers. “Master Ravailac is dead. Two days ago. He died silent—as far as words are concerned.”

Two days ago.

Shock chilled me.

Today, in Paris, is the twenty-ninth of May.

Fludd said, “*Upon the twenty-seventh, by your Gregorian calendar.*”

Cecil will barely have known since this morning!

If fear went through me, from head to heels, I hardly knew that I felt it.

A foolish, foolish thing for Fludd to say, if he did not know events would prove him right.

No: a lucky guess! What else, in all honesty, *can* it be?

The sun made me dizzy. I dug the nails of my fingers into the palms of my hands; even through gloves, it

brought me back to the rocking barge. *Cecil must see me shaken*—he showed no sign outwardly. The deck shifted underfoot as the rowers tangled their oars. We backed in a momentary swirl of water. The gothic spires of Whitehall-palace huddled further ahead on our right hand, a great cluster of buildings and courts in which every man may lose his way.

Cecil's gentle voice continued, "...In the Greve; his flesh torn by torturers, and then his body pulled apart by four horses. Our ambassador says that this Ravaillac, being a strong, well-made man, could not at first be pulled apart by the beasts, and the executioner had to hack at his joints, until the horses pulled him into quarters. Master Ravaillac had been questioned these two weeks, but said not a word whose employee he was in the matter."

"Nothing?" Temporarily thrown as I was by Fludd's prediction come true, this got my attention. I barely believed it. "He said *nothing*?"

"Master Ravaillac claimed he was alone in what he did. That he killed King Henry because King Henry would have made war on the Pope." Robert Cecil spoke dryly. He added, "No man reporting to me believes that to be the truth. There are many and enough candidates in Paris—Concini and his wife, the Duke of Epernon, Henriette d'Entragues the Marchioness of Verneuil, Father Cotton of the Jesuits.... It seems Master Ravaillac was not held at all closely before his trial, and men went in to speak to him, and tell him to keep his mouth closed for fear of calumniating the reputations of 'good Catholic men'...."

I might despair over the loss of Ravaillac as a witness when I had time to think, but at that, a warmth of relief flared up in me. If the finger points at Catholic nobility, one fewer reason for Marie de Medici to think herself threatened by M. de Sully! One more reason to leave inactive the traitor in his house.

"And M. de Sully?" For all my care, I could not help but sound anxious. "I have no more news of what has happened to my lord the Duke than I had on the evening of May the fourteenth, when I know him to have straightway taken refuge in the Bastille."

"Not straightway." Cecil nodded his head. "Continue."

Remembering Poissy, I thought, *Sully did more than Lassels knew of?*

I could not prevent myself asking, "*Not* straight to the Bastille?"

"It seems that Rosny rose eventually from his sick-bed, and rode with several hundred horsemen towards the Louvre palace, but he received warnings. I am told he was handed a message. 'If you enter the Louvre you will not escape, any more than him'—meaning your King Henry. Thus, the Bastille, where he spent that night."

My chest tightened. *A message*. God bless the apprentice-boy, or Lassels! Or, if not *my* message, God bless the man who wrote it.

Holding myself in control, I said, "That was near a fortnight ago. He is still there?"

"Rosny was..." Cecil paused deliberately, "...well enough...to ride again by the next day. Men say that he rode to the palace accompanied by three hundred men, and wept with the Queen and embraced King Lewis—hoping to curry new favour, or else ashamed of leaving too fast the previous day, men have said. But there was a Parliament that Saturday, where Queen Mary crowned her son, and herself regent, and made all her enemies embrace and swear peace. Rosny protested himself ill, but she made him attend. He then returned to the Arsenal, where he has been since."

Cecil met and held my gaze: I was careful not to bristle at his tone. He spoke with the dryness that

seemed habitual to him.

“The Regency thrives under his Majesty Lewis’s royal mother. You are correct, M. Rochefort, in that she is no great friend to M. de Rosny. M. de Rosny is still on the Council of Ministers—but increasingly less listened to. The lower rooms of the Palais are an inner court, and other men have access there—de Sillery, Villeroi, Monsieur the President Jeannin. . . .”

“Jeannin!” I couldn’t withhold an exclamation.

“Men love the rising sun,” Cecil said, with no more ceremony than if we had been two men in a tavern together.

He had begun by running his own agents, many years past: I saw suddenly that he might have sought to enjoy such a thing again, with a Frenchman who has no allies to call down on him. Today is Saturday, here is M. Cecil: free of his office, overseeing Prince Henry’s barge, and entertaining himself by receiving the report of foreign spies. . . .

“Men love the rising sun,” Cecil repeated, “and Queen Mary is certainly that. Rumour now says of M. de Rosny that it was the severity of his regulations that prevented men gaining wealth. . . . It seems he has been deserted by many of his clients, from great to small. Jeannin to Arnaud.”

Great to small, indeed. I managed to keep a level expression. Arnaud, one of us, Sully’s men; Maignan’s friend; no more than very minor nobility. *The Duc has treated him more as a son than a servant!*

If I were in Paris again, and free to be the man I was before, Arnaud would find himself called out and killed, robbed of his bright new future with Madame the Queen Regent. But my life is no longer as simple as being my master’s servant.

Cecil’s misshapen shoulders shrugged. “Rosny was King Henry’s right hand. Ruling with his King, as a minister rightly may. Now he is only a hand from which they wish to pry the late King’s money. I think his business at court is likely done with, unless he can catch support soon, or attach himself to Queen Regent Mary and her favourites. I am sorry, Master Rochefort.”

Anyone less suited to play at the smooth court game of favourites than M. de Sully, I couldn’t imagine. By his demure and cynical look, Mr Secretary Cecil was of the same opinion.

“France should be grateful that the transfer of power is likely to be accomplished so smoothly,” the Englishman added. “When a great monarch dies, it is a time of uncertainty and fear. Favourites and noblemen think of rebellion. Even your Chancellor Villeroi is rumoured to have kept King Henri’s seal, that should have been broken on his death, and used it to authenticate some regulations in favour of M. Concini. It takes a steady hand to guide the next monarch to the throne.”

As this Mr Secretary Cecil put James on the throne after Elizabeth Tudor’s death, I thought, steeling myself to remain expressionless.

“Of course,” the tiny man added, “matters are more difficult, and revolt more likely, when there is a regency. And your young King is nine years of age. You and your countrymen must worry greatly, Master Rochefort.”

And I perceive that Mr Secretary Cecil is well aware of the vinegar that is false sympathy. I bit at the inside of my lip. When great men play at unbending, it is always a mistake to reply in the same vein. I did not imagine Mr Secretary taking kindly to my reaction, should I protest his gloating over what he must see as his own success and M. de Sully’s failure.

He was not, of course, interested what effect his words might have on one M. Rochefort, but I formed a convenient channel by which he might send them, second-hand, to M. de Sully.

“Now permit me to ask you questions of my own.” Cecil leaned forward. “Tell me what you witnessed of King Henry’s death.”

I felt as if the wind had been knocked from me, even though I would have wagered much on being asked this very question. *He will have had eyewitness reports about me, and gossip.* His small black eyes looked at me from among wrinkles, all the skin an unhealthy colour, but his gaze very shrewd.

If a man speaks the truth, there is that in his voice which another, much-experienced man, may sometimes hear. *A judicious mixture of the truth with an absence of some facts is all I may risk here.* I dare not substitute a lie for an omission. Milord Cecil has been in his post for far too long for that.

“True, I was present, milord. It’s my business to watch such men, as you will be aware.” I met his eye steadily. “François Ravailac is—was—a man from Angoulême, who had been a school-teacher and a monk, and was let go from the monastery in which he tried to take orders, because he suffered from visions.”

“Go on.”

“On that day...the King’s coach was delayed in the rue de la Ferronnerie. My attention was taken briefly when two men I knew of the royal guard intercepted me. You must know the rest, milord.”

He said nothing, only making a neat gesture that I should continue.

“I saw Ravailac standing on the wheel of the King’s coach. I saw the knife go into Henri’s body.” Whatever I could not control in my tone would, I thought, be put down to the presumed horror of the regicide. I looked up, suddenly, as if I had been lost in my thoughts, but surprised no expression on Cecil’s lugubrious features.

The Englishman nodded. “They say the Duke of Epernon was behind Ravailac, and gave him a sign to make the second blow, the first being slight.”

“I saw no such sign.”

Mr Secretary Cecil seemed thoughtful. “You did not tell me why you’re not in France. Why Rosny sent you to England. Why he has not recalled you.”

“M. de Sully—” I tried to make it sound more an affirmation than a correction. “—did not send me here. It’s as you suspect, milord. *You* may believe in his innocence, but not all men do. I myself am suspected of involvement in the assassination. I cannot endanger my lord the Duc—once a man is put to the question, he’ll confess any words that are put into his mouth, and I don’t doubt the assassins of King Henri wish his first minister dead too!”

“But you, Master Rochefort, surely, you must know who the assassins are—the associates of Master Ravailac? You had been following him, you said.”

“He had his circle of friends in Angoulême, but they are nothing, milord.” I shrugged. “I interviewed the monks; they found no worse in him but a little religious madness. Ravailac had made one attempt beforehand on the King’s life, last December. He hung about the gates of the palace with a knife, waiting for the King’s coach, but the guards easily drove him off. Being a harmless madman, I had thought him the least likely of all the plots against King Henri to succeed.”

That, I could speak with absolute conviction.

The difficulty was in keeping both bitterness and irony out of my voice.

“Milord, it has been more than fourteen days since the King was murdered. I am cut off from Paris. I neither know what has happened since, nor whether I will endanger M. de Sully if I return now.”

Cecil looked down at the papers on his lap. The wind ruffled their edges. Further down the barge, I glimpsed Saburo seated back on his knees in some painful-looking fashion, speaking to a secretary who scribbled away at the writing-desk resting on his lap. The sound of hammers suddenly pierced the day: silver stabs of sound echoing across the water, bouncing distantly back from the waterside houses. Evidently this test-voyage of the royal barge necessitated on-board repairs.

The English minister lifted his hand without looking. Almost immediately, a foreman in a leather apron hustled his men away to a different part of the barge.

“Clearly you are a witness,” Cecil said mildly. “Even if Master Ravailac is no longer alive to corroborate what you say. Now. If I were to ship Monsieur Herault back to France under armed guard?”

“That was always the danger of seeing you, milord.”

“You have taken no precautions?”

I allowed my asperity to colour my tone. “What precautions may a man take against milord Cecil, who may do as he pleases in this kingdom?”

Quickly, he returned, “I am a tyrant, you would say?”

That I had him interested in the exchange argued well. I now contrived to look something at a loss, which is an advantage for any tall man when dealing with a small man, to make the latter think he has the advantage.

“Milord Secretary, it would not be the act of a tyrant, but of a judge, if you suppose me a criminal. I am not, but I have nothing except my word for proof.”

The sun, uncomfortably bright in my face as it rose higher, made me narrow my eyes.

“Here in London, my name was bound to come to Mr Secretary’s attention. Milord, you will think that perhaps Madame the Queen and the Parliament have a right to my presence; you would have me returned to France without an interview. Therefore, until I can safely return home, I appeal to you in this way, in the hope that I may have done such a service for you as I have done for M. de Sully prior to this.”

I remember keen-witted Mr Secretary Cecil as politically astute for an Englishman, and liable loyally to follow his King’s policy where France is concerned. But since France and Spain dance about in English policy, and no man may say who is the superior from one week to the next, I had thought I might offer the man, rather than the politician, a sweetmeat.

“The services of M. de Rosny’s agent,” he said.

Your rival’s agent. I kept my expression severe. Who must now come to you, hat in hand, for your generosity.... Is Cecil-the-man immune to this? He was by no means immune to such rivalry six years ago.

This being the last throw upon which I had put my all, calculating it through sleepless hours after M. Saburo's message, I held myself in an attitude which I hoped showed only attention and not desperation.

The first minister's gaze moved back to where Saburo sat on the deck with one of the secretaries, the secretary's pen flying across paper and dipping rapidly in his inkwell to keep up with the Nihonese man's speech. I saw Saburo pause and sniff at a delicate glass goblet. Monsieur the Ambassador has been offered refreshment, where Monsieur the Spy has not.

Cecil said, "The Ambassador speaks nothing of you before you fought bandits on a beach. May one assume your departure from France was contested? And may one also assume, monsieur, that your removal from France of the de facto Easterner Ambassador, and the young man with you, had more to do with the removal of witnesses than with generosity?"

Cecil will have had men observing where Saburo returns to sleep. They have not yet identified the Hic Mulier for what she is. I did not allow myself even a thought of relief, it being my conviction that Cecil would be aware of it, and read other causes into it.

"Both suppositions are true, milord," I said frankly. "Neither the young man nor Saburo will die easy, both being able with the sword. And it seemed ungrateful to abandon them to interrogation, such as they would have found in my home country when it was known they had seen me leave."

The term *ungrateful* got me a swift glance from his dark eyes. I calculated it time to season half-truth with full truth.

"A man may be blamed for things he has not done," I said quietly. "That is all I can say to you, milord. And you should in no wise associate M. Saburo or M. Dariole with me in respect of that. M. Saburo is the last remaining man alive from his ship-wreck. And M. Dariole is...merely one of the sons of sword and hazard, with whom your lordship will be familiar from the English court, I dare say."

In the silence, I heard the creak of oars, the lap of water against the sides of the barge, and the constant background chatter from workmen that M. de Sully would never have countenanced in his own presence.

"Tell me more of this 'R.F.,' if you please, Master Rochefort." From Cecil's mouth, it was a statement and not a request. "How does he differ from fools such as Fawkes and Parsons?"

The thought that M. de Sully might yet live and be free put such a relief through me, short-lived though it could prove to be, that I smiled at the English Secretary.

"You will desire me to complete the names that are missing from my report, milord," I said. "Although, I would assume that you know already of many conspiracies in the court, and possibly this physician, who appears in my report as 'R.F.,' is already not strange to you."

He gave me no reaction; I had not expected one. I gathered my thoughts for a moment.

"I have made as many enquiries as I might, these last two days. 'R.F.' is one Robert Fludd, a physician, with a house two streets from your St Paul's Cathedral; apparently now respectable. Gossip says there was in the past some unknown scandal, and he was not admitted to the Royal College of Physicians until last year, although he had been practising as a doctor and an astrologer before."

I looked up at the English minister. "Gossip does not say he owns a second house, in Southwark, but he does. Broadly, this Fludd is an astrologer, he likes not the government of England at present, he would have another king, and so desires to kill James Stuart. Of the conspirators who met him there, the initials

‘H1,’ ‘H2,’ and ‘W’ refer to the mathematicians, M. Hariot, M. Hues, and M. Warner. I have observed them at the Tower: all often speak to, and often visit, ‘E.N.’—Henry Percy Earl of Northumberland, the supposed source of this conspiracy. They are his mathematicians, and are everywhere accompanied by two...gentlemen...known to be of the Earl’s household in the Tower, whose names I have only as Luke and John.”

“Very devout,” Cecil observed dryly.

Sunlight rippled off the river water. A breeze brought coolness.

“There are two initials yet in my report: ‘P’ and ‘H.’ Monsieur the Earl of Northumberland might cause a great scandal,” I said, “if he repeats what this Fludd says—that your King’s son, Prince Henry Stuart, is deep in the plot to kill his father.”

Without a pause, Cecil said, “I doubt the Prince has even heard of this Robert Fludd.”

Ah. You’ve heard something: not as much as you could wish. Good . Now we know where we are.

“I doubt that also, milord.” A slight inclination of Cecil’s head seemed encouraging. I continued with what forty-eight hours of diligent investigation had found me. “But...it *does* seem that Monsieur the Prince visits the Tower often to speak with M. de Raleigh. Anyone who wished to throw mud, and suggest the Prince also sees Monsieur the Earl of Northumberland there, will find it easy to make that mud stick. A word from one of your Prince’s trusted counsellors—to avoid the Tower until you’ve put an end to this conspiracy—will avoid even the possibility of scandal.”

His head, that seemed over-large for his body, moved in slow nods. He shot a sudden glance at me, that jolted me where I sat.

“And the ‘star-struck’ part, Master Rochefort? What is that?”

Silence. Nothing but the lap of oars in the river, and the smell of fresh paint. I had a momentary different scent in my nostrils: the memory of camomile grass.

“Milord, this Fludd has a way of building from an unwise word, a look, and a lucky guess, until a man truly believes that his mind and future are discovered and read. Fludd is an observer of men; no more. Still...”

I looked up at Robert Cecil.

“Still, he had men stationed everywhere to turn me back from leaving London and its suburbs.”

Cecil nodded slowly. “For what reason?”

This I had not written down, nor had I intended to, now being the only moment for such honesty, where the wind could blow my words away.

“As Parsons brought in the soldier Guido Fawkes.” I shrugged. “Fludd believes rumour—that I killed Henri of France. He’s astrologically convinced I am destined to kill James of England and Scotland. I need not add that I do not share the conviction!”

Cecil frowned. “Crackpot conspiracies are two for four-pence in any man’s market. This conspiracy is...lurid, Master Rochefort, if you will pardon me for saying so.”

I bowed my head silently. He was not asking pardon, I was not granting it. I was acquiescing to his right

to say any damned thing he liked to me.

Diffidently, I added, "Most men consult astrologers. With a lucky guess, and sufficient observation, a superstitious man would believe Fludd in everything. I am meant to believe that he foresees all, and that therefore I *am* to kill King James."

"Has he cast the King's chart, do you know?"

"Not that he showed me, and I doubt without burning it if he did."

The English Secretary of State nodded. That Fludd should avoid easy arrest and automatic sentence of death for casting the King's nativity evidently surprised neither of us.

"Master Rochefort, if you were not Rosny's agent, then I would dismiss you out of hand. Clearly this Fludd is just another such rogue as Simon Forman, and good for nothing but selling love charms."

"Yes, milord. However," I added, "Fludd has men enough at his command to prevent me leaving London. That will be no small number of conspirators!"

Perhaps he heard a slight, unintended emphasis on *me*. His gaze went to the unhealed scratches and bruises on my face. He looked quizzical.

I put doubt out of my mind. "I was stopped at the river, before the heath, and at Whitehall itself. They could not be sure where I would go. How else could they intercept me but by numbers? And if there are *that* many men in this star-struck conspiracy—scores, perhaps hundreds—then, I would be concerned about it."

Mr Secretary Cecil looked mild. "My men would have found signs of such a network in London, were it so extensive. And...there is nothing of the magnitude you describe."

Stubbornly, and rather more rudely than I should, I said, "Then your men must have missed them!"

By his expression, I saw my chance of more detailed information from Paris disappearing. Hastily, I added, "Robert Fludd may be star-struck, but he's a dangerous man. I tell you, milord, he has men enough spying for him to seem infallible."

"If this were very new...but, no." Cecil's small brows moved closer together. "I say, it is this man Fludd's folly. If there were an organisation capable of that in London, even in the suburbs, it could not operate without my knowledge." He snorted softly. "Unless you will have him be a genuine prophet, Master Rochefort!"

I found myself touching my doublet sleeve over the healing wound. "With me gone, he will have nothing to observe. Your King is safe. I may leave Fludd under your hand, milord."

The English minister raised his head, gazing out at the walls of Westminster as the oarsmen sweated past it. He spoke, apparently absently.

"You must devise a way of returning to Master Fludd without arousing his suspicions."

"*Returning—*"

Cecil, despite his tired eyes, brightened as he turned his head to look at me. "The right way to catch Northumberland, if he has been such a fool, is to let this conspiracy run on almost to the sticking-point. Then we may see my lord the Earl compromise himself."

I scowled, despite myself. “Milord—”

“I have no intention of endangering the life of his Majesty. Master Saburo can bring letters from you when he visits court, and if I do not hear, I will haul up my net with only these sprats in it.”

I stuttered. “But, milord!”

“You offered me your services, Master Rochefort, did you not?”

Short of jumping overboard and seeing how far I might swim—which I briefly considered—there was no way out of hearing Mr Secretary Cecil’s words. Knowing it would be useless, I protested, “But I must return to Paris!”

Cecil smiled overtly. Through my shock, I saw why he rarely permitted it to himself; it made his long face into that of a clown.

“You, Master Rochefort, will oblige me by keeping your place in this conspiracy, and by going along with Fludd’s plans, and reporting to me whenever you have news. As Sully’s man, I am assured of your skill in this. I don’t doubt that you have practise enough at acting the double agent....”

Cecil’s long face became solemn again.

“I appreciate the position you find yourself in—that you have no certain way to receive information from the French court. All the while you work for me, I see no real difficulty in authorising one of my secretaries to let you see a part of the diplomatic despatches that come to me from Paris.”

Stunned, I stared up at him, and could only think, *Bait and hook!*

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I stuttered out the first objection that came to mind, thus giving myself time to think.

“I may have been followed here. If I’ve been seen where you are, milord, Fludd will suppose I’ve betrayed him!”

Cecil waved his hand impatiently. “You will think up some convenient lie to tell him, Monsieur Rochefort, will you not? Because that is what you do.”

Whatever credit I might have with Mr Secretary would evaporate with insistence on a rival network of agents and spies to his own, so much was evident to me. For an Englishman, he was (as M. de Sully had thought) very nearly as touchy in his pride as a Frenchman.

A convenient lie for Fludd? I wish I had one! The barge creaked under my boots. Thousands of pounds’ worth of silk bunting and gilding went for nothing, for all the effect Prince Henry’s ceremonial barge had on me.

“We must be of use to one another, ‘Monsieur Herault,’” Cecil said, “if I am to trust you with information from France.”

I took a breath. “Milord, you are aware of the rumours: that I know who is behind M. Ravailac’s actions. I have good reason to wish my presence in London unknown, or I will probably be killed.”

“That is the hazard of your occupation.” Cecil nodded sombrely. “While you lend me your assistance, I will of course lend Monsieur de Rosny’s man my protection.”

I bowed. *He desires to heap coals of fire on M. de Sully’s head.* Well, I shall benefit a little, perhaps. But if he has no belief in Fludd’s agents, neither will his men....

As calmly as if he spoke to one of his English informers, Robert Cecil added, “I appreciate your worth greatly in bringing me this conspiracy of Doctor Fludd. As a conspiracy, it may be the brain-fever of one man. It may not. You shall be engaged in this business of mine, Master Rochefort, and discover all.”

Cecil picked up his papers and put one hand on the chair’s arm, slipping down to stand on the expensive carpet. Automatically, I rose and bowed in response to his dismissal.

“If Master Saburo is not available,” he added, as he turned away, “you may make use of that young man lodging with you, as a page to carry word between us. I will recognise his face.”

I repressed a desire to beat my fists against my head.

Returning to Southwark, I left M. Saburo still being interviewed—there would be a vast amount of talk before they let him close to King James Stuart, although the decision to do so was taken. Even M. de Sully’s short ambassadorial trip in ’03 took us several months, and the Nihonese captain of foot-soldiers was no established French king’s counsellor.

Is this such a bad bargain? I wondered, as my small boat left the barge, passed Whitehall-palace, and eventually docked at Bankside.

Merely to keep watch on a local conspiracy, in return for the best quality information out of Paris that a foreigner can give. Except—*except!*

Except that M. de Cecil thinks he can be confident, now, of giving me orders whenever he pleases! And how does *that* sit with “Queen Regent” Marie de Medici, and my plans?

I stopped, in the middle of a Southwark street. Men stepped around me without complaint. A seller of band-strings stumbled, banged her tray against my elbow, and gave me a filthy look, and then smiled with gaps between her teeth as I offered her coin. I might have had more from the woman than a handful of ties for ruffs and falling bands, I guessed, but I walked swiftly on through the drying mud of the street.

Not a bad bargain, except that I must now provide Doctor Robert Fludd with a supposed method of murdering his King!

Not a bad bargain, except that Doctor Robert Fludd is...well-in-formed.

If Fludd is a foreteller of the future—then he *knows* that I have betrayed his conspiracy. Knew that I would when he met me. In which case, why tell me at all!

Frustration made me clench my fists as I walked. Other than return to Dead Man’s Place and sketch futile—if appropriate to the location—plans for James’s assassination, what else should I do?

Add to which, I am in England, not Paris . And my possible entertainments are uncultured whores,

uncultured theatre, or watching animals tear each other to pieces. Dear God, but Zaton's would fail here for lack of gentlemen to patronise it!

It was not long before noon. The thought of Zaton's put a number of things into my mind. A meal. The comrades I had left there, and the possibility of my ever rejoining them. A game of hazard, to multiply the contents of my purse, and where I might find one in Southwark that was not played with false dice and marked cards. And, by a natural progression into which I did not enquire too closely, my mind turned to Mlle Dariole.

Whom I have not seen these four hours, and therefore take to be causing chaos somewhere....

Saburo is a responsible man, for a foreigner; I am experienced in my profession. It is only she—only she, now, who knows so little of Henri's murder, and yet can spoil all with a drunken word, or a boast, like the boy she seems to be!

I could not tell why being possessed of a vast amount of frustration and foul temper should lead to my thinking immediately of the boy-girl. Perhaps her womanhood, coupled with her defeats of me, still rankled. For all I might suggest that my instincts had suspicioned her to be female, and held back... I had not been conscious of that at the time.

It is as possible, I admitted to myself, that I did not know at all.

The distant ends of deserted alleys took my attention as I walked on, and empty shacks and sheds behind stables and brothels, until I realised that whatever confrontation I envisaged between Dariole and myself, I envisaged happening in isolation, if not precisely in private.

As at Ivry's stables.

That made me curse, and spit into the kennel, and stride on with left hand bearing down on the hilt of my rapier, not much concerned if the up-thrust scabbard behind should rake some whore-hunting citizen's belly. The violence that I felt thudding through me would welcome a pass with swords.

I turned down one road that took me past several establishments where Masters of Defence taught their skills. I did not think to meet a student skilled enough to give me a bout sufficient to take away ill-temper—any good teacher would be established in London and not the suburbs. Still, I thought, it is choose this, or picking fights in taverns....

I will have no man's unnecessary blood on my hands.

I went upstairs in several schools, to watch students at practise. I might have fought bouts with my rapier, or with other lengths of sword, or with broadsword, buckler, or glaive. All of it seemed lacking, to my jaundiced eye, and I moved on from one establishment to another. It was not until I mounted the oak steps in a narrow house, and entered a long *salle d'armes*, that I heard an instantly familiar voice among the talk—and knew, equally instantly, what I had felt lacking.

“Oh, the good God, no! Primo, not secondo! I could hit your elbow from here. *And* your belly! Suck it in!”

The familiar raw adolescent-boy's tone.

A dozen or so men sitting and standing in the long room were dressed both badly and flamboyantly, in rich men's cast-off clothing—actors, I realised. *From one of the play-houses Mlle Dariole has taken to frequenting.* And the middling-tall figure with her shoulder presented to a man in a green doublet, the pair of them with foils between them, was Dariole herself.

Steel met steel. I folded my arms and leaned up against the pillar of the gallery, just inside the doorway, and watched Dariole as she both named and touched with her point every button she chose on the actor's lurid doublet, despite all his efforts to the contrary.

"Yes, you can *kill* him," a stringy tall fellow with black hair and a pocked face called over. "Can you teach him the trick so that the audience in the lord's gallery can view it?"

"The pit audience will like it better!" Dariole's accent was little better than when she had made a fool of herself outside her cousin's house. Her new player friends did not appear to notice. Players and whores and soldiers; all have greater toleration than men of the middling sort who live in rich houses in the city.

The skinny, pock-marked man protested, "The groundlings don't throw gold angels down when they like a duel!"

She grinned at him. "I thought you were a poet. When did you care about who pays how much?"

In a grim tone, the man remarked, "Since I *became* a poet!"

The arms-master, a grizzled Englishman with grey hair shaved close to his skull, came to take me aside for the few necessary questions I would have expected in a Parisian *salle d'armes*, while equipping me with a rebated blade some yard and a quarter in length. I flexed my wrist, feeling the point dip.

"You rebate so?" I nodded at the small cloth bag of sand tied tightly over the blade's point. "Only the point? No edge-play?"

The English master grunted something under his breath, and swapped me the weapon for one a finger's length shorter, also bound with sand-filled cloth at the tip, but with the edges filed down to bluntness. As might be expected, the balance was foul. Such are the penalties of sword-play.

Dariole came treading back across the floor, in the middle of a loud and prolonged diatribe from the assembled men. There was no moment for thought before I saw her make me out in the shadow at this end of the room. Her eyes suddenly brightened.

"Dariole."

I left off the honorific so as not to become mixed in speech between *monsieur* and *mademoiselle*. Evidently, from her glare, she didn't see it that way.

"Messire! Just the man for me to practise on. *Almost* a challenge...."

She had got herself a new doublet of bleached linen—*with my money!* I reflected—that was a fraction large for her, and the cream-white of the cloth stood out against the charcoal-coloured wool of her Venetian breeches. The folds of her small ruff pressed up under her chin, and she had changed her high crowned hat for a velvet bonnet, flat as a pie, with a pheasant's feather sticking behind, and the curls and tufts of her hair framed against the velvet.

She could have been twin to Fludd's page that turned me back at Whitehall-palace. Her expression was that of the young man at Zaton's.

"You are entirely extraneous," I said, finishing removing my boots, as the custom is, and moving out onto the floor of the salon. "Not to say, superfluous. Has it never occurred to you, puppy, that your cousin is not the only man capable of throwing you into the kennel where you belong?"

There was laughter at that. Dariole flushed. With more than shame, I thought. *As if I have betrayed*

something a comrade would not tell.

The pock-marked man and some of the actors broke off their stage-duels to watch. I guessed her to have made the rapid friendships of young manhood with them. She glanced back over her shoulder. “Watch me teach *him* something!”

We began with no more introduction than that. The floor cleared. I ventured three, four, sudden and violent attacks—and in each case shortened my arm, by bending of the elbow, but subtly enough that she would not see. The muscle in my wounded arm twinged; settled. Briefly, I thought, This—no, *this* will not be like fighting M. Fludd....

Dariole stepped forward, her feet, shod only in hose, sure-footed on the oak floorboards. She thrust.

I evaded and immediately lunged.

The holding-back of my arm had fooled her, body and mind; she stood inside my reach by a hand-span. I shot my point under her arm, and into the gap between doublet-body and sleeve, where her shirt showed linen-white.

The rebated point thumped home.

I hit her with force enough to bend the blade into a bow, pushing her back. She staggered two full paces. The hit would bruise, that was certain; would leave a black and purple mark on the side of her ribs—if I knew my mark, between the fourth and fifth rib: the opening through to the heart.

“*Sonbitch!*” She gasped, either with pain or surprise, or both; her point came back up into guard; and she glared at me, her cheeks turning pink at the applause from the rest of the salon.

“Careless—” I almost added, *mademoiselle*, which was careless of me. She looked the very picture of a young man outraged. Too young for a beard; not too young to defend his honour.

“Putain!” Her accent thickened, and she slipped back into her native language. “You arse-licking, low-life son-of-a-whore!”

It pleased me to have her insult me through temper, and without irony; it argues loss of control. *And leads to my long-deserved victory.*

I smiled. “You are dead, I believe.”

“Go fuck your mother!”

“Alas.” I gazed down at her with all the annoying complacency I could assume. “I have not the resources. That would require necromancy, at the very least. Although, were I you, I *would* be hoping there was a way to raise the dead....”

She had spoken in French, I in English, so it was I who gained the applause of the collection of badly dressed pupils. A grudge-match is always liable to draw an audience.

And they are helping me by their presence, I thought. It is certainly time that M. Dariole’s pride was publicly humbled. Albeit, regrettably, I cannot kill her in this bout. But I can cause pain. I can punish her.

A surge of energy went through me. I saluted briefly, gave the young “man” my shoulder, and immediately thrust in again to put her on the defensive. Each attack came close enough to make the heart jolt. Silence surrounded us: no noise but for the thud of hose-clad feet on the floor, and the dull clack of

rebated steel. The sun striped the planks down towards the window, and I drove her thus far, until a white blaze of light covered her face. I made a thrust that caught her weapon, bound it with mine; made to have it out of her hand by wrenching, full strength—

She dropped the blade in avoiding me.

I thrust again, determined to hit her while she was defenceless—and she caught her falling sword in her left hand, the steel guard-rings reversed over her fingers, and parried me as no man should be able to do. *Insult added to injury: with a sword that is badly balanced and not her own!*

She pushed the tip of her rebated blade up past my arm and into my chin, banging my lower jaw into my upper jaw so hard that my teeth clicked.

The pain was surprisingly disorienting for such a stroke. *I have bit my tongue*, I realised. A bead of light slid in my vision; I realised it to be her blade driving for my face.

By instinct, I evaded, but clumsily. I heard a man laugh.

“Very well!” I spat blood on the floor, caught up a blunt dagger from one of the stands against the wall, and, with better timing than she, took her blade out of my way with the drop-hilt of the smaller weapon. “This is how I, Rochefort, fight—”

I slammed a cut in with my rapier that dipped past her defence and rose, landing blunt edge first, full across her chest.

Her face twisted in pain and she squealed heartily, stumbling back a pace. I could not help but smile. *I, alone, of all men here, know why.*

I stepped forward and lifted my dagger up, taking her sword out of that uneasy left-hand grip. I flung the weapon skittering noisily across the floor. At the same moment I reversed my rapier and hit her a blow in the belly with the pommel, and with satisfaction saw her stagger back and come up hard against the wall with her shoulders, wheezing for breath.

Any young man, or any experienced man, would admit himself defeated. Dariole came off the wall and into a fighting stance again, before I could thrust home; facing me with only her dagger.

“Dagger against rapier and dagger?” I smiled, letting her have her moment to breathe—because it would make the next moment the sweeter. “You have a high opinion of your skills, *boy.*”

A grin broke out on her features. “Yes. And *my* opinion’s justified!”

She threw the dagger into my face.

I had not expected it, not from her. It was no hardship to bring my blade up and smash the weapon down and away—but she ran past me in that heart-beat of time, scooping up her own rapier from where it lay against the wall under the window, and came instantly back into the attack.

I stepped back, of necessity, as I parried—

And she neatly caught up her dagger.

“Now!” She grinned, tossing back her short hair, breathing hard, her face rosy. I made the attempt to strike her while she spoke. She moved backwards, her feet gliding flawlessly across the planks, parrying me with rapier and then dagger, and with no break in her words. “Messire, I’m going to stripe your arse

for you!”

I forgot that these were rebated weapons, although my hand kept the bad balance corrected; I forgot we inhabited an English School of Defence, and that what I did was the worst of manners in any *salle d’armes*.

I began to fight as if to kill.

Breathing hard, I drove her about the floor, from the window to the stair-end of the long room and back again. Students dived out of the way, putting themselves behind the structural oak beams that shut off the combat area, cheering.

Cheering Dariole, the under-dog.

The unfairness of that—*again!*—drove me to heights of skill: we thrust, parried, with sword and dagger together and in the same heartbeat, dodged, slashed, thrust, hacked, ducked. She slid out from my body-charge. *Yes, you may well avoid a grapple, girl—*

She lost the merest fraction of her balance and mis-stepped.

I brought my rapier’s blunt edge down hard enough on her forearm that she let go of her dagger. Had it been a sharp edge, I would, with that impact, have severed the arm. I grinned wolfishly at the marks I must be leaving on her.

“Go suck your cock!” she exclaimed, flexing her empty fingers.

I could do nothing but laugh as I pressed my attack. *I have her now*. The silvered blades flickered in the sun from the salon’s end. Her breast rose and fell heavily. I have the stamina, which a young man—or woman—does not.

Will I drive her to surrender? Better, will I drive “him” to confess herself a woman, and seek mercy on that account? That would be a greater humiliation than dying at my hand. Though here, she cannot die.

I heard my own thoughts. *Cannot die*.

My parry came in late. Her rebated point glanced off my shoulder.

I did not riposte.

The thought completed itself in my head. *Here, I cannot kill her—and that is why I am here*.

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It felt as if I took a bad fall from a horse and winded myself. I took her blade with mine, circled it, and thrust straight through to hit her on the tenth button of her doublet. She swore, flushed, and—*That is all*. A wound to her pride, and nothing else.

If we carried unbated swords, I would in that instant have killed her. We are both dead, several

times over.

The full realisation came as shock enough that I lost the rhythm of my step, stumbling back in a flurry of defensive blows. I could do nothing but be stunned by the sudden realisation. *If I did have the unbated weapons to kill her—*

I could not bear to fight.

Her eyes gleamed; her teeth showed in a wide grin. She slashed a cut towards my head—pressing me without mercy or relief. I ducked away. Shock thrummed through my body and my mind.

I have seen many dead men in my time, and made more of them than I care to think of; to imagine of Mlle Dariole bleeding between her ribs and teeth should not send a wave of nausea through me.

I wish her dead. I wish her dead at my hand, and humbled in the way to which there is no answer!

No. No, it is a lie. I do not wish her dead. I want her humiliated, and for her to wish *herself* dead, yes. But not stark, cold; not truly dead.

If this were a brawl in the street with live blades—

If this were a brawl in the street, I would have no option but to end the fight, throw down my weapons, and throw myself on her mercy.

At that sudden, vivid mental image, I felt myself stiffen in my under-linen.

I halted, staggering, mid-way down the long room.

Her backward pace took her away from me and into the borders of the sun, where dust swirled in the beams of light. Her face stayed hidden in shadow, but the white light made a perfect outline of her stance, rapier held extended towards me, dagger loose and deceptively casual in her other hand, every line and curve of her body a poised thing made all of energy. Her chest rose and fell under her doublet with her breathing from the exertion.

Coldly, in myself, I pursued the matter. *As if the first thought were not bad enough—think further:*

If *she* cannot be harmed—why, then, neither can you, Rochefort.

Rochefort the fool! Rochefort the clown!

She can give you the defeat you are seeking.

And only that defeat.

If, appallingly, I cannot countenance the thought of killing her, rebated swords in a *salle d'armes* allow me to duel with her. But, even more truly, a rebated duel allows me, without harm to my body, to lose to her. To be most shamefully disgraced. As I was at Paris. At Ivry...

My head spun with a dizziness I did not find unfamiliar. I had reason to be glad of my English trunk-hose, there being so much volume of material that a man might be fairly upright without any other man noticing.

The onlookers would wonder at my stillness, in a moment, I knew. *As will she.*

“Messire.” Although she breathed hard, her point did not lower, the small tied bag of sand on a level with my chest. The sun gave me her profile as she moved, slightly. I saw that she smiled.

And stopped.

Every muscle still, no more expression on her face than there is on a man's when he first takes a wound, only a similar kind of blank surprise. I watched it fade. Slowly, she began to smile again.

“Not in the mood for running around, messire?”

She knows what hampers me.

I could not have said how I knew—how I deduced with utter certainty, from her eye, that she knew what bodily indisposition I laboured under.

“No lunge, messire?” A tone of complete innocence. “No overwhelming me with the sheer force of your charge?”

“I stand here, do what you can!” I growled, and felt heat travel up my face. *Dear God, let them only assume I am short of breath!*

Dariole paced forward, the light sliding down the central ridge of her blade. She was a thing of beauty as much as the weapon. I shifted my feet awkwardly, turning my back to the watching students of the School, to be the more certain that no man might see my indisposition. She came up within lunge of me, but not so close that I might put my blade to her without violent movement.

And she knows I cannot, safely. The bitch—

Quietly enough to keep it between the two of us alone, Dariole said, “I can do more than touch doublet-buttons, messire. I can show you up, to these Englishmen. Think you can stop me?”

And here I am brought to the point where I would beg.

I looked for a long moment into her face.

And she knows it.

I wondered, coldly, how long it had been apparent to her—this thing I had not known myself. Or not allowed myself to know.

Inside my breeches, I grew stiffer still.

“There are some things a man may not bear,” I said levelly, and she smiled as if I had been pitiful.

The breath came harsh in my lungs. I felt my body swell, and arousal and shame both bring my heart-beat to a high rate. *I am begging her, I realised. And I both desire and loathe it.*

Her eyes half-shut for a moment. She looked up with a new expression. “You’ll do what I say, won’t you? I’ve got you right *here*, messire.”

Since Ivry, I have dreamed of her.

More telling, I have had those dreams that lie only on the borders of sleep, that are somewhat under our own control. And here is one of them to the life. I am beaten and must beg. And, if the worst happens, I will spill seed, as I do in dreams now, and have not since I was a boy.

“Yes.” I could barely speak, both wanting to, and desperately needing not to, say such things out loud. “Yes.”

She glanced at the men calling out, now, demanding what was the matter, and why no more of the duel? Her smile widened. The last few days laid themselves out in my mind: she has been humiliated by her cousin; how must she have felt when I spoke in public of that?

She fainted—in case I should still disarm her by force. The point of her bated rapier came to rest against the underside of my chin. It was a true deception, but I think she might merely have put it there; I was in no state to fight. I stood, chest heaving, watching her face.

She met my gaze, and moved the bated point into the cloth at my neck.

“Drop the sword and dagger,” she said quietly.

You cannot hurt me!

The pressure of the covered point at my throat was in no way like a live weapon. I could bat it out of her hand with no more cost than bruises.

Without a word, I loosed my grip on both hilts and threw the sword and dagger aside.

The clatter of metal on wood made every man startle.

Light flashed on the floor, in the corner of my vision. The drop-handled dagger lay with its blade in the dust. I could see only the hilts of the sword, further off in shadow.

In Zaton’s she could have, *would* have, cut my throat—and that hurt less.

Quietly enough that no man should hear but us two, I said, as I should have said then: “Mademoiselle, you have the victory. I am done.”

“Down.” Her eyes all but glowed. “Beg.”

“Mademoiselle—”

“*Beg.*” She held my gaze. “Get down on your knees, Rochefort. Beg my pardon!”

She spoke it loud enough to be heard. The keen audience froze; their bets and jeers died down. Even with my back to most, I felt how each man’s face turned to me. Heat flooded both my face and my belly—at that latter, I shuddered.

And this, clearly, is why I sought a private place.

What a man will not let himself know!

I felt a pulling sensation in the front of my breeches. My prick, taut as it was, felt both hot and wet, as if it wept the dampness before the act into my linen. Her gaze dropped.

She can see, I realised. And realised, too, *she knows enough of what lies between us to look.*

“Dariole.” I do not know what else I would have said, and my voice was too harsh and dry for any plea to be understood by her.

Chatter rose up behind us. Off to one side, the *maître* folded his arms with a long-suffering expression. Whether it was the presence of the actors, or this room sunlit so like a theatre stage, I do not know; it seemed to me that this was no more than a waking dream. *I may do as I like.*

The thought sent shuddering hot shivers down my back and belly, concentrating in my groin.

“*Well?*” Exertion still sounded in her voice. Her chest rose and fell, her face pink and damp. She sheathed her dagger without looking, and with that hand unbuttoned the bottom six or seven buttons of her doublet, disclosing a creased strip of linen shirt. Short hair clung in sweat-dampened curls to her forehead. The sleek gathered wool of her Venetian hose rounded over her hips.

I looked down at her, standing in perfect Defence textbook position, her chin up, her blade poised. Something of the theatrical clung to her, also.

I cannot be about to do this! some part of me protested.

“*Beg,*” she repeated.

She held the rebated sword just as if she held sharpened steel to my throat.

Stumbling and awkward, I got down first on one knee, and then on the other.

My clothing pulled at my crotch. I knelt on the hard boards. Barely, I was aware of indrawn breaths behind me; one man’s exclamation, another’s raucous scorn.

She gave me the smile of one of Henri the Third’s young louts. “I can humiliate you, messire. You can’t stop me.”

“Yes.” I managed not to say, *I know*.

Bad enough that I should have to face it. For Mlle Dariole to know, also....

“You can, but I beg you will not.” I contrived to speak aloud, voice harsh, and varying between squeak and growl like a boy. I could feel my face colouring, hot as fire. *If I am not allowed some respite, the cock-stand in my breeches will do her work for her!*

With my back turned to the other men present, I reached down covertly and adjusted myself. Dariole stepped forward, closer. Before I realised what she might be about, the blunted edge of her sword dropped and I felt it pressing against the inside of my thigh.

The pressure of the blade increased.

I gave in to it, shifting my knee on the hard wooden boards. Immediately she put her point to my other knee, pushing it wide apart, and leaving me kneeling splayed, as I had been to Fludd, and helpless. My prick throbbled and swelled, pushing against the cloth. That it might be visible to others flooded me with shame.

Fludd’s voice sounded in my mind. “You will remember this, but not for the pain.”

I will remember to cut your throat for you, you son-of-a-bitch! I thought, and did not for a moment know whether I addressed in my mind Robert Fludd or Dariole.

She held the rebated rapier blade between my thighs, some three or four inches below my crotch.

The heat in my body was such that I knew she had only to lift the blade up into my scrotum and I must spend on the instant.

“*Mademoiselle...pardon me.*” I sounded wretched. I twisted away from her gaze—and realised that by doing so, I hung down my head. Behind a curtain of hair, I felt myself flush. *I have said precisely this,*

many times, to her, in the privacy of my thoughts.

In the appalling silence, I at last lifted my head and met Dariole's gaze.

Her smile of joy in fighting faded. One corner of her mouth pulled up, and she gave me the most ironic look I have ever received from so young a duelist.

"I never knew this was such an effective weapon. . . ." Her voice dropped to a whisper. "What would you give me, not to make you spend in front of all of them?"

She speaks the lines I have imagined for her, in the theatre that a man keeps private in his mind.

I ached to spend. Every inch of my skin felt alive, conscious of the rub of under-linen and silk hose.

The low rumble of voices at my back brought me to consciousness of the falsity of it all. Men do not sound so, when another man is in danger of death. This is not the atmosphere of a duel—God He knows I should know that!

This is gossip, salacious comment, the tones of actors in play-rehearsal. This is theatre: a masque, a play-scene, a game. *This is not real.*

Embarrassment quite without eroticism flooded through me.

I swallowed, forcing myself to speak. "Mademoiselle, I have perhaps alluded to. . . things it were wiser not to have mentioned."

She said, "Only half an apology?"

The tone of her voice changed. I stared. Anger and malice alike vanished; she spoke with a light, wry irony—with something that, if it had been any woman other than her, I would have sworn to be sympathy.

I swallowed, hard. "Mademoiselle, *please.*"

I could not tell whether I desired more to squirm with shame and horror, to spend, or simply to throw myself down and weep. That I must look absurdly comic, beaten with false weapons, made me desire the earth to open up. If I could have stood to hurt her, I would have fetched her a punch in the face to break her bones.

If she teases a man's prick—well, it was I who invited her to this dance.

It is hardly her fault if she brings this to the—conclusion I no longer desire. Or do not desire here, or not in this way!

I felt cold with embarrassment at my absurd, straining body.

"Messire," she said quietly.

A look passed from her to me.

I realised, slowly, that this was no part of the game. Or was, perhaps, only no part of her parading of her skills for her theatre friends. I could not read her. Genuine embarrassment made me deflate.

"Dariole. . ."

“Oh, get out of here!” She pulled back her blade from my throat.

Every finger of my hands quivered as if the duel had been real.

My knees shook; the sheer effort of getting up off the floor made me stagger, and half-fall again. I made to go for my Saxony rapier, where I had left my live weapons.

“No. Leave those. *I’ll* take care of them. Just to remind you, messire.”

I got to my feet, grabbed my boots, and stumbled, bent over, out of the salon.

I took no notice of the raucous jeers and calls of the players behind me. That I was without weapons, and in stocking-feet in the streets, for the moment I did not even notice.

How could I have done such a thing!

To act out such a vile fantasy, and in public; how could I embarrass myself in such a manner!

Relief that I had not further embarrassed myself—that at least I did not stand here in wet, sticky linen—brought me to shame. I stood with the dusty earth beneath my stockinged feet, the warm wind blowing all the smells of Southwark to me. My heart hammered, and my faced burned; a thousand gold louis could not have moved me to turn around and go back into the School of Defence.

But I should.

The knowledge came to me with a feeling as of waking from deep sleep, or a trance. My head cleared. I rubbed my hand over my face, bringing it away wet with sweat.

I should return. I owe her a true apology—*more* than an apology. It was I who encouraged her to that, back there; to every word, every act.

My own voice still sounded in my mind. *Mademoiselle, please.*

My knees and my balls both ache, I thought, and for the same perverse reason. I wish to fall down before her.

I am a thing beyond contempt.

It was perhaps an hour later, with the sun past one of the clock, that Dariole came back to the lodging house in Dead Man’s Place.

I got up from where I had been sitting, waiting for her, on a horse block. She stopped in the middle of the deserted street, lifting her chin as I came up to her.

She had my sword and dagger in their scabbards, with my hanger and belt, all clasped together in her left hand. Without a word, she held them out to me.

I said, “Why?”

She lifted one shoulder. “If I made you beg for them, you’d only enjoy it.”

“*Dariole!*”

“I’m right, though, aren’t I? Disgrace makes you stand.”

Is it so simple as that? I wondered helplessly, gazing down at her. *You...*

She narrowed her eyes against the sun. There was dust on her clothes and hair, the fine golden dust of London after a day or two without rain. She had contrived an angle for her velvet cap, on the back of her head, that framed her young man's face in a style that shouted *Frenchman!* to any English courtier—and conceivably to any Southwark sturdy beggar of Fludd's.

She persevered. "Aren't I right?"

I took my weapons, and busied myself hooking on the hanger and suspensor strap.

"I do not know how to speak to you, mademoiselle."

I did not look at her while I made my confession.

"I am ashamed. Truly ashamed. Not as—as you have just seen me."

"No?" She regarded me with too much equanimity for my comfort.

"I should never have brought you into any of this!" I held up a hand to stop her protest. "I know, you came on some half-witted whim of your own. . . . But for the part of the responsibility which is mine—Mademoiselle Dariole, I am sorry for that."

It might have been the light that kept her eyes slitted, or puzzled suspicion. "Are you *apologising*?"

Her tone moved me, momentarily, to a painful smile. "Why—yes, made-moiselle. I would suppose that this amounts to an apology."

"You're not well." She folded her arms, the one over the other, and I saw that she already had wine-stains on the elbows of her doublet. With an odd tone to her voice, she said, "Messire Rochefort *has* to be sick, if he's apologising to me. I don't remember—did I hit you on the head, back at the salon?"

Confusion and embarrassment made me uncomfortable; I was by turns as hot and as cold as when she had been humiliating me before the English actors. Strangely, despite that, something in her half-teasing query made me almost desire to smile.

"If you did, mademoiselle, I do not remember—but perhaps that, itself, is the proof."

She put a hand over her mouth and snuffled a giggle; the sound of a much younger girl taken by surprise by laughter. Something in my chest ached. A moment of silence fell between us.

"Do you know," I said, and began again, sweating with embarrassment. "Mademoiselle, do you know what it is that we have been doing, between us?"

Her shoulder came up in a lithe shrug. "You spend when someone shames you. *That's* obvious enough."

I suppose my face must have been enough of a spectacle to make her smile.

"The whores in Les Halles were informative," I remarked, somewhat dryly. "I suppose you will say that is where you gained your information?"

"I don't think I would need to ask them, messire."

Her matter-of-factness disabled me in what I would have said, more than any amount of feminine outrage

and weeping could.

“I never intended to—abuse you,” I managed.

With Ivry all too plain in my mind, I looked down at her, and she gazed contemplatively back. I could have been seeing her for the first time. Her face was incomprehensible and distant to me—the more so, perhaps, for the close, perverse scene we had enacted between us.

I have seen the fat boy at Zaton’s, the effeminate page, the unfeminine woman, all by turns, and it has never occurred to me to ask, what kind of young woman does as she does? Dresses as a man, abandons her family....

Put her in with a hundred duellists and she will kill ninety and nine of them. This is why she does what she does. And why, dear God, is such talent—such superlative talent—wasted on a woman?

A woman who I truly do not know.

I found it difficult to look at her. “I do apologise, mademoiselle. Circumstances have brought about a situation between us that—that *I* should not have allowed to develop. There will be no more of it.”

She looked at me gravely. Her face was neither man nor woman, or perhaps was both.

She’s young, I thought, regarding her. And she acts on impulse: I know that, if I know nothing else. She will not have looked deeply into this. She is too eccentric in herself, to know how dangerous a man’s compulsions may be. In particular, when they are disgraceful.

She has never shown enough disgust.

“Because I am...what I evidently am,” I said, “there is no need for you to become entangled in it.”

The word is not *entangled*. It is *corrupted*.

I am the elder, it is my part to be responsible.

I do not know if I can heal the damage I must have done her, merely by abstinence—but *I must try*.

She looked up, her expression calm and stubborn. “You didn’t inflict anything on me, messire. I found you out. Remember Zaton’s?”

I have never been less pleased with that womanish tendency to blush that I inherit from my mother.

I said, “You could have found out nothing, if it were not there to be discovered.”

There was no feeling of arousal in my flesh, but I had the strongest possible desire to kneel down and beg her pardon.

Prompt on my thought, as if she read my face, she said brightly, “Could I make you beg now? Right here, in the street? Down on your knees and kissing my boots?”

I glanced away, at the small shadows cast by the noon sun, and the traffic of men and beasts up at the junction of the Bankside road, and took out my kerchief, to wipe off my forehead. She watched me with eyes that were bright, but seemed, most unbelievably, to be holding no malice.

I kept my voice steady and severe by an effort. “I would not beg you, mademoiselle—I would implore you. And in the next minute spoil my breeches. I am not to be trusted.”

I looked down at the woman with clear vision—as I have never done, not from Zaton’s onward. Looked with the normal, fallible judgement that a man employs. She is part fool, part impetuous boy, part warm-hearted girl, and I am nothing, *nothing!* that she should have anything to do with.

She said, “Messire, do *I* disgust *you*?”

What moved me to honesty, unless it was shock, I don’t know. I said, “Yes. A little.”

“Because I dress in men’s clothes.”

“Because...” I felt my face heating still more. “Because *you* should be disgusted. Horrified! Where is a woman’s modesty, mademoiselle? Why are you like this!”

Her hand touched her sword-hilt, fingers resting on the rings of the guard more as if she sought reassurance than made any threat. “I’m not disgusted. I like it. You deserve it. I’m happy as I am, messire.”

I could do nothing but shake my head. *How deep are the emotions of a sixteen-year-old boy, never mind a flighty young woman?*

“There need be no more discussion of this,” I said quietly, to reassure her. “You will not be—troubled again. I am sorry that I must continue to speak with you of other matters. They are becoming crucial.”

A second’s froideur, that I did not comprehend, was succeeded by a shrug, so quickly that I did not truly know if I had registered a genuine hesitation on her part.

“Robert Fludd,” she said, giving the English name the French *R*. “Don’t look so surprised, messire. Messire Saburo asked me to read your letter to him—your letter to Robert Cecil.”

“Saburo asked you *what*?”

“The samurai doesn’t read English well.” She grinned. “I do.”

With my head full of whirling thoughts, I could barely collect myself enough to realise that, yes, dear good God, the samurai might well think that a sensible course of action....

With an innocent cheerfulness that wrenched at me, Dariole demanded, “So what’s happened now?”

I paused. I had barely stopped to consider what I would say when she asked me questions.

Any fool will have known she would ask.

“Any fool except this one, apparently,” I said aloud, and bowed slightly, at her stare of confusion. “Mademoiselle Dariole. Very well, we are as much embroiled in England as we were in France, and, on the whole, I think I prefer the danger of you well-informed to the danger of you ill-informed....”

I glanced around. Many a man in Paris has thought himself safe in the street, or in his lodgings, when another is listening at the door. “As to where we can be safe in speaking of it—”

“I know!”

She grinned, like a boy, and lifted her hand to point over the tiled and thatched roofs. A flag-pole flew a standard, I saw, perhaps two streets over.

The common advertisement for a play-house.

Rochefort, Memoirs

18

What?" I heard myself sounding ridiculously bewildered.

Dariole laughed. "We'll go to the play-house! I promised I'd look in at The Rose and see what they were putting on. Messire—think! *Whatever* we say when we're sitting in a play-house, anyone who hears it will just think we're talking about another play we've seen! They have plays about killing kings all the time!"

I looked down, out of my stunned confusion, and inclined my head in as respectful a bow as I had ever given her. "That is—appropriately bizarre. You had better fetch M. Saburo, if he has returned. How long until your friends begin their play?"

She lifted her chin, squinting briefly at the position of the sun. "Hour, hour and a half, depending on how big a crowd they get in...."

"I will meet with you both at The Rose."

I thought she might have spoken again, but she did not. She reached up to settle her velvet bonnet more securely, nodded once, and took to her heels, heading for the Thames-side at a run.

Boy! I thought as I watched her go.

Boy, girl, woman: before whom I have been helpless, aroused, ashamed....

Honour should take me out of England now. Anywhere out of her company, before I harm her more than I have done. But there is Fludd. Cecil. Sully.

I walked for some time unaware of my surroundings. Coming to myself, I found I stood in the grounds of the cathedral of Southwark.

Playing Protestant is no hardship, if I am prepared; if I know what sect it is, and whether I must or must not dip holy water from the font, or genuflect towards the altar. But there will be no Chapel of Our Lady here....

I contented myself with entering, and giving pennies to light a candle, placing it as close as I could come to the altar for their rood-screen. The place seemed as busy with private business as is the great church of Paul across the river; groups of men standing talking in clusters at the base of the great white stone pillars. I could not kneel. I only stood, for a very long time, with my head bowed; the cold of the gravestones beneath my feet striking up into my body.

It is twenty years since I have made confession, or desired to.

In my profession, that is just as well.

I opened my eyes and gazed up at the light falling brilliant through the coloured glass.

It means, also, that there can be no absolution.

I inclined my head to the altar, replaced my hat, and began to walk back towards the cathedral entrance.

If that is so, then I will do without Monseigneur God, and myself do now what must be done.

It took me no great time to walk to The Rose theatre, it being not far from The Globe—but smaller, and much shabbier. No play had yet begun, I found as I strode up, looking over the hats of the men crowded round the entrance. Dariole was not easily spotted, being no different to any of the dozens of young gallants come over from the court and city. I soon picked out M. Saburo, in my cloak that began to seem unseasonable in this hot May weather.

He grunted, seeing me, and pointed at the open doors of the thatched building. “Noh play, ne?”

Before I could reply, Dariole exclaimed, “You have plays too?”

“Hai, Dari-oru-sama.”

Immediately she began chattering to him. Somewhat dourly, I paid for us to enter. If I had not been so thoughtful in myself, I might have been amazed at the hollow wooden circle that we entered—the ground sloping down until it was a man’s height deep in front of the edge of the stage, and all around, wooden scaffolding holding up three storeys of galleries.

“Up.” I pointed, and left the cloaked samurai and Mlle Dariole to push through the crowds in my wake, discussing the finer points of acting in France, England, and Nihon.

The galleries had a rail in front, and a wooden bar to sit on, but comfort was not my object—crammed into the end of one first-floor gallery, all the way around next to the side of the stage, the only places that men might be close enough to hear us were if seated to my left, or directly behind us. Anything to cut down on the number of potential eavesdroppers.

Let Fludd predict *this!* I thought grimly, indicating to M. Saburo that he should pass me and sit closest to the wall, where he would not be conspicuous. I didn’t realise I’d spoken aloud until the boy-girl gave me the most aggravating of grins, slipping in to sit between the samurai and myself.

I made play with shifting my hanger forward and hilt up, so that I could sit more easily. The young woman hung over the gallery-rail and whistled, until a slut came to sell her a handful of hazelnuts, which Mademoiselle de Montargis de la Roncière set about cracking with her teeth.

The rumble of conversation began to rise to full-throated clamour. She spat nut-shells into her palm. “See? I told you!”

Behind me, four or five gallants spoke in ringing tones of something they called “Cheapside comedies.” To my left, men apparently debated the efficacy of bull’s blood or pig’s blood for the bladders which the actors burst at their “deaths.”

“You were right, mademoiselle.”

She shot me a look as if she would have spoken. Unexpectedly, I did not find her silence comfortable.

Out on the stage, a few actors battled gamely with a prologue. Men and women flooded into the pit, calling to their friends, shrieking with laughter, and the level of noise did not drop. I didn’t expect it to, this being barbarous England, where a play is merely a sensational entertainment. Saburo leaned forward on the rail, staring at the stage jutting out from this back wall, and the painted pillars that held up a stage-ceiling figured with the constellations. Aries and his fellows looked in grave need of new gilding. I made a sign for Saburo’s attention.

“Myself, I have had enough of astrological constellations, no matter where they may be represented.” I spoke quietly enough that we should not attract attention, but not in the whisper that would make us seem covert. “It appears we are all drawn into this. We should therefore—although perhaps against my better judgement—confer.”

Dariole carefully placed a hazelnut shell on the side of her index finger, and flicked it with her thumb, hitting the high crown of a hat three yards out into the pit. “So—what’s wrong with just plain killing the King, here, in London?”

Incredulity moved me to crisp speech. “This isn’t my court; I have no spies nor informers of my own; there was a major conspiracy against his life five years ago, for which all who were involved are either in the Tower or met the headsman’s axe; and now I am observed by M. Cecil!”

I closed one hand over the wooden rail in front of me, until the support creaked. “I have met this King. He’s cowardly as a woman, he wears steel next to his skin, he sleeps in a different palace room each night, and he wets his breeches if a man brings a naked sword into his presence!”

I became conscious that I was beginning to be loud, and wave my other hand. Her grin stopped me.

“It is ridiculous,” I protested. “England had attempts on Great Eliza’s life, all failed.”

“The one on King Henri succeeded.” Her eyes glinted, as if she knew how deep a dart she planted. If I had had time, I would have wondered at her sudden malice.

“Even this King, unpopular as he is, the English do not allow to be killed. There has not been a succession by assassination in living memory.” Paying her in kind, I added, “*You* should know that, mademoiselle; there was a Markham involved in such an attempt, not many years ago.”

“‘Monsieur,’ not ‘mademoiselle.’” Her clearly defined brows came down. “Not Cousin Guillaume?”

“One Griffin Markham, I believe. Is he kin to you?”

“Cousin Guillaume has brothers.” She shrugged, adding nothing more, and looked thoughtful.

Perhaps she does have some concept of family shame, I reflected. *That would be... ironic.*

Saburo leaned forward and spoke past her, to me. “I still owe you *giri*, for my life. Perhaps I will soon have a chance to help you, Rosh’-fu’-san. Let me take the head of this Ro-bu-ta Fu-ra-da.”

I blinked, then smiled regretfully. “I think that would put you out of favour with Mr Secretary, and obstruct your mission to the King.”

He grunted; I thought in disgust. Or in gratitude at being released from the obligation. *Who can tell?*

Out on the stage, the main part of the play swung into action. Two more actors came out and told us it was night, and cold, and they were on a castle battlement. Since they evidently could not afford the scenery-flats one sees in Paris, it was necessary to thus inform us. A white-faced man appeared close above us, on the balcony at the back of the stage, and the two actors gave us to understand he was a ghost.

“So what are you going to tell Fl—*him?*” Dariole demanded, swivelling about on the seating-rail. “He’s going to expect you to tell him how to assassinate the King—oh, don’t *worry*; half the plays on in Southwark now have king-killing in them! *Historical* kings, of course. The English Lord Chamberlain won’t allow anything else.”

The actors' voices echoed around the walls, as in an amphitheatre. On stage, a royal progress was degenerating into a family quarrel. I paid no attention. I only stared at the young woman.

"What?" She shifted uncomfortably. "*What!*"

"You will pardon me, mademoiselle. Thank you. I believe...you have given me an idea."

My gaze turned towards the stage, but I saw nothing. I sat furiously turning over my thoughts in my mind, dimly aware of Mlle Dariole being first importunate, and then sinking back into a sulk, the hazelnuts she had being cracked with particular vigour.

Time passed; I was unaware of it. I roused when the fat actor playing the hero struck a rapier through the arras that hid the opening at the centre back of the stage. A pause, then a body fell through the curtains, landing flat, face-down. The blood-bladder hidden in his clothes made an unfortunately-audible squelch, blood squirting out to either side of him.

"English!" I muttered, in disgust.

Saburo burst into deep, loud, roaring laughter. "Kabuki!"

In the silent theatre, the sound of him banging his hands down on the gallery rail echoed. The samurai's body shook with mirth.

A split second later, the rest of the audience began to laugh, the pit particularly raucous.

"Oh well." Dariole, beside me, shrugged. "They did steal it off another theatre—maybe it'll work better as a comedy...."

I thought the actors not so sanguine as she. The fat actor tried desperately to hold together the next scene with a "woman"; a boy younger than Dariole, in a matronly skirt and bodice, a modest ruff hiding his Adam's apple.

I put my elbows on my knees, and my chin on my fists.

As a way to satisfy the complaints of Mr Secretary Cecil ...I could not be faulted for such a rejection...am I inspired, or mad?

I came to myself to realise I might not be the only pattern of madness present: on stage, the boy in a dress performed an interminable scene of supposed insanity.

M. Saburo leaned past the woman in breeches and spoke civilly to me. "What will you do? This conspiracy. Will you do what minister wants?"

Slowly, I sat up. "He's my only access to news from France. That I *must* have, if I'm to do anything against the Queen Regent, and preserve Monseigneur de Sully. For the moment, then, it appears Mr Secretary has the matter his own way. Therefore, our Monsieur Astrologer Fludd must have his plan to assassinate the King...I'll *give* him a plan."

"You will?" Dariole sounded doubtful.

"You said it to me, Monsieur Dariole. Half the plays in London have king-killing as a theme. Well...."

For all the awkwardness between us, I could not help smiling at her expression.

I pointed out at the stage. "From where could it be better to steal a plot to kill a king?"

I spent the next few afternoons in the theatres of Bankside and the City—in most of which, it appeared, Mademoiselle Dariole already had the entrée. Fludd did not contact me immediately, for which I was grateful. *I need the time.*

Dariole did nothing other than what a foreign boy with a fat purse might do: that is, find herself welcomed into every crooked game of cards and dice that players play off-stage. She won as much as she lost.

It annoyed me to note that, where I might not comment on her conduct in the slightest, these players might tease her as they pleased. As the second half of this English May grew hotter, and she acquired herself another wide-brimmed and high-crowned man's hat to stop her nose pinking and peeling, the pock-marked actor remarked, "You are as careful of your complexion as a little girl, monsieur!" and had nothing for his pains but a rude gesture. I knew very well that, despite what had passed between us, had I said it, she would have drawn sword on me.

At the thought that I must then have begged her pardon, I grew warm in the crotch. I abandoned her company for the rest of the day.

I acted in all as if I were no man, who might be capable of desiring her. I was not prone to more of those waking dreams of submission. The ales of Southwark, while detestable in flavour, have at least the quality of making a man sleep without dreams.

As I pursued the performance of plays, I watched young "Monsieur" Dariole make friends—acquaintances, rather—with the greatest of ease. She entered other people's conversations with the finesse of a drunken soldier, appeared to think that she knew them down to the bone if they had passed a sleepless and drunken night together, and relied on the use of violence to get herself out of any trouble it might bring her. On the fifth night, I came back to the lodgings in Dead Man's Place having seen her smack a broken-off dagger blade down the face of a foolish young man behind a tavern, and I could not for some minutes discover the source of my shock.

It is no different: broken blade in the face, or a length of noble steel rapier between the rib cage.

But the boy did not deserve a damaged eye, fool though he was to attack her. Does she begin to be a tavern-bully, Mademoiselle de la Roncière? That is no different in kind to the red-faced, middle-aged husband who bellows and beats his wife. It is all the same pleasure in bullying.

Have I damaged her, by what I am? Is this what I begin to see?

Part of me watched, also, for men who might observe us. It would not have surprised me at any hour of the day or night to look up and see the face of Robert Fludd, or his three mathematicians, or the woman, Lanier. *I know when we will meet again,* he said.

This night, I could see no spies.

Struggling with flint and striker to light a candle, I succeeded, took my way upstairs in the house, and found, as I unlocked the door to our rooms, a flash of white upon the floor. I bent swiftly, picked up the sheet of paper, glanced rapidly about myself, and listened.

Nothing moved in the silent lodging-house.

I read: *By Battle-bridge, Tooley Street.*

Nothing more. Not a time. Not a day, even.

That will be his house, I thought, having now some familiarity with the streets of Southwark, having walked the ground. *The message delivered at night, so I am intended to go the following morning.*

I put the candle-stick down on the table, shooting a glance out of the mullion windows at the western sky. Something past eight of the clock, and the light almost gone.

Unless I plan to wander streets full of barred and shuttered houses, the earliest I might make this supposed rendezvous would be after dawn on the morrow. When he will doubtless meet me. And, to his men, there is another of his successful predictions!

I sat down on my cot-bed, pulling undone the strings of my falling bands, and removing the dust-grimed linen. After I had undone a few of the doublet's forty buttons, I sat for a moment.

Does it matter if he has this further triumph?

In short, no.

The sooner I arrive there, the sooner I give him this ultimate fool's plan, the sooner he kicks M. Rochefort onto the street in disgust, and the better that will be!

I finished undressing, smiling slightly. *I can rely on an early rising*. Although Saburo might be fast asleep on the floorboards, my cloak serving him for a thin mat, Mlle Dariole was not yet in—and I did not expect her before dawn coloured the streets.

If she is not dead in the kennel somewhere, over a quarrel at hazard was my last thought before I slept.

Congruent with my opinion, she staggered in at four of the clock, seeming disappointed that I was not displeased to be woken. I ate, and left M. Saburo for some unaccountable reason kneeling on the wide floorboards with a shirt and a pen-knife, and Mlle Dariole slumped, fully dressed, on the straw palliasse of what was plainly a servant's bed. She was not asleep; I heard her rambling to the samurai as I walked down the stairs and out into the early light.

I smoothed the plume of my hat, and set the hat on my head. The street address took me to where I had expected, across Long-Southwark, and down the street parallel to the river. Fludd's house, now I saw it plainer, extended past the walled garden at the back, to the river, where a stream fed a small water-mill, and I could hear noises from artisan workshops.

About to seek the house's main entrance, I caught sight of a figure further down towards the Thames.

The agent of the Earl of Northumberland, John. He gave me a curt nod, folding his arms and leaning against great gates, that I saw, as I came closer, led into a yard.

Iron-shod wheels shrieked as I crossed the street. I had to stand back as a great ox-drawn wagon came into the yard, the early-morning moist dust not yet raised by the beasts' hooves, but their breath steaming in the air.

"Follow me, master." John shifted off the wall and walked in.

I followed him through the yard behind the walled garden—you would not have known that the one property belonged to the other; that I supposed to be no accident. The open space beyond the gates seemed full of pack-horses; great bundles being tied onto the V-frames that hooked over their fat barrel-chests. Servants or workmen—it is difficult to tell with the English—ran about, loading and unloading; it was more chaos than I cared to deal with in my state of bewilderment. Over by the

workshop door, great bundles were being slashed open. I glimpsed cloth, but not in bales; in sprawling bundles that looked like cast-off clothes. Voices rang through the morning. Cold air blew off the Thames-river.

Doctor Robert Fludd, swathed in a gown of black velvet, turned to me smiling, with his sallow cheeks pinkened by the wind. "Master Rochefort! I congratulate you on your promptness."

The gnarled mathematician, Hariot, stood with him, in soft leather doublet and Venetian hose; an outfit that would both suit the court and wear well in travel. Investigation among servants at the fringes of court brought me enough gossip to know that Thomas Hariot, for all his paper-profession, had crossed the Atlantic to the New World. The skinny Hues, and small, ancient Warner, men knew less of.

"The Wizard Earl's Three Wise Men," I said, nodding to them, and watching to see if that sobriquet would cause them irritation. Only John glared, and I suspected that to be for the insult to his master.

"You're not a man of superstition." Fludd stated it as though it were incontrovertible fact. "Some study of the Hermetic Arts and magia will not lead you to despise these Three Magi."

By the subdued laughter from Hariot and Hues, I guessed he had made a joke. I merely frowned, folding my arms. The flash of a white pinner made me turn my head. Aemilia Lanier stepped between the pack-horses, a stack of paper in her hands—no, not paper, I realised, but pamphlets, such as are sold at St Paul's churchyard and all through the city.

"I have what you desire, Doctor Fludd," I said mildly. "Where will you discuss the matter?"

"Let us stand out of the way." He led us, Lanier following, down to the far side of the yard, where a brick wall and pilings held back the waters of the Thames-river. Over on the far side, the rising sun gleamed on the black Gothic spireless church of St Paul's.

"Now, Master Rochefort," Fludd said, rubbing his hands briskly, I thought against the cold. He looked at me with bloodshot eyes. "How is it to be done?"

The presence of the Thames-river was useful, so close. At a push, I might kill Fludd with one rapier-thrust, and dive in; the river here would be easily crossed by a strong man swimming. Conceivably one of the Magi might be carrying a pistol, but the hope of firing it and hitting me at distance was low enough to make the attempt not unreasonable.

You do not know it, Monsieur Fludd, but you owe a great debt to Mr Secretary Cecil.

I nodded downriver, indicating the crennelations of the Tower just rising through woollen river-mist. "I take it your patron won't be joining us?"

Common but accurate gossip had the Earl of Northumberland living there in better conditions than most men live out of prison: with his wife visiting, his servants to wait on him, his books, his laboratory instruments that gained him the name of Wizard Earl among uneducated men.

"I see that he leaves you to take the risks, Doctor Fludd."

"There are no risks. Everything is calculated."

Fludd spoke as if it were no great matter—so mundanely that I saw there was no way to shake him by suggesting, as seemed true, that Monsieur the Earl could back out of this conspiracy merely by denying he ever heard anything of it. Why should Fludd care, being "assured" of success?

It comes as second nature to me to attempt the fragmentation of a conspiracy I have joined with the intent to ruin. *True, I need not bother with that here.* However, it may make them more ready to dismiss the company of M. Rochefort, and that will be fortunate....

Fludd said amiably, "It is enough for you to know that the Earl supports us, monsieur."

"Or to know that you *say* he does."

Thomas Hariot lifted his bearded chin and curtly interrupted. "Henry Percy is with us. He's our support for putting the young Prince on the throne, in place of the coward, his father—"

"He is in prison," I cut in. "Where he can offer no help. You are all men of words and figures. This is why, I think, you need a man of action to carry out your assassination for you and your Wizard?"

I managed the imitation of a man prickly of his honour well enough. Hariot bristled up at once.

"Calling him Wizard is as accurate as calling you 'gentleman,' Frenchman! Any man of learning and education is like to be called a wizard here. If you insult him on that account—"

Robert Fludd laughed aloud, holding up his hands. "What did I tell you, Tom?"

Hariot snorted. "Oh, you were right. I confess it. I have temper enough for two, and the Frenchman irks me."

"You are not required to be brothers." Fludd's smile softened. He lifted his head to look up at me. I could have done without his amusement. For the plan I proposed, an atmosphere of prickly suspicion would best serve my purpose, not one of reconciliation.

I raised my brows. "Did you require my assistance, Doctor? Or have you nothing better to do than talk, as is common with conspirators?"

In the background, Aemilia Lanier did not speak but she smiled. There was ink on her fingers, and smudging the white front of her pinner. I thought: I would sooner put my fool's plan before Fludd and his mathematicians alone, not with this woman here.

Fludd spoke. "How do you plan for us to do this, Master Rochefort?"

"Ah, no, too fast." I held up a hand. "Hear what I plan to do after it."

Fludd inclined his head. The dawn coloured his face. I could not tell whether he was amused, puzzled, or anxious.

"Your demands?" Now he sounded faintly amused.

"Money. Passage on a ship." I shrugged. "Anything else is death for me, Monsieur Fludd, and I am not a suicide."

"Far from it. Assume all can be arranged to your satisfaction. How will you proceed with the assassination of King James?"

I couldn't help but wince. "Monsieur, if you must speak of it, don't speak so loud."

"No man hears us. I have calculated this. We may, for this time, and in this moment, speak in perfect secrecy."

That secrecy was not my concern, I did not wish him to know. My nod of agreement was therefore reluctant. I stood for a moment looking down at him. He crossed his arms, within the hanging sleeves of his robe, and smiled encouragingly.

“You will think me a fool.” I made it a flat statement, so that they would be ready to disbelieve my apparent false modesty. And be the more outraged, when I sounded a true fool.

Take me for an incompetent; dismiss me out of hand from this! I can afterwards avoid being killed by your men; I know the precautions to take....

“As to the plan,” I said. “I tell you what I will not do. I will not work with more men than there are here today, and I will not attempt to kill more men than James Stuart himself. Where many men are to die, there is always one conspirator who will warn a friend. We will have no more Powder Conspiracies.”

The mathematicians nodded. Thus far, sense.

“I will not, either, seek out a fanatic madman, such as the man Ravailac was. Your King James is more...wary...than the late Henri of Navarre.”

I saw how for *wary* they all appeared to hear *fearful*, and were content.

“James is alert to threats in his carriage, in his bed-chamber, and in court-audience.” Here I gave a shrug. “His weakness, messires, is that he loves both hunting and ceremony. My plan is to take advantage of both.”

I caught the man John’s eyes on me, dark and intense with suppressed emotion. Whether he took offence at this devil-may-care ex-soldier assassin I play-acted, or whether it was ought else, I did not know.

I swept the group of men with my gaze. “This, then. When James Stuart is next away from court at the chase, let Prince Henry the king-to-be send his father a message, to say that there is good hunting in the county *he* is in. It may tax you, I suppose, to find somewhere the King has left harts and roebuck alive?”

To my surprise, the elderly Warner grinned at this.

“Let the Prince send that message,” I continued, “and when King James is there, let the Prince say that he has arranged a feast and a masque in the King’s honour. You must tell me somewhere in this countryside where there is a grotto, or cave, or clearing, where a masque may be set up. Now every man knows your King James’s love for masques, and how he and his Queen and their children like nothing better than to join in and take their own roles in masques at court.”

So long as the masque glorifies the Stuart royal line, as I recall from my visit with Sully. But that is hardly a fault restricted to one royal house.

“Prince Henry shall invite his father to the feast.” I took an imperceptible breath, calm as when I throw at hazard for a great sum. “Courtesy then demands that, since he is present, there is an invitation to the King to take part in the court masque. I advise the role of some ancient divine king for James. And, under cover of the masque—*thus!*”

I made a jerking movement with my right hand, at which Hues and Warner jumped.

“Two inches of steel between doublet and breeches, into the royal kidneys, and King James is as dead as any monarch you have buried in your Westminster church.”

The sound of iron wheels, oxen, horses, and the oath-laden shouts of the workmen: all seemed forbidden from this small area and group of men. Aemilia Lanier watched me with eyes so brilliant as to glow.

I gave them no time to think.

“You said I must strike the blow, you are wrong. Prince Henry must do the deed, since he will be on the stage of the masque with the King and dancers—*only* he can do it. I shall hide his retreat as the alarm breaks out, then ‘discover’ him bound and captive elsewhere, and so not guilty of his father’s murder.”

I held up a hand to forestall comment.

“We shall, beforehand, have taken a servant, killed him, and dressed him in a costume identical to that of the Prince. When James is stabbed and killed, I shall, in my pretended rage, stab this ‘assassin’ and stop his tongue. Thus, a madman has impersonated the Prince to kill the King, and there is James, dead. Meantime, you shall also play a play here in the London theatres, to declare how great a king the Prince will be, and thus convince the citizens to be joyful. So you may declare ‘long live King Henry the Ninth’ and crown him with an easy mind!”

I finished with a flourish, and waited for the sky to metaphorically fall on my head. I had my hand ready to draw, though no man could have told it, and my eye on both Hariot and John.

A bigger bag of foolery you could not open! All the most ridiculous parts of every play-house spectacle I have watched this last week, all mixed together into an obvious farrago of impossibilities! Now, tell me how great a lunatic is Monsieur Rochefort! I await the explosion!

Robert Fludd spoke calmly. “For the masque, how if it were set in a great cave? Would that suffice?”

Hues muttered something, fell silent at Hariot’s gesture; I saw both of them smiling with what seemed to be immense relief.

“I know one, in the west country,” Robert Fludd went on. “Close by a property of mine. The hart and doe are hunted in the hills there, and there is a cave called by the rustics ‘Wookey’—a very great cave. *There* is your ideal setting, Monsieur Rochefort. A feast in the caves by torch-light, then the masque, and the regrettable sacrifice of James Stuart.”

I stared.

Enthusiastic faces looked back at me. Fludd reached up and patted my shoulder. “I could not tell you, Monsieur Rochefort. It had to be of your own devising.”

“But,” I said.

Aemilia Lanier, in her contralto voice, spoke over Hues and Hariot. “The masque is half-writ. You must look over it with me, Monsieur Rochefort.”

Frankly bewildered, I said, “Masque? You have written a masque?”

“Yes. I could not tell what would be required in detail. But I have more than half of it, and the rest will be quickly done.” She smiled with unaccustomed friendliness. “The masque is called ‘The Engineer of Shadows.’ And I have titled the play, for London, *The Viper and Her Brood.*”

“But—a theatre—” I thought, *you cannot take this to be serious!*

“Master Fludd took up the lease on The Rose, when it closed these five years past.” Aemilia Lanier

beamed. “So we can have Prince Henry’s Men play *The Viper* there, as soon as I am done writing it.”

Fludd took my unresisting arm. “Did you think I would not have calculated the future of this, also? Of course I knew what plan you would devise! I told you, you are our salvation—the man who will kill the King. We will devise more closely later who shall strike the blow. Let me take you inside the house, and bring out a map of Somerset, so you may see where the hunting country is, and where the hills, and the cave.”

I stood silent with sheer amazement.

Fludd smiled. “The property which I own there is a paper-mill. I bought it many years ago, when first I calculated where James Stuart would die. It has been a useful business to me. Those clothes and rags you see over there? They will be going down to Wookey, to be turned into paper. Later today, you should set out with them, and travel to Somerset. You will need to look out the ground before the killing of King James is set into motion, will you not?”

Rochefort, Memoirs

19

Messire Saburo, it appears that I must leave London for a short time—”

I stopped abruptly, seeing the man of Nihon kneeling on the floor of our lodgings, a doublet spread in front of him, reduced to its component parts of woollen shell, bombast stuffing, wooden belly-plates, quilted linen lining, and buttons.

I blinked. “*What?*”

“Want to wash clothes.” Saburo scowled ill-temperedly. “Sewed up too tight. All little stitches! You do this every two, three day?”

“I don’t do this at all,” I said, with some fascination. “*Why*, in the name of the good God—no. Never mind. Messire, I shall be gone from London a week, ten days at most.”

The samurai peered up at me, and sat back on his heels. “What goes wrong?”

“What goes...?” For a second, I could have ripped out my hair by the handful. “What could *possibly* go wrong? It was a fool’s plan, an idiot’s plan; any man with a brain could see it can’t work!”

Saburo put down his pen-knife. He rose to his feet, making a face. “Fura-da is a fool?”

“*Just* such a fool.” I swung about, pacing the room, ignoring the dismembered garment. “You tell me, Messire Saburo—a plan that depends on having the King’s son stab the King *in open view of the audience!* That will have a servant to put blame on, wearing the same costume as the Prince—which expensive garment it seems no costumier will remember sewing!”

“You stab servant,” Saburo put in. “Who is already dead. *Two* death wounds, Rosh’-fu’.”

“Yes, that too!” I fetched the wall a hefty kick, and turned about to sit on the open window sill, the dogs

bawling twenty feet below. Their warm scent drifted up. “But—I can see no way to placate Monsieur Secretary Cecil except by undertaking this journey....”

I concluded my explanation of Somerset by asking, “Shall I leave you more of Monsieur Fludd’s money?”

“Hai.” Saburo’s head jerked curtly. “Every man want coins. I am having to pay now, not have credit until the rice-harvest in Nihon, *then* pay. Money will take longer to get here, but my credit’s good. Is not right. They don’t trust me!”

“Welcome to the way of the world—here, at least.” I took my purse from my belt, weighing it, and turned the coins out on the table, the better to divide them. “Have you news of your audience with the King, yet?”

“Hai. Lord-daimyo Seso invites me to court again. There are many men to talk to. Says I shall get see King-Emperor James soon.”

“That will be the court *soon*. I doubt you will have seen James before my return.”

Likely it’s as well I shan’t see Cecil before I leave, or else my tongue might lead me into comment on this *stupidity* of travelling into the English provinces on his supposed business, now of all times! I need further news of Paris....

A clatter of boots on the stairs distracted me. Mlle Dariole barged backwards into the room, her arms full. “I’ve got it, but I can’t sew—oh, hello, messire!”

She dumped down a heap of what was not old clothes, or bed linen, as I at first thought, but plain cloth.

I finished dividing up the contents of my purse. “Monsieur Saburo, I imagined you would be fitted for English court clothes.”

He lifted up a spare shirt in one broad hand. Sweat had marked the fabric yellow at armpits and neck. He shook the shirt at me. “Bug eggs!”

“Bug eggs?”

“The—” He ran his thumbnail down the garment’s side seam, evidently not having the word for it. “Full of bug eggs!”

“Those are flea’s eggs, messire,” I said reassuringly. “You may burn them out over a candle. That destroys any such mites as you may have.”

“*Filthy gaijin!*”

The unsewn doublet scattered across the floor at his kick. I prudently left him his coins without mention of them, and set my pack in order.

“Going somewhere?” Dariole looked out from behind a length of pale linen as she held it up, and the samurai fingered the weave of the fabric. “Did Fludd throw you out, like you thought?”

Tanaka Saburo lifted his head and looked at me, silently.

I said, at last, “I needs must take Doctor Fludd a little further into deception.”

Dariole’s eyes shone mischievously bright. “Oh—he didn’t *like* the plan? He did? Mordieu, he *did!*”

She yelped with laughter. I could not help but sound stiff and on my dignity. “Mademoiselle, while I’m gone, you will attend on M. Saburo in the office of a page.”

It may be difficult to swagger while picking up another bolt of linen and flinging it over one’s arm for a samurai’s inspection, but she managed it. “*You* just don’t want to tell me where you’re going. . . .”

Somewhat ironically, I said, “I am traveling to look at a hole.”

She stopped, stood still; her head cocked to one side. The buttons of her doublet were undone again, almost up to her high standing collar. White shirt showed, and I had a sudden uncomfortable apprehension of how warm the cloth would be, how hot her skin beneath it.

“*A hole?*” She tried to repress a grin and visibly failed. “A woman’s hole, would that be, messire? Or a man’s hole?”

“A hole in the ground,” I said crushingly. “It seems Monsieur Fludd owns a cave.”

“A. . .cave. Right. . . .” Dariole glanced from me to Saburo: the Nihonese man currently on his knees with linen stretched between his two hands, sniffing at it. He ignored our interchange. She added, in tones of contempt, “In the provinces, somewhere?”

In French, I said, “Go to court with him, mademoiselle. You are familiar enough with Fontainebleau and St Germain that you can act the part.”

She offered another out-flung length of cloth for M. Saburo to inspect, and nodded, making no further complaint.

Instinct moved me to instantly demand, *What have you in your devious mind?*—whether merely anticipation at Saburo’s admission to the English court, or whether (as I thought) she planned some social atrocity of which Guillaume Markham would be the centre.

Reason, contradicting instinct, told me she was better left alone. If she has no wickedness in her mind, a question from me will be enough to set her concocting something.

I continued to pack, watching them bicker over bolts of linen, and felt a sensation unfamiliar to me—of separation, perhaps. I knew it for foolishness. The samurai, irrevocably alien, and therefore excluded from many of this country’s political machinations, I may leave unguarded for a week or two, knowing Cecil has him under observation. The female duellist. . . am I to leave a young woman who knows half the truth of Henri’s assassination here in London, to make up what she doesn’t know and boast of it the first time it takes her humour to do so? Am I mad?

No. Not mad. I approach sanity for the first time, I thought grimly.

There is Mr Secretary Cecil for her, also. And Tanaka Saburo. The samurai is best guard to her, as she is best guard to him—given what’s passed between she and I, a better one than I could ever make.

Within the hour, I left.

“Aemilia will finish your masque. She has the play half-done, also.” Fludd stood beside me, his hands clasped behind his back, while I engaged to look over the ambling horse he proposed to have me ride to the west of England.

I rubbed the dun stallion under the jaw, and the stone horse responded by gazing at me with luminous brown eyes as if he had no idea of a contest of wills with me. “M. Fludd, you tell me that there *is* a play, to be put on at...”

“At The Rose,” the doctor completed. “To arouse the citizens from their supposed misery at James’s death, as you said, and to send them out onto the streets in support of Henry. It shall play the same day that the masque is played at Wookey, and that James dies, and then until the coronation. We have a number of the Lord Admiral’s Men—Prince Henry’s Men, as they now are—already at their rehearsals.”

I am too old for this business, and as great a fool as M. de Sully ever rated me! I never caught any of Fludd’s men listening at the play-house.

He plays *me*, as if I were an amateur—but you will find, Monsieur Fludd, that this will stop, very soon.

Robert Fludd bowed to the woman Lanier as she walked up between the train of pack-horses, readied for the journey to the paper-mill.

“So much better to have it done by a genuine poet,” Fludd added, “rather than one of those hacks at The Fortune or The Globe.”

Lanier gave him a derisory look, as if being cloaked for a journey loosened her tongue. “You can’t afford Ben Jonson, Doctor, to write you a proper court masque! And you fear that Masters Heywood and Decker would put vulgarity into a play—which a woman, of course, will never do.”

I made her a bow of greeting, concealing a sudden and cheerful amusement at Fludd’s expression. *Evidently women are not as easily predicted as the future.*

“You’re writing both play and masque, madame?” I said. “I congratulate you on your skill.”

Her dark eyes lifted, under lashes that were still thick despite her age. Twenty years ago, men would have thrown themselves under her pretty feet to stop mud getting onto her embroidered shoes and shoe-roses. Now, she reached out for the stout arm of a servant, and swung herself up onto the small sideways-facing platform on the lead pack-horse. I reached up a steady hand; her fingers warm on mine.

“A writer has parts of plays and masques always about the place.” Her smile briefly dazzled. “I shall rely on you to look at this cave, of which I have been told much, and instruct me where you wish the players to enter, exit, and give their speeches, for your purposes.”

“I would have thought Monsieur Fludd might foretell that with ease.”

Fludd folded his arms. With Aemilia Lanier on the side-saddle, and my height, he now must look up to both of us. It did not seem to discomfit him.

“Consider this,” he said. “Suppose I tell you, monsieur, that I have calculated by my mathematical skill that you shall return from Somerset to London upon a certain day. What happens then? Conceivably you decide that you shall not, and take great care to arrive back before or after the day I have set. Conceivably, also, this upsets plans I have in hand, and I must do my calculations again, which is no short work. Now given this, Master Rochefort—if you knew a vast deal about how a masque may be successfully used to murder King James, would you speak to the principles about it? You would not. Knowing they know their business...” here he bowed after the English fashion, “...you know they are best not interfered with, and left to arrange matters in their own fashion.”

“That is easy prediction,” I refuted him. “See what a man does, and then afterwards tell him that thus you predicted he would act!”

Fludd reached across and took my arm, drawing me down towards the gate of the mill yard. The stallion followed at a twitch of the rein, hooves clopping hollowly in the morning mud.

“You have more confidence in my predictions than you allow to appear in your speech.” His grasp on my arm did not loosen. “I judge you spoke so to Mr Secretary Cecil.”

His remark did not come as so great a shock as he wished. Albeit it was less likely Saburo and I should be known to have met Cecil, it occurring outside of the court, a quite mundane intelligencer could have discovered the matter by careful questioning.

“If all’s foretold...” I shrugged. “If I speak to Milord Cecil, or even your King James himself, it would hardly concern you—you have already predicted the matter, and know you shall succeed, no matter what!”

Fludd let go of my arm and stepped back, looking up into my face, his eyes slitted against the dazzling sun. “It takes no calculation to tell that Mister Secretary Cecil would forbid you to either kill or openly betray me, yet. He wants all his coneyes in one net. A snare to take astrologers, mathematicians, and noblemen, all in one. Does he not?”

Indeed, you *do* owe Mr Secretary a great debt. You are neither armed, nor accompanied by armed men, at this moment; I should out with my blade and stick you through the throat like a hog-butcher.

Quelling disquiet aroused by a memory of how he had eluded me when we fought, I shrugged again. “If I had indeed spoken of you to Milord Cecil, do you suppose I should have returned here?”

“Any man might guess as much.” Fludd smiled sadly.

He is a madman, I thought, not letting it show on my face. A few cunning guesses; the putting together of prophecies from gossip and observation...how many such charlatans have I seen attempt the French court? Except that *he* believes it all, paradoxes notwithstanding.

The sooner Cecil has him under the Tower’s interrogators the better. Then I am done with these perplexities!

“I leave you in Madam Lanier’s hands,” he said. “Travel down with the rag-carts; you are less likely to be attacked, or to get lost. The leader of the pack-horse train knows the way, fortunately. Our roads are much inferior to those the Duc de Sully so pleases to build in France.”

The pin-prick stung, but I did not bother to think whether or not it was malice. I was for that moment too bent on calculating how soon I might go and return, how long news commonly takes to get to Robert Cecil from Paris, what actions the Duke my master might take now that Henri’s government seemed to have fallen apart at a stroke...*Ravaillac’s stroke*.

How long will the Queen Regent leave him alone? The more it looks that all have abandoned him—Jeannin! and *Arnaud!*—the less she needs him dead. But if he should recover and come about? Ten days in the countryside is a torment to me now!

Well, then; I shall make it as short a time as is possible.

A growing babble of men’s voices made it clear the pack-train was about to leave. I put my foot in the stirrup and swung up into the saddle, easing the stallion’s head down so that he should have no chance of

exercising his willpower against mine. I did not look back at Robert Fludd.

I fornicated with Aemilia Lanier the first night out of London.

Madame Lanier proved a spiky but surprisingly literate companion on the road. The small platform on her pack-horse put her in close proximity to the very odorous bundles of clothes that made up its load. She, by the time we had skirted the Lambeth Marshes, appealed to my chivalry, and I rode west out of the London suburbs with her seated sideways before me on the dun-stone horse. He had none of the incomparable virtues of my lost jennet, but he was stout enough to carry two.

“A widow,” she said, not long into our naturally following conversation. “Signore Alphonse Lanier was musician to her late Majesty. It seems that guarantees no pension under her successor.”

Her eyes gleamed with humour when I looked down. Many men will try to be second husband to a widow. With her warmth resting against my chest, and her curving weight supported by one of my arms, I thought it a pleasure to be holding something so womanly.

“But a *playwright*, madame?”

“Poet,” she corrected. “This masque and this play of Fludd’s take time, but the work he assures me I shall be known for is partly done: ‘Salve Deus Rex Judaeorum.’ It is a poem devoted to virtuous women in the Bible, and, by extension, recounts how wrong are men today when they would blame every ill on women. I shall dedicate it to the Lady Arbella Stuart.”

That name was familiar to me as a cousin of the Stuart King, whom my master the Duke considered to have had as great a claim in ’03 to the throne as James. Aemilia would get small pence dedicating her poetry to a lady kept as the King’s pensioner, and not highly fed.

I affected surprise. “Will such a thing still be necessary? If you’re the fellow-conspirator of the man who puts King Henry the Ninth on the throne, won’t you be an influential woman under the new reign?”

We rode out of the habited lands now, where apples were green and hard on the trees. She spoke with a delicate, acid irony. “I suppose I might gain a small pension, proportionate to a woman’s talent.”

“You will not be a Henriette d’Entragues?” The Marchioness of Vernueil, being notorious for conspiracies, might not be the best example, I thought only as I spoke. *Being so much a whore as she is.* “I mean, for political influence?”

Aemilia Lanier supported herself by an arm around my back, and with her head down I could not glimpse her expression.

“Things are different in England,” she said finally. After a moment, she remarked, “I notice that you do not ask Doctor Fludd one question, monsieur. You do not ask him when you will die.”

That made me raise my brows. “I would not be so foolish. Have you?”

She nodded. A black curl crept out from under her linen coif; I took so much liberty as allowed me to tuck it back under the cloth with my gloved finger.

“These are tales to scare babies with.” I brushed her cheek with my knuckle, seeing her skin smooth, and unpainted, for all the creases at the corners of her eyes. *Put her in court dress, she would have admirers at St Germain.*

“He told me I might choose between a long life with poverty under King James, and short, moderate fortune but a name if I follow the fortunes of Prince Henry. If James lives, I am to be one of those who use the pen and pass away unknown. If Henry rules. . . .” She lifted her head, and fixed me with shiny eyes. She did not weep, but there was moisture in the corner of her eye. “It seems a small thing to you. I have *always* written, since I was little Aemilia Bassano being raised by the Countess of Sussex and beaten for unwomanly pursuits. I would sell my soul to be in Master Jonson’s place and write for the court. Sometimes I think I have done that very thing. Fludd is a good man, and what we do is just, but he knows more than any man should.”

I desired to rally her, but I contented myself with putting the reins into my left hand, and patting her own white hand with mine. “Why would I ask him a question that men ask of hedge-wizards and village conjurors?”

“Master Hariot said the same. I think I am the only one to have asked, and he calls me weak and womanish. I have thought. . . .” her dark eyes lifted, “. . . that Master Hariot may have too much belief in Doctor Fludd to ask.”

I laughed. “Or too much sense! What man wants to know the day? It’s enough knowing we *must* die.”

The roads of England are worse than any in Europe. The weather stayed sunny and dry, however, so that the train of pack-horses progressed faster than they otherwise might, although much slower than a single rider. We had little enough company on the road through the country called Surrey—indeed, I noticed that we seemed to be avoided by such other travellers as we met.

Aemilia Lanier roused herself from her meditations to answer my question. “Where do you think old clothes come from? They’re from the dead, monsieur. Fludd’s workers strip them off the plague corpses. A look at the parish records will tell you how good business is of late.”

I have never been unwilling to take up my sword to duel or go into battle. Imagining myself caught in the arid, deserted streets of London during a plague outbreak. . . . *now there is a bad death*, I thought. *And one I can see any man asking an astrologer-conjuror how to avoid.*

She added, “Once the clothes have been through the boiling and the shredding at Wookey, they lose the contagion. Perhaps before that. The pack-horse men never seem to die of any disease. Then, the rags come back to London in the shape of paper: sermons, tracts. Play-books—which the Lord Chamberlain regards as an equally vile contagion!”

She smiled. She wore a bum-roll under her petticoats, that I could feel against me when she swayed as we rode. Her bodice was full, nipped in to her farthingale waist. The weather remained hot enough that her travelling cloak stayed rolled up with mine, tied behind the saddle. The simple coif that covered her hair was dazzling white in the sun, like the pinner that covered her shoulders and the upper slopes of her breasts.

What I could see of her skin there was a little slack with age, but pleasantly rosy as she realised that she was watched. There was some grey at her temples, not covered by the coif, but as I put my arm about her pliant waist, I felt she had an uncomplicated ease with her body that any woman of the French court might have envied.

Towards later afternoon, coming to an inn at the village where we would stop for the night, she dismounted and met me again after I had stabled and cared for my own beast.

“Is there a reason for two rooms?” She spoke directly, with none of the teasing and bargaining of a whore. “I have given your name as Master Lanier, but if you do not like it, say so, and I will tell them that

you are my brother.”

It is not the habit of the God-fearing English to be so forward. This smacked more of court life, and her Italian name. Bowing, I said, “You honour me, madame,” and took her arm.

I like her honesty; I am in two minds about her forwardness.

Perhaps she suspected as much; it was all the forwardness I got from her. We ate in our rooms, and her way of looking at me bashfully over the meal reminded me that I was a man, a tall man, bodily stronger than she, and a cultured Frenchman besides. I set myself to charm her; she was duly charmed, and when we retired for the night, I upped with her skirts, and went no further forward with my own undressing than undoing of my breeches.

With her thighs smooth under my hands, a disquieting thought pushed its way into my mind. *Is this but a desire on my part to wipe out the first image of me from her memory?* No man likes to feel at so much of a disadvantage, being seen helpless, beaten, and kicked.

My prick woke to the feeling of her warmth under my palms, and I condemned the thought to oblivion. I drew out of my pocket a linen prophylactic, and tied it about my member, concealed from her view by her skirts and petticoats—I doubted it tactful to mention my certainty that, if she would offer her goods to me, they were likely more than a little shop-worn, and I had no desire to find myself boarding a fire-ship.

When I had her dancing on my stiff cock, her self-possession stripped away, and when I used my hand on her (having learned somewhat in Paris in my years), and brought her to uncontrolled release, I swallowed her shout with my mouth and felt obscurely vindicated.

At the same moment, perhaps by some awkwardness of my body, or lack on her part, I felt my own climax departing unsatisfied.

I fell beside her, unspent, as my breathing subsided in the long evening light. Frustration tensioned my muscles—and *she has not noticed*, I saw. Lost in her own pleasure.

Poor bitch. My anger deflated with my prick. She will be past the age to give sons, and a widow with no money...no wonder she will play the whore to gain allies wherever she can.

Aemilia’s voice broke the silence. “Are you thinking that Doctor Fludd bid me do this, so that you would talk to me after sex?”

I rolled over and smiled at her. “If he’s right in what he ‘calculates,’ I have no secrets from him. No, I was not thinking that, Madame Aemilia. I was assuming—perhaps all too confidently—that Madame has entertained herself with me for her own pleasure.”

She chuckled. It was a ladylike sound for one so recently abandoned to grunting, heaving pleasure. Still, as the proverb has it, *No court lady does not shit*.

“That’s not too great a confidence, monsieur. You’re a tall man of your hands, and I rather think I have been entertained indeed.” She rolled over onto her side, her soft breasts shifting on her rib cage, and slid her hand from the hollow of my neck, over my chest, and down the hair of my belly towards my male parts. This distance being too great for her—she was not a tall woman—she had to sit and lean forward, by the time she reached toward my balls.

I took her hand and put it away from my prick.

Besides the undiplomatic presence of a prophylactic, I will not risk such a failure twice.

“Regrettably, I am not a young man, madame. But if you would be entertained otherwise, you have only to let me know.”

I chased her shivers down her soft belly with my tongue, playing with that woman’s mouth that God has set in their lower parts, until she clawed at the mattress, sweating and wrenching herself about.

Unawares, I felt myself overcome by an odd feeling of contempt. We are none of us dignified in sexual congress, but to have this older woman as abandoned to pleasure as any young maid....

“Some woman taught you this!” she gasped.

I had a sudden image of Aemilia, her streaked hair uncoiled as it was now, with a woman’s head between her cool, plump thighs.

And if it were Dariole, in her men’s clothing, whose face lifted bright-eyed and breathless from a woman’s secret parts—?

Madame Lanier underwent that convulsion which in the female denotes pleasure, and I astonished myself by spending, helpless, with as much violence as if it came up from my toes; shooting my seed into the linen and the depths of the mattress, taken helpless and unaware by my sudden imagining of Arcadie de Montargis de la Roncière with a female lover.

An hour after noon the following day, I rode ahead on the poor excuse that I wanted to scout the countryside. A high covering of cloud left the sky grey, but the world warm and remarkably clearly lit. I slowed to a walk after my initial gallop.

If Madame Lanier has her best days behind her, where are mine? I doubt her a handful of years my senior. If *she* is clownish for desiring to feel desirable...ah, but she is a woman! For men, it’s different.

The pebbles and rocks in the ruts of the road stood out clearly. The sound of the mount’s hooves on the earth, the rustle of wind in thick-leaved hazel hedges, the sun’s heat on the woollen broadcloth of my sleeve, and the slight soreness of my prick, fretting against my under-linen; all these were present to me in a clarity of light, pressed down on by the unforgiving sky.

Denial is impossible. All my obsession is still for a young woman who is less than half my age. For a young woman who is more a young man than she is a demi-whore like Lanier.

Even the rocking motion of the saddle made my flesh hot, stirring at the thought of Mlle Dariole.

You are well over twice her age. Any man at court would take you for a rich shop-keeper, in search of a poverty-stricken noble family who will sell him their child-bride!

I felt my face heat, with more than could be accounted for by the Spring sun.

Marry her? Dariole would *howl* in her scorn.

And middle-aged shop-keepers with fat purses do not seek out boy-girls who look at their best in breeches, I reflected. Why *not* take Lanier? Separate her out from Fludd when Cecil and his men take the conspirators; let her express her gratitude and warm my bed back to Europe! She’s perfect: a woman of experience, age, favourable looks, intelligence; not liable to be shaken by my profession of conspiracy...

I could not get out of my mind the memory of Dariole bawling like a five-year-old in front of the house in More Gate, all her dignity and young pride gone with the shit soaking her clothing, and running off her boots over the cobbles. At that moment, my sympathy went out to her, moved by nothing more rational than a kind of...fellow-feeling, one might call it.

And she abandoned even the memory of being humbled within an hour of it happening!

Oh, I don't doubt she plans to hurt this Guillaume Markham if she can, but still, to come back so quickly from such a catastrophe to her pride....

My ruminations stopped as the dun stallion paused. We stood on the crest of a hill, at a forked road. The light made the ranks of receding western hills in front amazingly clear. I turned in the saddle, seeing the pack-horse train curving slowly up the bottom of the slope, and shortened the reins so I might wait for the guide.

Clear as the diminishing hills, I saw one thing which I could not hide from myself.

Rather than bed Aemilia Lanier again, you would be in Guillaume Markham's place, and take whatever humiliation it is that Mlle Dariole is devising for him.

It is not so easy as a matter of will, to abandon a woman with whom one is perversely besotted.

But it's done and over; I have made my apologies to her; there's no more to be said.

I should watch over her, I thought. As well as the need for her discreet silence, justice would have me see her safely back to Paris—but at the moment she is safer away from the Queen Regent here. Although Marie de Medici will have agents in London soon, if she does not now....

And if Milord Cecil decides I am more useful being exchanged for some favour of the new Queen Regent, he'll send me back with any Frenchman with whom I am associated. That is my risk; it should not be Dariole's.

But it is.

I'll write a report that's all M. Cecil could wish, I reflected, as the pack-train creaked and whinnied its way up towards me. *If I didn't think at least one of these horse-drivers to be Cecil's spies, I'd abandon this journey and make it up.*

I need a gap within which I can slip back into France, and bring M. de Sully what I know. Any delay may be fatal: who knows when Madame the Queen Regent will decide herself safe enough to do without him? If his influence weakens, is he in less danger, or more?

Heavily laden pack-horses passed me. I touched heels to the stallion's sides, having him out of a clump of new grass, and fell in behind the train.

We spent that night in a deep, steep-sided valley, but Madame Lanier had cause to be disappointed when I bid her hire two rooms at the inn: one for herself and one for her "brother."

Her cheeks flushing at the insult, she said, "That is the disadvantage of older men. They have the much more skill, but they are so rarely up to the occasion!"

Choosing to deliberately sever relations, I returned, "I hope your poetry for the masque is less stale than your insults, madame," and had the bitter content of seeing her march off, head high. It would, I thought, be less wearisome to quarrel than to spend nights I did not desire to, fucking her.

She is no prophylactic for me, against desires for Dariole. I will therefore withstand all on my own.

On the sixth morning out of London, we passed a town called Wells, graced with a heretic cathedral, and came to Wookey. Madame Lanier left me without a word, to go in company with the miller's wife and cousins, while the pack-train began to unload. I found the miller, and showed him the letters Robert Fludd had given me for the purpose.

"Certainly, Master Herault." The heavy-set man filled leather lungs and sent a shout cracking across the mill yard. "*Edward!* I'll loan him to you now, master."

A yellow-haired youth, fat and red-faced in the English way, trotted from the horses towards us.

The miller added, unselfconsciously, "He can take you up to look at the Witch's Cave."

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20

Witch's cave?"

I suspected a game of "cozen the foreigner," even confronted by this serious-faced English yeoman.

"Up at the Wookey Hole. Witch has been there since my great-grandfather's time. Though I suppose Doctor Fludd and her, they'd get along well enough. *Ned!* Get over here, you dummock, and do what the master wants. Master Herault, this is my son, Master Edward Field."

The English boy bobbed a rustic bow. I had supposed some man would be set to watch me, and report back to Aemilia Lanier if I did anything Fludd might not like. A twenty-year-old boy with a cudgel at his belt instead of a sword? I raised my eyebrows. I have never entirely understood whether this brand of Englishman is a gentleman or a peasant.

He led me north. The land to the south was all apple trees now, white blossoms laying across the green Levels; less advanced than the northeastern country that we had come from. We strode up the track from the mill to the cavern, he in front. I reflected that I had no inn's man-servant to clean this mud off my boots. Edward Field remarked on the unusual late Spring, and twisted off a sprig of hawthorn flower from the hedge that we passed. He tucked it into one of his button-holes.

I pointed at his russet doublet breast. "Why, monsieur?"

"No reason in particular, master." He began to babble of apple-fields, coppiced trees, and the height of the stream for turning the mill-wheel—anything except answer my question about something that had all the hallmarks of peasant superstition. He did not have his father's equanimity.

If the peasants locally think like this boy, it will be of use to Fludd in keeping any man out of the caves.

My interest in agriculture and arboriculture is less than minimal. I observed that the road up to the caverns was a mere track, full of flints and loose stones, and streams of rain-water running down over our boots. Half a day of courtiers and servants up and down here and it's a stream-bed, a marsh, a bog!

I reined in my thoughts. *But then, that is no true concern of mine.*

It's an incurable problem of the agent playing a false game: so much concentration brought to bear often makes it a true one.

This once done, I thought, I took note enough of landmarks on the way here. I can abandon the pack-train and cover the ground back to London in half the time.

"Has your father handled business for Master Fludd long?" I asked, with an eye to Cecil and his ever-present curiosity.

"This last few years, sir."

"And your presses are not seized?"

"No, sir."

He didn't seem to think it an odd question. I wondered if my suppositions about why Monsieur Fludd might own a paper mill and printing press in such an out-of-the-way place were unfounded. An ideal way to print heretic pamphlets, occult books, revolutionary political tracts....

Well, I will check the pack-train before they set out back. Suppose I cannot prove conspiracy—I'm certain that Mr Secretary Cecil will be as pleased to suppress a black magician or political agitator.

The hill was high and steep above us. Green with grass and slippery moss: no approach for armed men that way. I glanced back, pausing to breathe. The mill itself can be easily taken, where it straddles the stream. And it has a better road than most of the farms we passed, since they need to bring the pack-train in and out. Cavalry might get to the mill easily, but then there is the river between them and the cave....

You will not do Milord Cecil's job for him.

I smiled to myself; then sobered. I do this because I habitually do it for M. de Sully: take note of all, no matter what, because there may be ways found to make use of it.

We climbed a steeper section of the path. It opened into a flat, wide space in front of the rearing face of the hill. The entrance to the caves was dark, plain, and usefully larger than I had expected.

"Here, master." Ned Field took two pitch torches out of his bag and set flint to steel, and handed one lit torch to me. I followed him in.

Light became dimness, and I stopped to let my sight adjust. Just inside the lip of the cavern entrance, cool air touched my face. Water dripped, the sound magnified. My boots slipped a little on the moss-covered rock. Holding the torch up, I saw the path drop steeply in front, and I glimpsed hewn parts of the stone walls. Light sent the shadows of rock-formations skittering ahead.

The Field boy's hand closed hard over his sprig of hawthorn. I saw a spot of blood on his glove as he released it. His eyes, gazing at me in the torch-light, showed white all around.

"We don't come up here. Except we leave offerings for the witch. It's a bad place."

I wonder you don't tell me it's like Broceliande, haunted by fairies! I kept the scorn off my face, and nodded for him to precede me. Fludd has doubtless owned his property here long enough to make sure the witch legend spreads and is properly emphasised.

Passing the walls, I reached out to touch them. Dry, gritty; and the torch-light made them sand-coloured, with swirls of darker rock. White dripping stone had fallen in many places, and hardened to pinnacles that hung down from the cave roof. Rather than grow used to flinching away, I hunched my shoulders. The English court would be well enough in here, few being as tall as I. I made mental notes for the report that would do duty both for Fludd and Cecil.

We descended a set of hacked-out steps where the passage narrowed. I heard Ned Field's breathing in the quiet. A bigger darkness opened up ahead. With only the scrape of his boots to guide me as he drew ahead out of torch-light, I followed him into a cavern. The pool of flame showed a floor, half-shale, like a river-bed. At that thought, I glimpsed running water off to my right, deep and with a deceptively still surface.

"River Axe," Field muttered. "Carry you under if you fall in. Sometimes water's up, 'n you can't come in here."

Stones crunched under my boots as I followed him up away from the underground river, climbing a slope between folds of rock, into a lower-roofed cavern.

Off to the sides, still pools reflected both our torches and the hanging and standing pinnacles of stone. The air felt cool—would feel no warmer in Summer, I guessed, and no colder in Winter.

With a covert smile, I reflected that it would make some nobleman a fine wine cellar.

"Here." Field lifted his torch and stopped.

Ahead, the passage opened up into a great cavern, large enough to be any man's banqueting hall, with a ceiling that no man except I should consider low. I walked forward, felt my boots splash in water as I came to the centre of the cavern, and lifted the torch to disclose a shallow small stream bisecting the floor. A tributary of the Axe?

Beyond it was a great flat space. Small caves led off that. To my left, a great silent pool flashed back gold light from the torches.

"Are there more caves beyond this?"

"Yes." The boy's teeth clattered as he spoke.

He may be leading me into a trap, I thought, crossing the shallow river, careful of my footing. Just because I know no reason why he should doesn't mean he won't....

He came up with me as I came out of the smaller caves abutting on the main ones. There was sweat on his forehead, under his ripe-corn hair.

"It's ideal," I confirmed. "The large cavern for a banquet and masque, the small caves for actors, servants, cooks. Will it be possible to have men up from your mill or the village, to put temporary wooden bridges where the river may rise?"

He flinched as if I sang a bawdy song in church. "If you pay them well, master. They won't like coming here."

A flight of soundless dark shadows flickered across the torch-light.

Field shrieked.

A man instinctively reacts to the sound of human panic: alarm thrilled through me. In a fraction of a heartbeat, I had the explanation. “They are bats, monsieur! No need to—”

He screamed as a man does when he cannot suck any air into his lungs, and pointed. His torch hit the rock floor and rolled in a cloud of evil-smelling smoke. My remaining light illuminated what he stared rigidly at, below and beyond us. A white, wide-mouthed face, entirely not human—

“Ah!” He grabbed my arm, knocking the torch. Before I could recover it, it fell; rolled into the water before me and was extinguished. “I saw her! *I saw her!*”

Field’s shrieks echoed off the walls. I shut him out, let myself remember direction, and groped on the floor for the fallen torch. I put my left hand on it, and coaxed it to light again.

“I’ll *die* now,” the English boy whispered.

The velvet jerk and rustle of wings made me duck. Heart hammering, I muttered, “Only if I slaughter you out of lack of patience, messire!” and sheathed my rapier—only then realising that I had drawn it.

“Come.” I got a hand under Ned Field’s arm and, since he wouldn’t walk, set about hauling and dragging him after me. I crossed the narrow stream and left the cavern. I was unsure, bumping him up the steps to the open air, finally, whether I had drenched his russet breeches in the stream’s water, or whether he had done that himself when he saw what he took to be a witch.

With a great deal of trouble, I got him down the hill to the paper-mill. His was a genuine shock. I have seen as much in skirmishes against cavalry in the Low Countries. A man’s mind can produce it as well from imaginary enemies, I thought, as I handed Ned over to his father, for his mother and aunts to lead away.

“I saw nothing,” I said when the bluff Englishman picked up the hawthorn twig that had fallen from his son’s doublet.

“You’re certain, master?”

“So certain that I will return and complete what I have begun.”

The man protested, both troubled and distrustful. I briefly wished I had a cross of the true religion with me—although on reflection I am not sure which the elder Field would have felt more devilish: a witch or a papist cross.

“The Devil gives her power,” he said as if he discussed the price of turnips. “Excuse me, Master Herault. I’m going to take my son to the parish priest. To see she hasn’t bewitched him into losing his manhood.”

I thought that, at the worst, Ned Field had lost only the contents of his bladder, but I doubted his father would find this a comforting remark. I bowed silently and left.

Bats are unnerving, well called the Devil’s bird. With that and the fact that he had lived with the legends all his life, I did not doubt that Ned Field had seen his witch. My heart had hammered. But now, the initial shock gone, I realised what it was that was so inhuman about the white face.

It was upside down, I thought. Reflected in water, in front of us. And however supernatural the witch may be, she was solid enough to ripple the water when she departed.

Ghosts and demons do not splash.

I abstracted a lantern from the stables without being seen by the mill workers or Lanier, and entered the Wookey caverns again some hour or so after I had left. I felt the air moving against my cheek. The roosting bats would have some access to the top of the hill, for their dusk and dawn flights, but I supposed that to be rock-chimneys not accessible to a man.

The calm chill of the cave sunk into my gloved hands as I held the lantern up. I became aware that the muscles across my back tensed. As silently as I could, I drew my sword before I entered the banqueting-cavern, and then stood still, letting the silence return.

My gaze took in cave wall, rock-spires, and a patch of white in the left-hand corner of my vision, about where the pool of water must be.

Cautiously, I turned my head.

Again, a white face reflected in the water, the eyes wide, the mouth reversed in the upside-down image. Masses of loose white hair shone in the unbroken surface of the pool.

I broke the silence. "Don't be afraid."

The reflection vanished. Rock scraped against another rock. A pebble plopped into the pool.

I took several swift strides, shattering the surface of the water, splashing through it; ducked, and came up under the lip of rock that I had guessed must be there—or else we should have seen the person standing there to listen, and not merely their reflection.

Halting, I opened the lantern-door.

She blinked in the yellow light.

A woman of short stature, with a livid face, and silver hair that hung down uncombed and uncut. She crouched down, back to the rock wall, putting out her hand.

"Excuse me, grandmère." I spoke quietly, but did not yet put my sword away. I stood the lantern in a natural limestone niche. She seemed an old woman, of the sort that peasants may well call witch.

She knotted her hands in her grubby bleached linen petticoats, staring up at me. One withered dug hung almost out of her smock. I doubted she would stand four and a half feet tall if she stood up. All that was dark about her was her eyes, and they blinked at me with a quick, irregular rhythm more reminiscent of a frog than a woman.

A madwoman.

"Excuse me," I repeated soothingly, mocking myself in my thoughts. "I had thought you something I should put in my report, but I see that is not so. I apologise, I will leave."

Too many years as the Duke's agent have left me with a predilection for seeing plots and rendezvous where there are none. Instead, here is an old peasant woman, probably driven out of her village, and probably seeking nothing more than to beg food.

In the lantern-light, I saw a fat, clear drop of water well up in her eye. It rolled down her cheek. She neither moved nor made a sound. It was barely obvious that she breathed.

Another tear succeeded the first, running down her dirty cheek. Another. I opened my mouth to speak,

and was interrupted. She spoke, loudly. Her voice made such a dry mangling of her words that it was a moment before I realised she had spoken neither in English nor French.

“No ghe credo!”

One of the languages of Italy, I finally recognised through her weeping. From Padua, from Venice...Mordieu! At least not Florentine, like Concini!

The old woman reached down, staring at me. She pulled up the hem of her top petticoat at the back. I could not work out why she showed me her filthy under-petticoats—and then she hooded the back of it like a shawl, covering up her uncovered hair.

A modest woman will always have her hair covered. That this evident madwoman could remember so much was almost as surprising as being addressed, here, in a foreign tongue.

“Who are you, grandmère?” I repeated it quietly in French, English, and the smattering of Italian tongues I had picked up visiting Savoy.

“*Son Caterina....*”

“Catherine.” Slowly, so as not to alarm her, I knelt down. She continued to crouch against the wall, as if it were all that held her up, still shorter than I although I knelt. Her eyes lightened as she slitted them against the lantern’s candle. Her hands, prominent with veins and knuckles, clenched the material of her petticoat together under her chin. Without the silver hair showing, she could have been anywhere between fifty and seventy.

And what will she do, when Fludd’s men arrive here?

I felt a stab of pity. There are such women called witches in France; some have irrational fears that every man is seeking to harm them, or speak constantly to voices that no other man can hear. Some claim to hear the voice of Monseigneur God, as Ravailiac did, and keep the priests busy working out whether they do or whether it is the Devil.

“You should go,” I began.

“Mi son Caterina!” she exclaimed.

I am Catherine, Caterina. A wandering madwoman who remembers that once she had a name, and that it mattered what it was. I gave her a nod of acknowledgement and rose slowly to my feet. The chape of my scabbard scraped the rock wall behind me, and I froze. After thirty heart-beats it seemed that she had not noticed—that it would be possible to back out of this cavern without causing her to break out into a cat-scratching fury.

“Ti xe’ Valentin Raoul St Cyprian Anne-Marie Rochefort de Cossé Brissac!”

I stopped.

The woman’s black eyes lifted, gazing up at me where I towered above her crouching body. She repeated, “Ti xe’ *Valentin*. Ti xe’ Valentin Raoul Rochefort de Cossé Brissac....”

“Not *another* one!” I bellowed.

She flinched back from the echoes in the surrounding dark. Her mouth trembled. I held out my rapier, the blade glinting as if it were oiled.

“Whose trick is it *this* time? Fludd, again? Lanier? Come *out*, Aemilia! I will not take this foolery a second time!”

A few soundless black shadows whirred through the lantern’s light, disturbed by noise. I heard nothing that indicated the presence of another man. Or woman.

“Very well—what did they pay you?” I reached forward with my free hand, hauled the woman upright with my fingers knotted into her shift, and slammed her back against the rough stone wall. “Play-actor! Stop this and talk, madwoman!”

She gazed up at me, over my fist at her neck. Tears slid out of her eyes. Tremulously, unmistakably, she smiled.

“Oh, cielo, misericordioso, voi non potete credere quanto mi fate felice!” She slipped into an educated, accented French. “Oh, good merciful heaven, you can’t believe, sir, how happy you are making me!”

I put my rapier blade across her chin, close to the hilt, just above my fist, so that the edge brought out a trickle of blood on her skin. “Who told you my name!”

Her smile didn’t waver. Her pale tongue darted out, and licked up her own tears as they ran down the wrinkles about her nose and mouth. She gazed up at me as she wept, her eyes shining with absolute joy.

I snapped, “I was correct, at the first. You *are* mad!”

“You don’t hurt me.” She did not move a fraction under my blade. “Here you are, here you are....”

Spontaneous joy is a difficult sensibility to fake. Tears, fear, disgust, or liking are easier. Whoever put her here, she is...genuinely overjoyed to see one Valentin Raoul Rochefort.

Why?

“Does Fludd think two fortune-tellers will impress me more than one?” I demanded. Her black eyes in her pallid face shone dizzily at me. She beamed. I do not like to hit an old woman, but a pawn of Fludd’s...I shook her, harshly, keeping the hank of her makeshift shawl in my fist.

“You can tell me, grandmère, or I can beat it out of you! He told you my name. Now you tell me his!”

“I put myself here, Valentin.” She hung in my grip, voice husky, gazing up at me with wet eyes. “I have been waiting for you. Ten years I have waited. And now...no ghe credo! No matter how sure I was.... It is you; it is Rochefort; it is you....”

I removed my sword and let go of her.

Immediately after, I grabbed and caught her arm as she slid down the cave wall.

Exasperated as much with myself as with her—why should *I* care if old bones are brittle?—I squatted down before her as she folded into a kneeling position. Her petticoats fell down, her head uncovered, and her smock shifted. Something caught the light at her waist.

A rosary. Old, polished dark wood, hanging from the cord serving her as a belt, evidently familiar to the fingers. The metal crucifix winked in the lantern-light.

I raised my brows. “Not all of England is heretic, but still, not a wise thing to be wearing. You were waiting for me. And now you, also, are about to tell me my future. And I am supposed to believe this?”

She laughed.

A small sound, in the emptiness surrounding us, but it left me open-mouthed in incredulity. At last, I managed to observe, "It seems to be my lot in life, to be mocked at by women."

"Poor Valentin!" Her bright eyes seemed almost tender. That, I thought, is more frightening than her pretence of having been waiting for me.

I looked at her sternly. "So. You followed me here. Superstition keeps out the peasants. You have been told my name, or a name you suppose me to go by. Be careful I don't lose patience with this farce. Whatever your actions mean, they will be irrelevant once you are dead."

I held my rapier with the point out to the side, ready either to cut at an attacker from the darkness, or slash back at the hag.

"You have never killed old women, Valentin. You will not begin now."

I glanced about the small, yellow-lit cave. Lanier, Fludd; they will have no reason I can see for wishing me delayed here. Cecil—no, too baroque even for Milord Cecil. What then? The approach of another, as yet unknown, enemy?

"I can show you." The old woman put her dirty hand on my arm. "It isn't far. I can show you why the..." Evidently a French word deserted her. "I can demonstrate that I have no need of a third party to tell me who you are."

"An invitation to go through a maze of black caves? I thank you." I inclined my head mordantly to the Italian woman. "I think *not*."

Her gaze remained steady. She shook her head very slightly; it might have been a palsy. "I am not as skilful as the London Master. You will have to come with me and answer questions."

For one moment, I took it to be the term of a School of Defence.

Fludd, I thought, a moment after.

Plausible. But I have seen too much deceit in the past to be convinced by mere sincerity.

At the worst, it is another dozen of Marie de Medici's murderous gentlemen. If they have found I am in England, it is a likely place to murder me. However, I have a sword and a pistol; it will go hard if I cannot use these caves to avoid an ambush, if I know where it is set.

And that, I believe, means that grandmère here must speak to me.

I stood up briskly, offering her my hand. "Show me, then."

The hand she put into mine was bare of any glove, and had any number of old white scars and calluses on it, but it did not have the bundle-of-sticks feeling that old court ladies often have; it was still a little plump.

"Valentin, Valentin, Valentin!" she almost sang. Her weight, as she used her grip on me to rise, was also more than I had anticipated. "I'm not mad." The fingers of her other hand picked at her skirts. "Or witch. I am not strega. Follow me, now. You will need the lantern. Bring it."

"I have noticed, also," I said, as I picked up the lantern, "that women are a little prone to giving me orders."

She put her hand to her mouth and giggled like a young girl.

An appearance of compliance may win many things. Holding up the lantern, I gestured for her to precede me.

She led me on and in, this cave proving low-roofed but long. The rock under my boots felt dry, barring two or three standing pools. I walked hunched over. Twice the ragged, pinnacle-studded roof soared abruptly up into heights so great that the lantern-light could not pierce the blackness—and once into a wider space, that echoed like the vastnesses of Our Lady in Paris. Rock showed runnelled and melted, like candle-wax. Beyond that, the roof came down low enough that even the old woman must hunch over. I took care to look back in the lantern-light at regular intervals, memorising the landmarks of our way. A shiver went through me, anticipating what I might meet in this labyrinth.

“Here, Valentin. I live here.” The old woman ducked her head under a natural arch, and I followed, finding by lifting the lantern that I could stand up beyond it.

The surface of the limestone walls shone cross-hatched in every direction. Not with scratches, I realised as I gazed. With signs of the type that are seen in geometric and occult books. Scratched whitely into the fine surface...

“Calculations,” I surmised, somewhat ironically. “Mathematics.”

“It was difficult when I first came here.” Her voice spoke beside me. “Later, I could steal paper and ink from the mill.”

I raised a brow, sardonic. “Are you not afraid to leave your predictions here, for all future ages to discover?”

“The river’s level will have risen before they can be understood, and all these caverns drowned.”

The thought of this cave, and others, filled up with water to the roof, oddly disquieted me. She moved off into the shadowed end of the cavern. I walked in her wake, past the lines of writing scratched into the wall, not quite sure what I glimpsed beyond her.

Paper.

I reached out to touch one of the stacks, finding it slightly damp and gritty under my fingers. The lantern showed me that the ink hadn’t run, only spread a little into the fibres of the paper. All of it—I looked around at pile upon pile, higher than the woman’s head, stacking the end of this cave—all of it covered with hen-tracks, scribbles, equations, and diagrams.

“Here *you* are.” She held out one undistinguished sheet of paper. “I use the Nolan method, you’ll observe. And that is my own proof of the Bruno Equations, there. I’ve been waiting for you these ten years and more.”

“Of course you have.” I nodded reflexively, and sighed. True, there was a nest of blankets in one corner of the cave, torn and re-woven as a sow’s nest, but she might have slept in it for a decade, or only a handful of nights—or made it this morning.

I put the lantern down, reached out, and took the old woman under the chin, my fingers and thumb extending to either side of her throat. Her fingers scrabbled at my glove. I lifted her up on her toes, violently enough that her remaining teeth clicked together.

So close, she smelled appalling. I looked into her white-rimmed eyes. “All I have to do is close my hand

and you will cease to breathe. I assume you wish to live: most men do. Tell me who you are, why you are here, and who told you my name?"

Her eyes gazed with brilliant warmth. Courage and ease are difficult to fake, so close. Her heart-beat was a little fast under my hand, but not more so than could be accounted for by physical exertion.

"Who are you?" I demanded.

"Suor Caterina, born Elena Zorzi, of the Veneto, not far from Padua; but living in Venice most of my life."

I had not expected to be answered so easily. "*What* are you?"

"I am a Sister of the Poor Clares." There were vertical lines in her face that all pulled together and met at her mouth when she pursed her lips. "I don't want to lie to you, Valentin. I was dismissed from the Clares. But I still consider that I am a bride of Christ."

The dignity of her words went ill with her stinking clothes, half-naked state, and matted hair. I tightened my grip a fraction and moved my hand upwards, lifting her higher onto her bare toes.

"Who sent you here? Who told you about me?"

Wet snail-tracks marked her wrinkled eyes. She sounded breathless, as well she might, with my hand still about her throat.

"No man sent me. Unless God did. Long ago! I found the place, and waited. It's all true. Because here you are!"

She looked up at me with eyes that I swear glowed in the lantern light. I realised I had slackened my grip. She regained her footing on the sandy floor.

"Valentin Rochefort!" Her gaze moved up and down me in a way that made me feel curiously discomfited. "I did not know you would be so tall—or so strong. And a skilled swordsman, that I might have guessed; I calculated you would be a soldier—that is all those pages, over there. Ostrega! And a brave man, and a clever one. You did not run from the witch; you sought her out. It is such a pleasure, and I am so relieved, and you will forgive a religieus her words, but this is...a miracle!"

Her ancient face looked, for a moment, like a child's; a small child who has been given a gift for her saint's-day or Twelfth Night.

"I am not used to being looked at in quite such a way," I observed, standing undecided for a moment. "Why does every man—and now woman!—appear to think me some villain or hero that Fate brings them?"

Her smile curved into cheerfulness. "But no! There's nothing *special* about you, Valentin. You're a very ordinary man. You happen to be in a useful place, at a crucial time. That is what makes you a miracle!"

I confess I felt myself almost deflated.

"Fate has not chosen me?"

"Well, you are not to be France's second Pucelle, one supposes." Her lips moved as if she suppressed laughter. "I do not think you would make a splendid woman in armour, Valentin."

"You are perhaps correct..." I did not sheath my sword. With my other hand, I felt in my breeches for

the slit to my pocket-bag, and drew out a clean kerchief. I held it out to her. After a moment, she took it in a quivering hand.

She did not wipe her face. She folded the linen swiftly on a diagonal, and put it on her head, tying the corners under her chin, making something that if neither coif nor wimple, did at least cover her naked hair.

“Sit down, madame.”

“I am used to Suor Caterina. ‘Sister Caterina.’” She sank down to the cave floor and settled on the sand, gathering her multitudinous petticoats about her, so that I could not see her bare feet. Her chest rose and fell swiftly; I wondered if she might be about to have a fit and die. Suddenly she put her hands to her face, and then brought them down again, uncovering an uncommon stubborn expression.

“This.” I indicated the rat’s nest of papers. “Is all trash, Suor.”

“I knew this wouldn’t be easy. I was right.” She spoke as if I had not. “I am *right*. This was the test—if you didn’t come, if you weren’t Valentin Rochefort, if you were the character of a man who kills troublesome old women...I had no way to know: I’ve calculated you ‘soldier’ and ‘assassin’ and ‘spy.’ As to your behaviour, it seemed much more probable that you should be a mere murderer, not an honourable man.”

I shifted uneasily at “honourable.” “Are you confessing a failure of your foretelling? You know I have killed, but not whether I’m honourable, as men go?”

“I calculate a man’s actions.” She wiped her withered-apple face with her finger-tips. “Not his mind when he does them. There is nothing in the Nolan Formulae to show a man’s heart.”

I stood very still, things stirring in the back of my mind. “I am less concerned with honour than you think....”

Squatting, I checked the lantern. Light for another half-hour. Should I go back to the mill? Is there something happening for which this is a planned diversion?

Except that I can think of nothing which will threaten *me*, rather than Fludd’s faction. And if his conspiracy falls down about his ears, my heart will not break.

The old woman smiled. It was obscure to me why an elderly nun whom I had just manhandled should regard me both with apparent affection and amusement.

“I work with the same calculations as the London Master, Roberto,” she said. “He and I were both students of the Nolan. I am hiding nothing from you, Valentin.”

She spoke a passable good French, with perhaps an accent of the Veneto, but she might as well have been speaking M. Saburo’s Nihonese.

“When you say ‘the London Master,’ you mean Robert Fludd.”

“Yes.”

“And this ‘Nolan’?”

“Magister Giordano Bruno, the Neapolitan; dead these ten years.”

The name roused no memories in me. “What did you study with him?”

“Heresy.” Her surprisingly sweet smile blossomed on the ruined face. “And the black art of mathematics.”

“Which leads you to prophesy?”

“Yes.”

That Fludd and this woman speak in similar terms means little, I thought. It is not anything unusual: France and the Low Countries have been full of sects and societies for as long as I have lived. Anabaptists, Brownists, Kabbahlists, Puritans. And now mathematicians.

Half-humorously, I enquired, “And what are *you* going to tell me, to convince me that you foresee the future?”

She gave me a stern look that brought to mind her claim to be a nun.

“I can tell you,” she said, “what has happened to Signore Gabriel Santon.”

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21

Gabriel?

It stopped me like a blow to the chest.

“Madame, you have spent ten years in this cave? I believe not! Evidently you came by way of Paris on your road to England.”

She regarded me with stubborn refusal.

“You can *tell* me about Gabriel,” I added sardonically. “But there is no way that I can check the truth of it, which I suspect you count on.”

Her expression didn’t falter. “I know how it seems, Valentin. I thought this was the one thing that you could not know, that you would *want* to know. One thing I can tell you in thanks.”

“Thanks?” I said, incredulous.

“There was a great probability that you would come here. But a much smaller probability that you would be a man not willing to kill a mad old woman. . . I would like to do something *for* you, Valentin.”

The level chill of the caverns sank into my flesh.

If I ask her for any news of Gabriel, it will indicate a belief in her that I do not have.

I found myself oddly reluctant to gain her confidence that way, even were she mad enough to credit me.

“You and Robert Fludd,” I began, insistently.

She shrugged. “We were both students of the Nolan, Giordano Bruno. There were other students. Rome

called us 'Giordanisti.' I believe they thought us a species of secret Hermeticist society."

I shrugged. "The trouble with secret magical societies, madame, is that just because they hold to false ideas about the nature of the world, that does not mean the secret society itself does not exist. Or, that men will not take action on the basis of what they *believe* to be true. If you and Fludd and other men believe in some heresy of this Bruno...well, then, you do. But if I ask you to forecast what has become of my servant, that implies I give credit to your ideas, and not your mere existence. Madame, I regret I do not."

The old woman reached and put her fingers on my arm, just above the gauntlet-cuff of my glove. I could feel her press down on the woollen cloth, against the muscle of my forearm.

"You needn't commit yourself to any belief of mine, Valentin. You can consider it the ravings of a mad old woman. God knows, the rest of the Giordanisti have been lost now, to madness, or drink, or the sin of suicide..."

She seemed to collect herself.

"When King Henri died, Gabriel Santon at first got sanctuary in the Bastille with the Duc de Sully. He is now alone, in the Chatelet. Valentin, *no!*—he's neither hurt, nor put to the question." The old woman gripped me harder for a moment, then released my arm. "The Queen Regent took him out from the Duc's train at the first Parliament, the day after the assassination. Now she doesn't quite dare inflame matters between herself and the Duc, so merely holds him as a prisoner, while the Duc presses for his return."

"You're well informed about French politics for a woman who has spent the past decade in a cave."

She smiled, her expression teasing. "I am. But I didn't calculate the state of France. I read of it in a pamphlet printed here, before they were shipped up to London yesterday. I will never neglect a mundane source, just because I know how to use Bruno's Formulae."

"Convenient," I remarked; sarcasm possibly too prominent in my tone.

"I didn't learn of Gabriel Santon in a pamphlet! Cielo, Valentin, I calculate him a soldier, he'll survive a prison!"

Gabriel in the Chatelet? The thought left a sour taste. Only a matter of time before they will put him to the question, if so.

And if M. de Sully can't get a client freed from prison, his power is *greatly* lessened....

"Gabriel Santon is likely dead in one of the Faubourg kennels," I said harshly. "I can verify none of this, Suor Caterina. You know that."

She felt for her rosary. The lantern's light moved with the air in the cave. Shadows chased over her face.

"It's as well," she said. "Even my meeting you here, Valentin, by the knowledge I've gained this way, makes my further calculations difficult...I believe that the act of calculation *itself* makes the future uncertain."

Her dark eyes shifted. "When two people, myself and the London Master, both set about calculations for a single event—then, how possible it is to bring about that future becomes...cloudy. And so I can tell you little more about the Duc de Sully, and nothing more about Monsieur Santon."

If she had said *nothing more yet*, I would have assumed that to be the hook within the bait.

“I have a problem with unsupported testimony,” I remarked. “One woman’s word, without evidence, is worth nothing.”

“One *man’s* word.” The old Italian woman looked up from the water-shaped limestone. “Worse than nothing. With Ravailac dead, who is to say that the Queen Regent desired him to kill Henri, except you? And you’re known as Sully’s man.”

It chimed so well with my own unspoken thoughts—put aside until I might consider matters at home more fully—that it was ten heartbeats before I realised what she had said.

I stared at her. “Dear good God—*is there anybody who doesn’t know!*”

Exasperation does not, perhaps, lend a man all the gravitas he could wish.

“Ostrega!” Suor Caterina giggled. “It must seem so, to you. I apologise, Valentin. I was thinking aloud. I’ve become used to talking to myself here.”

“Or perhaps Fludd rides down here to talk to you? He must, by his own claims, know you’re here. Or if he does not, is that not proof positive of his charlatan-hood?”

Her laughter faded. “He calculated me long ago as one of the Giordanisti who make their home in a cave, in rags, and so must be mad—this isn’t the first such cave I’ve lived in. Now...you’ll be familiar with that ruse of war, to hide where the enemy won’t look for you, because they *know* it’s theirs? I’ve made as few predictions about this place as I can, of late years, for fear he’ll find his calculations about it becoming cloudy, and see me under his nose.”

The woman calling herself Suor Caterina stood up slowly, and with care.

“I’ll show you a way out of the back of the caves,” she added. “Such a thing will be useful for you to know.”

I did not entirely discount the possibility of a dozen men with swords in some back corner of the caverns, but I nodded and followed, ready enough with sword and lantern for any ambush that might lurk in these white-and-ivory passages, among the glittering minerals and the still pools.

“Do I take it you prophesy an escape for me, through here?” I asked sourly, taking my landmarks. “I promise you, I don’t plan to be here long enough to need one.”

“Few men read the future.”

She sounded slightly smug. I shortened my stride, so as not to out-distance her. Half in jest, I said, “But you do—and Monsieur Fludd. Or is yours yet another method of astrology to his?”

“You’ll have heard something from the London Master, but this is the truth of it.” She spoke as she walked, sure-footed on the convex rock floor. “The calculations were devised back in the ’80s by Giordano Bruno the Nolan and his students. I’d been a follower of his for some years before they imprisoned him. That was in Venice, in ’92....”

Blackness lay ahead, deceiving my eyes until I saw a curl of light reflected, and knew it for water.

“The method was being worked out.” The old woman’s stride did not falter; she walked on into the water. “The equations yielded results better for a hundred years in the future than for a present today, but

even so, some present-day results could be calculated....”

I moved close to the water’s edge as her voice faded, holding the light higher. Beneath the surface, crystalline pinnacles gleamed. The pool or stream went into the dark, out of sight. Caterina’s back was diminishing ahead, into darkness, moving more slowly now. I guessed that the depth increased. If it was indeed the River Axe, both the current’s speed and the possibility of deep caverns beneath us did not entice me.

“Presumably, signora, you do not intend to drown us?” I eased myself into the water, feeling it cold even through the leather of my boots.

Her chuckle came out of the darkness. “Feel below the water. There is a rope to guide you. I don’t need it. I have been here long and long.”

I sheathed my rapier, and lifted the lantern for a last look at landmarks on this shore. The light showed me black and red patches on the cave-walls, some coincidentally taking the shape of beasts. With my free hand, I felt under the water’s still surface. I touched a taut rope. *Anchored under the water, out of sight; she is suspicious—and perhaps rightly so.*

Within moments, the light shone only on water.

The cave walls were lost outside the lantern’s reach. I began to slide the soles of my boots carefully over the rock surface, under the water. For all the guide-rope reassured me—dripping cold now that I brought it up to the surface in my grip—I perceived how easily a man might lose his bearings here.

“The Nolan Formulae,” Caterina said, her voice a whisper ahead in the dark. “It’s to my credit that I devised a way they could be used close at hand, to foretell the near days. Robert Fludd, whom Master Bruno had met in England, refined it again, to see further: four or five centuries ahead.”

Her form emerged from darkness, waiting for me. She turned her head, gazing back. “Our first task was to stop the execution of Master Bruno by the church: we held out for nine years, and then failed.”

“If you knew the future, how could you fail?”

I expected her answer to be Fludd’s: *A man may know all, but not do all.*

She nodded and smiled, as a dominie will with a boy who asks a clever question, and began to walk on beside me. She must push against the water’s weight, it coming up nearly to her hips.

“Bruno’s Formulae give only what *may* happen. Puts into mathematical calculation what is probable, and what is less likely, and what is all-but-impossible. If I desire an all-but-impossible thing, I can calculate what sequence of remarkable events would first need to come to pass, before it can happen. Then those events can be brought about by the actions of men.”

Water numbed me cold from the knees down; I could not tell if it were merely temperature, or if the seams of my boots leaked. The implication of what she said came suddenly to me. “I might have *avoided* what Fludd had rehearsed for me?”

I had not meant to blurt out such an unprofessional display of anger. I chewed at my lip for a moment.

She lifted her shoulders in a very Italian shrug. “The London Master has had the ten years since Bruno burned to make his calculations. He won’t have been content with first-order calculations! Ostrega! The iterations he will have been through. All his traps will be very thoroughly laid, to make events come out to his wishes.”

The level of the water lowered, gradually; I noticed the rope grew taut, anchored to some under-water rock surface as it must be. I let it slip through my fingers, following the old woman up the shallowing slope. She dripped, stepping ashore. I adjusted the hilt of my rapier, where the flat black ribbon-guard and pommel bit into my hip. Every thrust, every ward, *known*. . . .

The lantern illuminated another cave. I followed her, past smooth pinnacles. She pointed ahead. I realised that the slope increased—that we climbed, passing between narrowing walls. I held the lantern down close to the steep, dusty rock-face. No tool-marks on the stone. Limestone worn down by water.

I thought that appearing suddenly from the back of Wookey would fit my brief as Fludd's scout, should Madame Lanier observe me. All the same, I should prefer not to be seen. If I *must* follow Mr Secretary Cecil's orders and forward this conspiracy, I have a liking for an ace-card slipped down the top of my boot.

I saw natural light ahead, not far short of mid-afternoon. The grit of a short, steep climb grated under my boots. The Italian woman scrambled up the rock-slope in front of me with unexpected sinewy speed, and I emerged behind her into the open air, and weather as much like Spring as it gets in England.

Ahead and to the right-hand side, a bank of woodland. I shot a glance to the left—dust-heavy hedges and green corn shoots ran down a slope to flat open territory: the Somerset Levels. *And so that must be south.*

No peasants, fortunately; the English peasant being more violent and undisciplined than the French, and not much cowed by a man's rank.

The old woman walked a few yards into the woods ahead, and seated herself on a fallen trunk under other silver birch trees, breathing hard, and wringing water out of her petticoats.

I went on, relying on the heat to dry my boots and hose, finding a few animal-paths. Within moments, I pushed through solid brush; looking suddenly down on a slope that dipped into a steep-sided valley, with a disused track at the bottom.

Returning, I found the Italian woman still present—and not, as I had briefly entertained the hope, the result of my banging my head on some rock-protrusion. By sunlight, she looked dirtier and plumper. Her smile was both ugly and beautiful. I could see her as an abbess. Or, more likely, some elderly nun who was the bane of her Abbess.

“Signora,” I said. The scent of the leaves, and wet boot-leather, and (from further off) some peasant's pigs, and the skitter of a pebble as I walked, seemed all to have a rare quality of focus about them. I realised that I must be attempting to perceive time as it passed. *Since this is a point where I must make a decision.* Dear good God, now they have *me* thinking that way!

Suor Caterina patted the fallen tree trunk. I hitched up the scabbard of my sword, and sat beside her. She pointed towards the cave entrance, invisible now behind Spring-grown brush.

“We fell out over what to do with his knowledge.”

I guessed her to be thinking of her stacked heaps of damp paper.

“Both Roberto and I agree that this year, this very year, is the one on which all turns; that the next half-millennium is decided by what we do.”

“Certainly,” I said dryly, “it has been a year not without interest.”

The wind flickered green and bright in the tree tops, and a lark sang. I have never preferred bucolic peace to the court. From her education, I suspected Caterina felt the same.

Which is the more dishonourable: to kill a deluded old woman, or to let her damage other men with the knowledge she has been given?

The woman's eyes, gazing up at me, swum with brightness; I couldn't find it in myself to deny her. *And I am not ungrateful to have a few more moments before I must act.*

"Is it not presumptuous?" I prompted. "Five hundred years?"

"I am presumptuous. Roberto thought so, when we were students together. But it was I who first calculated the accident that meant King Henri of France should die this year."

Accident.

The strength of my relief at that word startled me.

"It *was* an accident? Not one of your foretold things, something that you or Fludd contrived to make happen?"

Or contrived to make me the instrument of?

Caterina shook her head. "Henri's assassination wasn't contrived—except that I and the London Master didn't do anything to stop it. His death delays a war; something we both desired."

She pointed at me with a filthy finger, the nail black with dirt but beautifully shaped.

"And *you*. You had to prove yourself to be the man he thought you were, by bringing that about on your own. And from what happened, the London Master concluded you to be a plain assassin. And concluded that Marie de Medici bribed and threatened you into killing King Henri."

She frowned.

"Now I see you, I don't believe that. I hold by my original calculation. That it was by chance Henri died."

Dry in my mouth, I aimed for sardonic humour. "You allow for chance, do you, in all your foretelling?"

Before she could answer, and before I knew it would burst bitterly out of me, I shouted, "*You could have warned me!*"

She slid her bare heels in the tree-bark litter, muttering as she looked down. "Cielo, Valentin! I would have, if I could! King Henri Quatre *had* to die. His taking Jülich-Cleves would have started a war next year, that would spread to all of Europe. A war that would last sixty or seventy years—"

I interrupted her. "I do not expect to be lessoned in politics by elderly Italian nuns! There's a chance the other German Princes might come in, or the Spanish, but too small a chance to concern a man. . . . Besides, the war is not dead with King Henri."

"But it is. Sully can't carry the Grand Design on his own. Say what you like about the Medici, but she's not interested in war and conquest. Now that that war's delayed five, perhaps ten years—"

She grabbed at my doublet-arm with a hand still dirt-ingrained, despite the cold wetness of the underground stream.

“Valentin, I can’t convince you. I know that! I can’t teach you meta-mathematical theory. There aren’t six minds in Europe that could understand it, and you’re not one of them!”

Surprised, I found frustration moving me not to anger, but to humour. I put my hand on my breast and bowed where I sat. “Thank you, Suor....”

“You think yourself a genius?”

“I confess, I have wondered.”

She laughed.

I looked her in the face, as much as I might from above her. “You should let me take you from here. Take you to a convent. Even this benighted heathen country must have a charitable almshouse! Let me put you somewhere out of danger.”

She gazed up at me where I sat.

Made uncomfortable, I remarked, “Madame, I am a little old for you to be looking at me as if I were your favourite grandson!”

She chuckled; a surprisingly deep sound. Her thinness must come from starvation; she had the resonant chest of a woman who is large, in perfect health.

“Heavens! You’re right. You could, however, be my son.”

It was automatic: I replied, “Certainly—if you are much older than you look.”

“Oh, a Frenchman in very truth! Everything my Mother Abbess said about Frenchmen is true!”

The sun burned down. I wiped at my face with my sleeve. *Let Milord Cecil have a report featuring Signora Caterina!* That would amuse *me*, at least. Although I suspect Milord Mr Secretary’s humour would run dry, confronted by a pleasant, but lunatic, nun.

All the same, she may yet be one of Fludd’s traps and devices, and she will be here when Cecil’s King arrives....

I put my hands flat on my knees. “Tell me, Sister Caterina, why is it that you wish the future changed? Or *do* you? And if you and Doctor Fludd are performing the same calculations, do not you and he agree?”

“About the nearer things in Time? We do, we do. Both of us calculate war in Europe, and civil revolt in this England. We differ in what we wish to do about it.” She shaded her eyes with her hand as she looked up at me, the sun far enough over the hill to dazzle her. By her pallid skin under the dirt, she did not see sun often. “The London Master would put off the civil revolt in England as long as possible, establish a line of autocratic Stuart kings under his ‘college,’ and use later wars in Europe to drive the engines of science and industry to his benefit. So that when peasant revolt does come, in forty years, his Henry Stuart can instantly suppress it.”

She began to shred a fragment of bark between her fingers.

“After that, in England... it’ll be idyllic, Valentin. Science and industry together advancing, bringing a golden age where no man wants or starves. But Europe—well, you’ve known France after generations of religious war; all Europe would be like that. Then England will conquer Europe and further dominions.

It will bring about a mercantile sea-empire as John Dee desired; but all under absolutist rulers. So that, half a millennium hence, all the Stuart kings need do is give the order to have the unholy comet wiped out of the sky. And wipe out the great extinction that threatens us.”

“Hardly ‘us,’” I said, blinking at the breadth of her vision. I am not much given to considering any future more than a year or two distant. I almost regretted bringing her down to earth. “Hope for a long life as we may, we can’t hope for five centuries!”

She reminded me of a preacher popular at court in the winter of ’02, who spoke much out of Revelation, and amused Henri IV’s nobility by rebuking them for their sins, the end of the world being at hand. Whether it is fortunate or unfortunate that the end of the world was not in fact at hand, I leave other men to judge.

“It sounds utopian,” I added, conscious of the wind warm against my face, and stirring my hair. There are moments when the bucolic life brings content. I looked down at the small woman, willing for this moment to play with her philosophies. “Utopian. But, Signora—you want to *prevent* it?”

Her hands locked together in her filthy lap. “An English empire, and you need to ask?”

I chuckled. I did not feel moved to defend the land whose flies I was currently swatting out of my sweating face. “Signora, you and I will be dead centuries before. Why should we care?”

“Ah, you laugh.” An unnoticed lock of silver hair fell down about her ear, and she did not lift a hand to brush it away. “Valentin, you’ll notice I don’t grieve for King Henri’s death. I don’t grieve for *any* king’s death.”

I might have remarked something cogent about the dukes and princes of the Italian peninsula, but I let it pass.

“Yes,” she said quietly, “Roberto’s future will avert the comet. But at the cost of so many centuries with all countries under the dictate of absolute rulers! And after the comet, they won’t give up power! Despots, warlords, dictators...never any freedom for ordinary men.”

“Kings are a natural evil,” I remarked. An insect buzzed among the brambles of the belt of woodland. I heard, far off, the *k-chunk!* of an ordinary man wielding a wood-axe. To be discussing the apocalypse on a sun-drenched June day...*no wonder such a thing has made her mad.*

Since she is a religieuse, and he a doctor of astrology, let me try this logic.

“Madame, both you and Doctor Fludd talk of God—why not leave it all to Him? Or to Fate, or that Destiny written in the stars?”

“You mean, what would happen if Roberto and I touched nothing?” Her face turned up to the sun. She closed her eyes, the brilliance casting deep shadows into the wrinkles of her skin. Without lifting her eyelids, she said, “There’d be war across all Europe, starting next year. Another Hundred Years’ War, but this time between France and Spain. Within five years, England will be lost in civil revolt for generations. And that will slow down progress. Civilisation wouldn’t flower out of this cloddish farmers’ society—” She spoke with an Italian’s contempt for the north, “—for three or four hundred years. And then comes the comet, and then where are we?”

Her eyes snapped open, and I saw them both clear and dark, not filmed over as old women’s eyes commonly are.

“The London Master fears the comet above all. He calculates that the world dies in fire. He’ll do anything

to bring mankind to the point where we have devices and machines to protect us.”

“From a comet of ill-omen? The goal seems admirable.”

She shook her finger in my face. “Don’t mock! Cazzo!”

True, I have heard worse language from women, but rarely from nuns. I sat up, spine straight, on the beech-log—realising then that I would bet a considerable sum of money on her having been a teacher, back in her Venetian convent.

“Signora, I apologise.”

“But you don’t know why!”

She visibly drew in a breath. *She has been truly afraid*, I thought.

“Bruno’s calculations are not yet refined to be perfect. At half a millennium, only the greatest and most significant events can be seen. Because of this, two people can differ in their calculations of the most important event, or about the nature of catastrophe itself. Valentin, I’ve seen the world end—but at *Man’s* hands, with dreadful weapons. That fire comes before the comet. Roberto thinks we’ll be wiped out by the hand of God. I think, if there is a comet, we’ll deal with it easily—provided we first survive ourselves! Plautus says it: *Homo homini lupus*—‘Man is a wolf to man’!”

“And you would do what yourself, Signora?”

She smiled with yellow and broken teeth. “Roberto wants to keep kings on the world’s throne because one man in command makes things easier to control, through that one man. I . . . Valentin, I see a world without kings at all.”

Perhaps I looked startled. She reached out and closed her small hand tightly over the back of my much larger one.

“When the civil revolt comes here in England, men will debate again: ‘When Adam delved and Eve span, who was then the gentleman?’ There will be a parliament of ordinary men in the army. The generals will put them down. But if this civil revolt can be delayed long enough, then men not yet born will come to adulthood for those debates and that army. And they *won’t* be put down. They’ll build a society where no man’s poor, because all property and land is held in common, and no man needs to fight wars, because there’s no king to order him into battle.”

I do not think the orders of kings the only thing to move men to battle. I made no comment, except to raise my brows and say, “All things held in common, like the Amsterdam sects?”

“Men and women working in a social commonwealth, well-fed, free of fear, equal under the law. Simple, obvious; how is it we can’t yet attain simple *justice*?” She said it as if she had been saying it for a very long time. She added wryly, “Rid us of kings—and popes. Religious and political absolutes; there’s your two prime causes of injustice, Valentin.”

A late woodpecker hammered concussive strikes, away down the slope in front of us. Lightly, I observed, “Given such a case, should you not be out like Fludd, conspiring for your Anabaptist kingdom?”

Her blackened teeth vanished as her smile did.

“You think I don’t? You think there is an easy choice, Valentin? Listen! I think, myself, that Man can live

without the injustice we have now, and still make industry and science progress. Not easily. So many pages of my calculations end with an incandescent light dawning over men, like ants, crawling in trenches.... But it *can* be done. However, I...I cannot *absolutely* calculate, to a certainty, that we would then have such science as we need when the comet comes.”

The woodpecker’s rattle made a staccato echo to her words.

“War is a brutal advancer of industry and science when it doesn’t wear it down completely. I can’t swear on my beads that the great extinction will be avoided—I can only say it’s possible it will be.”

“So you do nothing?” I asked.

She stood up, for once able to look down at me where I sat on the fallen tree. “Misericordioso! *No*, Valentin. I work. I am working. And...it’s ironic. What *I* need, for my purposes, is for a king to stay alive.”

“Which king?”

Her smile returned to her dirt-marked face, very wry. “James Stuart, of course! If James lives now, and rules for another twenty years, it’s not Henry, but James’s second son Charles who will rule after him. King Charles is incompetent enough to lose royal power, and hand it over to this country’s parliament. If that revolutionary step’s taken, then there’ll be a commonwealth; Diggers, Levellers...The ordinary man will govern himself freely—the *ordinary man*, Valentin. And it’ll spread from this land to others. Abolishing aristocracy, tyranny, kings...spread to France, even. To the New World.”

“Men of power will not give up power easily. I don’t imagine your revolution to be bloodless...the removal of restraint can be a terror.” I rose to my feet; by that action towering over her. “The thought of France without a monarch cheers me only if it’s Marie de Medici.... You should go home, Suor Caterina. You should in any case leave *this* place.”

I do not like to confess it, but I suppose that her moon-struck gallantry moved me. I added, “If you come with me, I will offer to conceal you out of the way while—events—play out. And afterwards, if you keep silent, you may well go back to Venice.”

“Where they will burn me, as Rome burned Bruno!” she said tartly. “Where is your sense, Valentin! No, I am safer here—”

Silence impressed itself on me.

The woodpecker .

I looked down at the old woman.

She gave a slight nod, as if there were a concord between us. She stood, rubbed her hands down her skirts, and turned towards the entrance in the scrub that had grown up over the cleft in the rocks.

If Fludd’s conspiracy were mine, I should certainly be obliged to silence her. But since it is not....

With her back to me, and in a low voice, Caterina said, “One thing more. Petty, when we’ve been talking of centuries and millions. And I dislike to do this to you...Misericordioso! Valentin, I am so sorry. I must warn you of this. If the English King James is killed, here—Mademoiselle de la Roncière dies, too, within six months.”

I took my way down the southern slope—and, as I rounded the hill towards the main cavern entrance, met with Aemilia Lanier in stout boots with six mill-workers behind her, all of them carrying torches and cudgels.

“The caves are adequate to our needs.” I cut off her questions. “Unless you need to know more, madame, we might set off back to London tomorrow morning.”

“I haven’t had time,” she protested. “I need at least a pair of days—”

I walked on, leaving her standing.

Bristol seems good, I thought.

The port lay a few miles to the north, according to the pack-master as we had travelled down the road from the city of Bath. In times when the roads to London were impassable, Fludd sometimes sent his pamphlets by ship. Second greatest port of the kingdom (although not a match for our La Rochelle), it had, also, vessels bound for Portugal, the Baltic, North Africa, the New World. . . .

What might a man do in Virginia? Own slaves, become rich, live free under a different name. Leave any number of dead kings behind in Europe.

You do not believe her, do you? That Mlle Dariole’s death and the English King’s murder are somehow bound one with the other?

The feel of my sword effortlessly evaded, and the pull of the healing scab on my arm, served as Fludd intended, bringing into my mind the fight with both him and the Abraham Men.

Fludd knows something, I conceded.

I do not see how a reasonable man can deny it.

But—the mistake would be to think that, because his knowledge may give him a little of a man’s future, that it gives him any *more* than that.

Have not I, myself, often fooled men by the addition of a small amount of truth to a great lie?

Suor Caterina, speaking of Dariole, so obviously wishes only to draw me to support her own cause. *That has no touchstone truth in it*, I reflected. It’s as likely that I’ll return to London and find Dariole on some whim long gone on the next ship to the Indies!

The slight tension always present in me on this journey sprang from an unacknowledged expectation, I realised. That I will turn about and find Dariole having followed me to this place, out of sheer curiosity, if nothing else.

As well she did not. She’s not wise enough to know I’m unwise company for her.

My stride had brought me down to the bridge over the mill stream. Crossing it, and coming to the mud-rutted mill yard, I walked directly but not particularly quickly into the stables.

Recovering the dun stone horse’s saddle-bags from where I had hid them, I made a quick job of tacking him up. I led him out into the sun, glancing about to see if there was anybody to whom I should make my excuses—that I was only exercising the mount.

Not one night here! I thought fiercely. No more of the honey-trap of Madame Lanier. No more mad Italian nuns! *Let* her confuse Fludd, when he comes to set his plot in motion down here. I wash my hands

of it! I am off back to London, to discover what else Master Cecil can now tell me of M. de Sully.

The stone horse set a slow pace, having rested no more than four hours since morning, and being besides bad-tempered at leaving a comfortable stable for the breezes and stony roads. I followed the way north in the middle hours of the June afternoon. A number of skylarks sung overhead. When the dun would have picked up speed, snuffling the air, I reined him in—he was not good for so many more leagues without a regular ambling pace. It seemed a short time, however, until I came to the Bath-London road, with Bristol to the west of me, and London to the east.

West is Bristol, freedom, another name by which no man knows me. And a great chance of drowning in the Atlantic, dying in a New World Winter, or being devoured by savages....

“A man could feel that to be very restful!” I leaned forward and rubbed the stone horse behind his ears. He shifted his hooves in the dust, not as fiery as my lost jennet. I moved him on, turning his head to the east, through the unrelenting green of the English countryside; abandoning the daydream.

The Italian nun is mad, but harmless. Fludd is a madman, and dangerous.

Anger rose in my belly. He has beaten me, had me beaten, and sent me about his business as if I were his servant!

“I begin to think Monsieur Fludd’s life-line runs only until Milord Cecil is done with him,” I said aloud, touching a spur softly to the stallion’s flank. “Then ‘Doctor’ Fludd will vanish. Or, Southwark being such a lawless suburb, he will be found in the kennel, his throat most unfortunately cut through by thieves.”

I had taken the precaution of abstracting the more recent news pamphlets from Wookey mill before I left, and the immediate road east proved easy enough that I might scan them in the saddle. What they said of France was no more than I had seen from the notes of Cecil’s intelligencers: that there were reports of merchants in Bruges getting news of Henri’s death a week *before* the event; that de Loménie, the Secretary of State, had apparently told Father Cotton he and his Jesuits killed the King; and that “good Catholics” in Burgundy, Normandy, and Maine were defacing gravestones in Huguenot cemeteries, and hurling abuse at their funerals, although these only took place after sunset. There was no mention of M. de Sully.

I do not know if that is good or ill, I reflected.

Water-drops smacked the paper, lightly, and I looked up to see the weather shifting quarter.

Hard summer rain set in almost immediately I passed Bath. I took most of it in the face, riding east through waterlogged muddy tracks barely worthy the name of highway, the horse and I equally plastered dun-coloured when we stopped at night. I missed my way once only, losing but an hour. The ride was hard, but of superlative time. From when I set out from Wookey, to when I rode in by way of the poorer outskirts to Southwark, took me only three days.

I looked about me as I rode in. Fewer women chattering in the street, fewer hens fluttering out from under the stone horse’s hooves. I spurred on into Bankside from the west. More front doors slashed with paint. More houses with shutters up, closed by the owners while they fled to the country.

At the parish church, I dismounted briefly to read the list of weekly deaths pinned to the door. Seeking the skyline, I saw The Globe and The Rose still had flags up. *Evidently the plague is not yet bad enough for the theatres to be closed.*

Impatience urged me to Dead Man’s Place.

No. Business first . Whitehall-palace. Find Fludd, see what further lunacy he has to tell me, in this little over a week I have been gone; then I am up to date in my report to Cecil, and cannot be taken unawares.

I swung back into the saddle. The noise of Southwark resounded in my ears: church bells, a quarrel inside the open window of an Ordinary; eight or nine children playing with a sewn-up linen ball, and the high-pitched screaming of dogs at the bull-baiting. As I kneed the stallion into quiet behaviour, and eventually turned down the street of lime-washed houses, I saw the great oak gates of Fludd's sundial garden ahead of me. Closed.

I rode closer.

Lichen grew green and golden on the flag-stones outside the front of the gate.

I swung down from the saddle, taking it all in in one glance. The garden's gate not opened for some time; shutters up on all the house's windows.

Breathless, but not from exertion, I loped down the side wall, to the Thames-river and the yard by the mill. The great yard gates stood shut—barred with iron, by the way they clanged under the impact of my shoulder.

No man answered when I shouted.

Striding back to the house door, I hammered on it with my fist. The empty echo returned. I beat on the nearest window shutter with the hilt of my sword, and peered to see if I could see through the crack—nothing. Straightening, I walked down to the yard gate, seeing the leaves of the apple trees over the top of it. A leap let me catch the top of the gate one-handed, and peer over long enough to see un-scythed grass swaying, half hiding the sundial in its overgrowth.

I dropped down to the flag-stones again, sheathing my rapier. No good to charge his front door: two-inch oak, and not to be got through without powder.

Has he done what I would wish him to do, and vanished? Has some other man killed him while I was gone? Has he merely pissed his physician's gown at the thought of plague, and left Southwark for his other house by St Paul's? Does Cecil have him in the Tower, now, along with Northumberland? How far must I look!

A stranger's tentative voice said, "Are you Master Rochefort?"

I startled and swung about so violently that the man stepped back.

Not, as I had half-expected, Northumberland's John, or Hariot, or one other of the mathematicians. A face I did not know. I looked a short, elderly man in dull, dusty black robes up and down—realising at last that he must be a heretic priest.

Half-way between satire and hysteria, I put my fists on my hips. "Does *everybody* know my name? Yes, I'm Rochefort. What of it?"

"Master Fludd has gone into the country."

"So much is obvious, I think." I shook my head. In the middle of a conspiracy to kill his King, gone. In the middle of a play-rehearsal, gone. His house shut up, his plans abandoned—gone.

"My name is Edwin Slaughter."

I had to choke back laughter at that. Any man less like a slaughterman it would be hard to imagine—although as a priest, I dare say he had enough to do with death of late.

“And?”

“I’ve been waiting, Master Rochefort.” His eyes were anxious. “Master Fludd said you would return this afternoon. He gave me your description: ‘a Spaniard-looking man, something above two yards high’—pardon me, master! He was most anxious that you should have this letter.”

Said I would return this afternoon. Is this another of Fludd’s calculations, or his lies?

The priest continued to make polite noises. I took the folded paper out of his fingers, ignoring his remonstrations. The wax seal cracked under my hand.

I saw it dated the day I had left London with Aemilia Lanier: May 26th, by the old calendar; June 5th, by the new. A week old, now.

I read:

Monsieur—

You know what it is we are to do. Continue to do it. I will communicate with you by random messengers; it will be of no use to question any of them.

Since I know that none of this is your desire, it takes small calculation to know that you will attempt to kill me, when next we meet.

I have therefore taken precautions that we shall not meet until after this venture reaches its successful conclusion.

To help you, monsieur, I advise you also that I have taken Mlle Dariole de la Roncière, as a guarantor of your behaviour.

I beg you not to cause her to suffer. She has been hurt already, though it was not intentional. Obey the orders I shall send you. Do not cause her more pain.

Part 3

Untitled

Translator’s Note

*This document is the shortest of the documents not in M. Rochefort’s handwriting that have been put in with the Memoirs. It’s also the one most damaged by fire, and therefore the one most subject to computer reconstruction. I’ve noted places where reconstruction fails with ellipses, [...], and put the most conjectural reconstructions in **bold type**.*

It's difficult to remember, now, when everything hurts, and my hands are arthritic knots that can't hold a quill-pen, that once I was capable of drawing a rapier and dagger from their scabbards while falling, and bounding up, and springing back into a fight. But it is true. I could and I did.

Write down everything, just as I tell it you.

Write down everything as I speak it.

Yes.

It's the sin of pride, Father. For a woman, when she enjoys [...]

[...] That's better. As you have it there, on the paper.

If I can live with it happening to me, priest, you can live with writing it down.

[Two further lines scored out and burned]

[...] I was young, then. Paris and Zaton's eating-house were a long way behind me. I ate in the Silver Martlet, with those from that company of players known as "Prince Henry's Men." All men and me, a woman alone; my protection was that I could have killed any one of them.

The samurai asked my help to go to James's court. I didn't want to admit I could help him. Sewing is a woman's skill, not seemly in a young man. Then I was confused because the task seemed to need no skill! None of his clothes-pieces were shaped cloth, they were all plain long strips the width of my forearm from elbow to wrist. Then there *was* skill, about the collar and the shoulders. I sat on the floor of the lodging-house in Dead Man's Place and swore, pricking my fingers, making what he called kimono and kosode and kagashina.

Monsieur Saburo bought wooden pattens and wore them over his feet, not over shoes like a Christian. His robes were all in layers, but splendid when he put them all on. I envied him his cattan blades, but he wouldn't let me duel with them. He left for Whitehall-palace, for Mr Secretary again, leaving me to guard the kabuto helmet—which he sometimes called that, and sometimes akoda-nari, and either way wouldn't leave alone, and couldn't take with him to court yet.

At that age I'd have told you how ill in body I felt. My night before had been a long one at dice. I put an old man's furred gown on over my shirt, shivered, drank small beer, and sat on my cot-bed to clean and sharpen my rapier.

No, Father. I'd been travelling alone for more than two years, by then. Remember, I grew up with five brothers? I've never forgotten how strong men are when I don't have deadly weapons, even now when I'm old and it doesn't matter. Half my joy in humbling or killing came with knowing how my skill put me beyond men's reach.

Many a young man could say the same. A sword is a great leveller.

I cleaned, I polished, I sharpened my swept-hilt rapier, that I won from an Italian after three nights at dice because I was determined to have it, once having felt the superb balance. I undid all, the buckles on the hanger, the hanger and strap from the belt, so that I could oil the leather with neat's-foot oil. If your life stood or fell by the weapons you held, Father, you wouldn't trust another man to maintain or sharpen them.

At home it would be June, and hotter. Even in England, I needed to leave the window overlooking the dogs' yard unshuttered, ignoring the smells for the sake of cool air.

I fell asleep over my weapons in the morning sun.

I don't feel guilty. Everyone makes mistakes. I don't blush when I think of it. I did, for a time afterwards. Then I made myself cold. I didn't think the Astrologer-Doctor would know exactly when I'd do something stupid, why would I? He was Rochefort's problem.

They must have drugged the dogs or bribed the handlers. Men came in through the window and kicked my weapons away, and rammed my head back against the plaster before I could wake up properly and get my dagger.

One man cuffed me against the wall, against an oak beam. I thought all the bones of my back broke. Maybe I spewed. I'm not certain. I must have been dragged out of Dead Man's Place like a drunk with his "friends" holding him up.

There were tall stone walls. I don't know if it was a long or short time later. The men had hold of me, my feet dragging in the mud. You could see the sky between towers. I couldn't see when we went inside by a dark door. Their lantern dazzled me. For the first time I thought the word *torture*.

One man pulled out my shirt, and put his hand up inside to pinch my breasts, leaving bruises. My bare feet froze on the stone floor. I knew no man would think anything except that this was my fault. I was still virgin; I'd lain with men before, but used the back passage so as not to get with child. Father, you know from confession that I like that better. If I were inclined to carnal intercourse at this advanced age, I dare say I still should—although old people have other concerns, usually, about that area.

In a stone corridor inside the tower, one man pulled a door open and the other threw me through it. That was when I realised there weren't more than two men. No more than two. I could have killed them in seconds, Father, if I'd had a sword. They came the one minute that I didn't, the one moment when I was too stupefied to run away.

Then I knew I deserved everything that would happen to me. My father and our priest told me, from when I was small, that it would happen to me one day, to be put in my place as a woman.

Yes, but that's why you're my confessor, Father.

I fell face-down on wet, sharp-smelling straw. Urine. Light from a high window.

Nothing but straw: no fire, no irons, no thumb-breakers.

The door creaked. One man knelt down by it, holding it closed, and with his eye to the crack, watching outside. The other came over and put his knee in my back, and pulled my robe up. I remember to this day. He was a fair-haired man, his beard close-shaven. His flesh smelled of the outdoors and horses.

The other man had a dark beard, and very bright eyes in the low light. I remember he whispered. *What if he finds out, Luke?*

The man Luke said, *He knows, or he would have ordered us not to.*

I screamed. I tried to fight as if I had a dagger, but with my bare hands. The man called Luke put his palm on the back of my head and smacked my face onto the flag-stones. Part of a tooth cracked and came away in my mouth.

Luke had bitten black nails on his hands. He scratched my breasts. He used his nails to tear up my thighs when he pushed them apart as he lay on top of my back, crushing me breathless. He kept my thighs forced open with his knees.

Father, I was a virgin as a woman. I was very tight.

He forced one of his hands up inside me and his ragged nails cut me in there, so that I began to bleed.

That made me slippery enough for him to lie with me.

Rochefort, Memoirs

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The way a sword sits in the hand is a comfort, even when a man is cleaning it. I wiped the flat of the Italian rapier's blade, holding it up to the light and examining the edge. *This will need sharpening.*

The body of the steel shone silver, with an under-tone of grey in the grain and scratches. It held blue in the depths of it, under this natural light, the polish on the steel mirroring the sky outside.

Such a beautiful object. And so different—or is it *no different?*—when the metal is smeared with clots and runnels of blood. Even that thin film of red that comes from a straight thrust has ended or ruined a man's life. Yet I rarely feel better than when I am holding a rapier or broadsword, a dagger or stiletto.

A man may fall in hate as swiftly as he falls in love, with the same intensity, and in the same momentary space of time.

I will kill the Englishman Robert Fludd .

I lifted her hollow-ground Italian blade up and inhaled, gently. It had the metallic, half-burned scent to the metal that always takes me back in memory to bladesmiths' forges.

Church clocks chimed outside the window. The noise of women calling children and apprentices in to their noon meal sounded as loud in the Southwark streets as in Paris. After stabling Fludd's horse covertly, I had walked back to Dead Man's Place—chickens and dogs got out of the way of my boots, and no man failed to give me the wall as I passed. It may have been evident that it was preferable to step down into the kennel than give me excuse to vent my emotions.

I found the weapons of Mlle Arcadie de Montargis de la Roncière laid out on her cot-bed, along with the Nihonese man's helmet. Still in place from a week ago.

The helmet, not forged in one piece of steel as a Spanish morion or caboset is, but made up of many narrow sections, was painted in bright enamels, catching the stripes of sun that came in around the half-shuttered window. I thought, I have not seen it out of Saburo's company until today.

Where is he? Have they taken him, too?

I must see Cecil. In a moment. . . .

I sat down and cleaned her swept-hilt rapier, her dagger, and put together her gear; the scabbard going

into the hanger with the buckles pulled closed, the fittings slid back onto the belt. The leather under my fingers felt still slick with a residue of oil, as it does when it has not long ago been cleaned.

A line marked a border between that leather which had been oiled and that still dry, halfway around the thin waist-belt.

I will kill Fludd. And the men who took her.

“Better yourself, if you want the real culprit,” I said aloud, and sat with my hands for a moment full of the loops and curves of straps, staring at the stained plaster of the wall without seeing it.

What happened in this room?

I took up her swept-hilt rapier again, stroking the sharpening stone at an angle along the edge. The repetitive sound seemed tiny in the empty room. My fingers found it difficult to be at ease on her hilt. Her hand will be something smaller than mine is; the grip is shorter.

Pin-points of silver dazzled off the curves of the ring-guards.

The room door swung open.

I sprang up, her sword in my hand.

In the half-light of the shuttered room, I caught profile and bulk in the doorway.

The Nihonese man, linen clothing wide at the shoulder, his hair clubbed and tied up in a foreign fashion, the two curved scabbards of his weapons thrust through his cloth belt.

I got out, “*Where is she?*”

His hand went nowhere near the hilt of the cattan-blades. Taking two steps forward into the room, he dropped down on his knees hard enough to shake the wide oak planks. Before I could react, he put his hands palm-down on the floorboards, and dipped his head down between them, his brow resting against the wood.

Until then, I had harboured some faint hope.

He spoke loudly and roughly, his expression not visible. “I failed in duty. She is my servant; I owe her obligation, protection. Giri. Fail!”

The hot, half-shuttered room smothered me; I gained barely enough control to keep from swinging my foot back and kicking him in the face.

“I cannot offer death.” Saburo sat back up on his heels, looking at me with tar-black eyes. “Only when I Hidetada return. Then you take my head. I apologise; I beg forgive.”

A sudden electric shiver in my skin brought me to the realisation: I am standing here as she was standing, he is kneeling as I was kneeling—or as I wished to kneel to her. To prostrate myself.

This is not the same as with Mlle Dariole. My prick does not respond to the Nihonese man on his knees before me. That absurd, delicious, shameful pang in the gut at submission is not there. *At least I can still tell the difference. Now, when it may all be irrelevant—*

I threw her rapier down on the cot-bed, crossed the room, and flung the shutters fully open. Warm air flooded in, and the racket of dogs; sixty or more of them suddenly barking at the disturbance. Did she

depend on the bull-and bear-baiting dogs for a warning?

“Where have you looked for her?”

The short, broad man got up off the floor. He eyed me as if there were something he could not make out. “Wherever I can walk. London is not as big as Osaka, Edo. But too big. I ask Seso-sama, help me to look for my page. He thinks, not the enemy’s fault. Thinks, a young man out drinking and fucking will come back soon.”

“A week. A week is not ‘soon.’ She’s *hurt!*” Crossing the room, I threw down the letter the heretic priest gave to me. “Can you imagine them taking her without needing to incapacitate her?”

The samurai glanced at her weapons, on top of the men’s clothes that littered her cot-bed. Following his gaze, I noted her ruff still present, grime around the inside, and the linen drooping for lack of starch.

“They must—they took her all but naked!”

“Kimono.” Saburo tugged at his own sleeve. “Heavy. Animal skin—fur.”

“Ah. *Yes*. I know it.”

I saw in my mind’s eye Mademoiselle Dariole, over the chops and small beer of the breakfast table, bundled up in a furred gown fifty years out of fashion, pallid with the night’s dicing and drinking. Those few mornings before I left for the provinces, I had maliciously sought to impose on the process of her recovery with wit. While she could rarely manage a reply in the same vein, she had at least never been short of verbal abuse. If I had paid attention, I would have felt suspicious at how easily those interchanges amused me. And why.

Any man may be angry when an associate of his is ill-treated by his enemy. Especially if it is an associate for whom he has, once, felt a perverse and guilty infatuation.

No, I will not lie—one for whom he still, disastrously, feels so.

Saburo broke the silence, his speech garbled from shock. “Could be, the enemy has killed her already—don’t take the chance she escape, then. *You* can’t take the chance she’s not alive. Must continue with Furada his work.”

Slowly, I nodded. “That’s true.”

The samurai frowned; an expression that pulled his brows and the corners of his mouth down.

I continued, “That, however, will not stop me finding her.”

His frown vanished. He jerked his head in a nod of satisfaction. “We look.”

“Yes. We look. Quickly.”

I reached down to pick up her rapier, and slot it into the scabbard; speaking without looking at the samurai.

“This was done to me once, by the Queen Regent Marie de Medici, using M.de Sully. What kind of an imbecile must a man be, not to see that it can be done to him twice?”

Upon the Sunday, the young man Henry Stuart made his triumphal entrance into London by water to Westminster, and upon the Tuesday he was made Prince of Wales in the Abbey. On the Sunday, also, a water-masque played out on the Thames-river: *Tethys' Festival*—of which I recognised but one thing, and that apparently stolen from Madame Lanier: “We poor engineers for shadows,” who “frame only images of no result.” *She perhaps refers to we poor mortals*, I thought acidly, *and not to M. Robert Fludd....*

The practical result of the festivities was that, try as a man might, he could not get to speak with Robert Cecil, Earl of Salisbury, until the Wednesday. Even the new entrée of M. Saburo to James's court could not effect anything quicker.

Reluctant to cool my heels before then—driven, in fact, by a passionate, impatient fear that I did not in the least desire to examine—I occupied the time in checking over the most obvious locations for a kidnapped young woman.

“Which must include Mademoiselle's Cousin Guillaume,” I observed to Saburo, as we found the streets of More Gate all but deserted on Sunday, June third; every citizen down at the river to welcome their prince.

Surprisingly, I could hear the noises of festivities inside the Markham house; the sound of voices, and women laughing, and a viol and rebec in concert. Hammering on the door brought me, finally, not one of the lackeys who had thrown out Mademoiselle Dariole, but a man with a dyed-chestnut beard that I recognised to be William Markham himself.

“Well, sir?” His eyes moved; he shot glances behind me, up and down the street, and stared at the cloaked Nihonese man with a more than usual suspicion. Clearly he did not recognise either of us.

Before I could answer, a woman spun into view down the sunlit room behind him.

I did not take her to be a woman who spun or danced or cavorted in the normal way of things; she had rusty hair and a horse-face, and must have been past thirty-five years of age. The brilliance of the smile she gave us made her beautiful for this moment.

“Is it guests?” she asked William Markham, looking at me curiously. “I thought all our friends were here?”

A younger man appeared around the doorway, fair and in his twenties; muttered, “Come away!” and led her off by her arm in a determined manner.

“What do you want?” Markham demanded icily of me.

He had been a handsome man once, so much was visible in his remains. Sweat stood on his pale forehead and under his eyes. Possibly it was his age, but I thought it not the heat of the day, or even the dancing I heard going on within doors.

Shifting my stance enabled me to see casually further inside the room. “A boy came here, a while back. Your men threw him out.”

His suspicion gave way to startled surprise. I had to bite back an expression of disappointment. *Whatever bothers him, it is not Mademoiselle 'Arcadie.'*

“He's robbed you, has he?” William Markham gave me a look of amusement. “The cozeners and Abraham Men are getting younger every day. He attempted it with me; I was too clever for him.”

“I have reason to desire to speak to him.” Although it was useless to ask, I added the question: “You haven’t seen him again?”

“No, sir, or I would have called the parish constable. He is no part of my family, I assure you, and has no right to the Markham name. Now, if you’ll excuse me....”

We made the appropriate flourishes and farewells. Saburo, silent, walked away down the cobbled street beside me.

“He lie?” the samurai remarked hopefully.

“Not about Dariole, I think.” I frowned. “Although a man might call this an odd day to have a feast at home, with every other city family down at the river. And then again....” I had made note of this, through the open door. “To what festivities does a man usually invite a priest?”

“Priest?”

“A heretic one,” I corrected myself. “Messire Saburo, it had the look of a wedding party to me, and not one that wants itself known—else why choose the day of the Prince’s celebrations? But as for whether that would concern Dariole....”

“They not want strangers.”

“True enough. Unless Fludd knows Markham, mentioned a family duty...no.” I shook my head. “I’m missing something, and this is not it.”

Walking on through the eerily deserted streets—which reminded me unhappily of towns emptied by plague—I came to a dead halt, and seized Saburo’s arm, and pointed over the roof-tops.

“*There.*”

The samurai brought his brows down in the most ferocious scowl. “What?”

“The Tower. *Northumberland* is prisoner in the Tower.” I looked down at Saburo. “The Earl who is Fludd’s supposed patron—well, whether he is the puppet, or Fludd himself, either way: what better place to keep a woman imprisoned? They say he has his servants in and out of the place. If a man were to bring her in, secretly, conceal her from the guards....”

Saburo gave a sharp nod. “Maybe. If so, how we’re find her? And how we get her out?”

The answer was not one that I liked. “It means more waiting, monsieur, but, since visible attempts at entry or bribery might move them to kill her—if she’s there—we have only one card to play. Cecil.”

Walking on down the noisome road, Saburo broke out of a brief reverie, and prodded me sharply in the arm.

“Monsieur?” I said mildly, having ascertained that we were not in the process of being attacked.

“Tower is not just prison?”

“Ah. True, a man might appear to go to the menagerie, or see the armouries or the jewels—but one sighting by *Northumberland*’s Luke or John and I’m recognised.”

Saburo’s mouth spread in a wide grin.

“I might go. I’m called kami. At court. ‘King James’s Demon.’ Rosh’-fu’, I make friends with the great ladies of the court. Maybe I get one to take me inside Tower some time soon?”

“If Fludd’s men know me by sight, they know you.” I shrugged. “And you have no more good reason to pay sight-seeing visits than I, monsieur.”

Saburo grunted, frustrated. “*Not* good.”

That left three days. I took the first of them to question actors behind-scenes at Edward Alleyne’s—or rather, Robert Fludd’s—Rose Theatre. Albeit I thought any man likely to know of Dariole’s location would be a man under Fludd’s control, and so of no use to me. One cannot ignore such chores.

The red-headed and red-faced actor Alleyne, out of retirement, as it seemed, and enticed by further fame into this lunatic’s plan, spoke much of the last monarch’s reign. I bought ale and listened to interminable stories of triumphal appearances, stars cheated of their roles by other actors, and the occasional devil on-stage in Master Marlowe’s *Faust*. His fellow actors were no more informative. Only from Aemilia Lanier did I get a frosty comment about Mlle Dariole.

“She brought it upon herself.” Lanier, sitting at the side of the stage with a writing desk on her lap, did not look at me, but pointed with the tip of her quill.

I picked out a young man on the stage, discussing something with Ned Alleyne in a hearty manner. A young man who was, I saw, no more a young man than Mlle Dariole.

“As with Mistress Mary Frith,” Lanier remarked. “‘Captain’ Moll Cut-purse. They had Moll in her shift at Paul’s Cross, proclaiming penitence for dressing in man’s clothes. It seems to me, monsieur, that your Mistress Dariole would not be so repentant.”

The emphasis on *mistress* was slight enough that I might urbanely ignore it.

Mary Frith proved not to have heard anything of a French boy-girl at all. She went as far as to take her pipe from her mouth, blow out a coil of foul smoke, and wish me luck in finding her. But, I thought, with a touch of pique at having her own territory intruded upon.

The following day we began to search anew. I applied again in passing to Whitehall. Mr Secretary Cecil, it seemed, had also the business of his daughter due to be married in the third week of June. With the King preparing to leave court, Cecil busy, and the aldermen, burgesses, Mayor, and all men with money waiting to leave the summer city to the plague and the poor immediately that James went, court business was frantic.

I left, to observe, from a safe distance, the new Prince of Wales pay visits to the Tower. Henry Stuart kept company with Sir Walter de Raleigh, to the admiration of the younger set and the distaste of older courtiers. It galled me that this English prince might enter there, and I—I could walk on Bankside and watch the Tower downriver, the ancient stones burning under the sun, but I dared not go inside. Recklessness moved me to a hundred plans. Caution told me that, since another’s life might depend on them, they were none of them performable.

If she is even there. If she lives, they may have moved her to Wookey—or any other house in England!

I made it my business, in the next two days, and with the help of M. Saburo as lookout, to break into both of Robert Fludd’s houses; the one in Knight-Rider-by-Paul’s, and the one near Tooley Street. I left no trace of my passing in either.

“Find what?” Saburo demanded, when I dropped over the wall from the warehouse, and fell into step beside him as we walked back towards Long-Southwark.

“Find nothing. As before.” Impatience had not prevented me studying all the thirty books Fludd kept in his Southwark house, but the marginal notes—mostly in figures—looked mathematical, not cipher as I was used to. My eyes ached with the strain of his vanishingly small handwriting. There had been nothing to show if Mlle Dariole had ever been brought to either of the houses.

Saburo sniffed the air loudly. I had chosen the hour of four in the afternoon for my burglary, it seeming inherently less suspicious. There were Ordinaries serving meat and drink on London-bridge. The samurai made an expression of disgust, as if what he smelled roasting did not please him.

“Your vow should have been not to *eat* until you see James,” I said, taking my mind from my difficulties with gentle raillery. “That would have been easier, monsieur. Death of God! but I’ll be damned if I’ve seen you eat anything but bread and peasant root-crops.”

Saburo pointed at St Mary Overy church, close by London-bridge. “Better than being cannibal, in temples!”

“*Cannibal?*”

“Was told again, at court, this day. Your Great Kami changes to flesh. Then you *eat* him. Barbarians!”

Even with a sidelong glance at his sloe-eyes, I could not tell if the stocky man were teasing or solemn. Either way, I thought, I would allow some other hapless priest of James’s court to set him right about transubstantiation. I laughed, caught off-guard—and the constant calculation returned, pushing itself into my mind again:

Now it is the ninth of the month; she has been missing...in all: fifteen days.

If she still lives. If no man cracked her over the skull that day, and dropped her body into the river.

From time to time, I would unfold the paper that the parish priest had passed to me, and read over Fludd’s handwriting. “*She has been hurt...*” the crease all but obliterated the word *hurt*. I know, from experience, that it is not so easy to subdue a man if you are unwilling to kill or injure him in the process. I did not think Northumberland’s men Luke and John had the look of expert professional thief-takers.

Fifteen days. Time enough to have recovered from a moderate beating; time enough to die of a high chest-thrust with a rapier.

I found myself walking with my left hand down on my hanger, fingers curled under my scabbard, as if I steadied the blade ready to draw. *No duel with bated weapons could satisfy this impatience.*

“I’m for Whitehall,” I said shortly. “I judge this the earliest we may get audience.”

Saburo moved towards the steps at the side of the bridge, lifting up a hand and signalling imperiously for a water-boat. “We’re go to Seso-sama?”

I nodded. “You are about to discover why ‘gentlemen-in-waiting’ are called so....”

Saburo spoke no words while we were rowed, painfully slowly, against the tide, up the curve of the river. Not until we reached the palace did any man of us speak, and then it was the water-boatman.

“Pardon me, master.” The man, who I had caught staring at me on our journey, shipped his oars, and

fumbled in his leather jerkin. "If you're a Master Rochefort..."

"—You will have a letter for me," I completed, sharply, before he could. I took the boatman's folded, wax-sealed missive, and stepped ashore after giving him a shilling.

"Furada say?" Saburo demanded.

"You have not leisure to wait: you must be on the Somerset road by dawn." I crumpled the paper, and thrust it in my purse. "I believe, monsieur, that Doctor-Astrologer Fludd begins to annoy me..."

We entered Whitehall-palace. In one large courtyard, I by fortune found a great crowd of petitioners, secretaries, and hangers-on. That moved me to think we should not waste our time waiting. By the time that a movement went through the press of people, some time later, I managed by dint of my greater height to look over their heads and see Mr Secretary Cecil—on his way to or from absence at Hatfield—passing by.

I caught his eye; he spoke in the ear of one of his gentlemen-in-waiting; Saburo and I were brought inside as discreetly as ever M. le Duc's secretaries managed at the Arsenal.

There, we waited again.

Late Wednesday, with the light going and waxen candles being lit in their hundreds, Whitehall-palace seemed all a medieval maze of corridors, rooms, halls, and staircases. This by no means helped me keep my bearings when Mr Secretary finally appeared, and beckoned myself and M. Saburo to walk besides him and talk.

I have known nobles at home who prefer to transact their business this way, as if holding a casual conversation between here and there. I did not suppose Cecil to be casual about anything very much.

Removing my hat, I said, "I apologise for seeking you urgently, milord. Doctor Fludd has had another message delivered. He sends to say he desires me in Somerset as soon as I may travel there."

Cecil seemed unmoved. I supposed him to have agents about the court who would tell him that the water-boatman we hired had been observed delivering a message.

"Then you must go—although I wish I might have brought you first to speak with King James.... You have scouted the ground?" Cecil enquired, looking up at me, and I dare say putting a crick in his neck.

"Yes, milord. There are caverns enough to hide a troop of your armed men, some eight miles north of this Wookey. They may be brought south immediately before need of them arises. For Wookey Hole cave itself, there are two exits, and if you wish to control the numbers of men who will come in and out of the caves, you may easily brick up some of the passages. The first large cavern might have been made by God's hand for feasting and masqueing."

"Master Robert Fludd will be pleased with you," Cecil observed. Before I could respond, he continued. "You think this plan should go forward, Master Rochefort?"

I shrugged elegantly as I walked. I am not fond of being invited to commit myself. "If you want to test the loyalty of your Prince to his father: yes. If you desire to find evidence condemning the Lord Northumberland: yes."

"The King's safety can be assured?"

"Not made completely sure." I gazed down at the small man, not able to resist giving my professional

opinion. "You speak of letting a dagger in through your measures for security. But, you will know who the assassin will be, and you will have armed gentlemen and troopers present. However, milord, one might say that *any* risk to a king is too great."

He gave me a sardonic look.

I stood back, so that the English Secretary of State might precede me through an elaborate door—Saburo mirroring me—and let one stride bring me up with Cecil again.

I took a breath. "Milord, here is something you may not yet know. The reason Monsieur Dariole is missing is that he has been kidnapped. The conspirators are now attempting to control my actions by threatening to kill him. Among my other reasons for coming here, milord, I wish also to seek your help in finding him and preserving his life."

Mr Secretary Cecil gazed up at me, gravely. "His life? I had understood the young man to be a young woman. Or does this come as news, Master Rochefort?"

I sighed, aware of Saburo's silent amusement. "No, milord."

Cecil's worn spaniel-face briefly showed lines of cruelty, or perhaps only determination. "I did not imagine so."

"She is not my whore, milord."

We passed through a small antechamber, where Cecil waved his hand irritably at the few other courtiers present. They bowed and left, to a man.

"Will you tell me she is your...younger sister, perhaps? Or your natural daughter?"

I reminded myself that Robert Cecil is not only English Secretary of State, but a head and a half shorter than myself; that it would be something less than honourable to knock him head over heels down the chambers of Whitehall.

"Neither daughter nor sister, milord." I kept my voice even. "She is an associate, a witness in affairs of my own back in Paris, and...a responsibility of mine."

It irked me to walk, respectfully bare-headed, beside King James's cynical dwarf, and have some conception of how amused he must be, even if he showed nothing of it.

"Pardon me, milord." I bit back any sign of temper. "I come back from Somerset, I find Fludd gone, his house shut up, and Dariole taken, and now myself instructed by letter—"

"And you come here? To me?"

"Fludd knows we've met, milord. He won't expect me to break off relations." I silently prayed, as a man prays over unlikely dice or cards, that this should be true. *Or Dariole is dead.*

Cecil exchanged a word with the guard on an inner door, and returned to our conversation, a thoughtful frown on his long face.

"The house was shut up the day after you left London, Master Rochefort. It is not suspicious in itself. The plague grows hot. We shall have a bad summer. Many householders flee into the country, away from infection."

"Has Fludd, milord?" If he should have a third house, in the provinces....

“Doctor Robert Fludd has, so far as I can tell, vanished.” Cecil’s expression was something between quizzical and high on his dignity. *Vanished from my spies and informers*, he meant. No man enjoys admitting that.

I threw chance dice. “Has he gone overseas? And Mademoiselle Dariole?”

“Conceivably. But no man has been found who saw them take a ship.” Mr Secretary put his thin arms about himself, pacing down the corridor. He nodded absently to M. Saburo as the guards looked queringly at him.

“A slippery man, this Fludd,” Cecil said. “I distrust him. However, if he continues to send word to you by letter, we shall soon have him tracked.”

“A letter may be a great displayer of a man’s location.” I kept my expression from cynicism with an effort. “However,” I echoed him, “Mademoiselle Dariole is dead if I am seen to be watched.”

It became plain to me from his expression that he did not care for Dariole’s boy-girl existence; nor could he conceive of her life being important, never mind the loss of it. I expected nothing else.

“If that happens—if she dies,” I explained gently, “I will have no further interest in this conspiracy, and will no longer consent to take part in it.” I put out of my mind, for the moment, how I would afterwards get information from Paris. I am not to be held Mr Secretary’s slave. “Mlle Dariole’s survival is a matter of honour, monsieur.”

Cecil did not like that plain *monsieur*. His face, as he found himself in the position of needing to request a conspirator to continue with their plans against his King’s life, was also well worth the seeing.

He gazed up at me, seemingly unaware of how I towered over him. “Perhaps I *should* have sent M. Hercul back to Paris under armed guard, as I at first suggested. I still can.”

I have handled this badly; I desired to pique him, not cause him to stand upon his dignity.

Behind me, Saburo rumbled his first words.

“If Dari-oru-sama is killed, I’ll report it to King-Emperor James. And my Shogun.” Saburo stopped and folded his brawny arms. “I am under obligation to her. Giri. Burden. Duty. As Rosh’-fu’-san is. I will seek help from King-Emperor James for her, as a diplomat and ambassador of Nihon.”

Cecil blinked, also halting. I realised I had my mouth open, and shut it. Master Saburo’s description of himself as an ignorant captain of foot soldiers is incorrect in at least one respect: he must have paid some attention to his Ambassador’s diplomatic manipulations.

If I had had Dariole there with me, I would have burst into laughter, and let Milord Cecil’s dignity fly where it may.

“Very well.” Cecil nodded. “I will have my men look for Mistress Dariole. If she is found, I will send word. More I cannot reasonably do. Master Rochefort, I expect to hear fully from you of this matter in Somerset.”

“I will send you plans and drafts of the caves,” I said. “Milord...is it possible to ask—”

“I do not wish the Earl Henry Percy to be warned.” Cecil gave me the look of a man ahead on all points. The shimmering candles where we stood illuminated his ruff, his white hands, his white face, leaving the rest of him as velvet darkness. He continued, “Yes, it is possible the young woman may have been taken

into his quarters in the Tower. *You* have no excuse to go there, Master Rochefort. And if you do, it will alarm my lord of Northumberland. I will not have this conspiracy ended until *I* choose.”

“Milord, you must have agents of your own, that Fludd and Northumberland will not recognise?”

“I cannot be sure of that.” Cecil frowned. “But...it is true that I dislike the idea of men abducting and harbouring a young woman in a royal castle, for the purpose of hurting his Majesty. I am owed favours by Sir William Waad, the Lord Lieutenant of the Tower. I will have Sir William instigate a search, so much as he may do covertly.”

I bowed, with a flourish of the plume of my hat; Saburo bowed deeply, and with great dignity.

“Need audience soon!” the samurai observed gutturally, as he rose. “Am I to see King-Emperor James yet, great daimyo?”

The English Secretary of State glanced ahead, towards a junction of the corridors. I guessed him to intend us to take the one out of the palace. “It may not be soon, I regret. His Majesty has gone north, now, to Newmarket, for horse-racing. But this will be of use to Master Rochefort—will it not? It will give him time to appear to rehearse the masque in Somerset, and thus appear to be obeying the instructions of Robert Fludd.”

Go to Wookey; do as you are told. From Cecil as well as Fludd. It could not be plainer. *And I must; I will be being watched by Fludd’s men.*

I bowed acknowledgement, looking down at the tiny man.

It would not completely surprise me—since Mlle Dariole’s absence holds me to England and this conspiracy—if Cecil himself might know more of her whereabouts than he claims, and keeps silent. But there is nothing to be done about that at this juncture.

“I will send word from Somerset,” I said. “Milord, a last thing. If there is no fresh news out of France, then may I entreat your lordship to pass word in the other direction—a message to Monseigneur the Duc de Sully?”

Cecil’s lugubrious expression did not change. “I don’t see why not, Master Rochefort. The English Ambassador to the Queen Regent’s court is used to handling matters of a diplomatic nature. I might request him to speak with Monsieur de Rosny.”

To have Cecil know my business did not please me; to get a cipher carried in any other way to my master the Duke defeats me. *And he must be warned.*

As I bowed agreement, and made to leave, Saburo gave a rumbling grunt, pointing at himself—not at his chest, I noted, as a European might, but into his own face. “Rosh’-fu’-san go to Wôki. *I* wait here. I see the King-Emperor whenever he desires it, great daimyo Sesô. And if I hear of Dari-oru-sama, Rosh’-fu’, I tell you.”

Rochefort, Memoirs

Tents covered the Somerset grass, set wide apart in case of fire among the linen and canvas.

Use-paths had begun to wear through the turf to the brown earth beneath.

The hardest thing in my profession is not the death of an associate, but the never knowing whether he is dead or not—although, as weeks and years go past, a man's opinion can only tend to one conclusion. The unanswered questions pile up in a corner of the mind.

I stepped aside, momentarily, waiting with my boots deep in muck as the carters whipped their beasts up the slope to Wookey Hole. The track from the paper-mill to the cave entrance lay covered six inches deep in straw; I had ordered it put down to stop the horses' hooves slipping. Yet more of the gear that goes with cooks, servers, dressers, players, musicians, butlers, and stewards went past me.

From here, I might look down the slope at the tents. Memory tugged at me. *Very like the herring-haunted Low Countries*, I thought. *On the two or three days in a year when it forgets to rain*. The camp had that air of temporary permanency that I well recall from when Gabriel Santon and I ordered a company on behalf of the United Provinces. All the immediate land about the mill resembled an army camp, for all it held Prince Henry's players.

Three weeks. Precisely: three weeks and three days. June coming into its last week.

Is this to be how it is? Diminishing enquiries as weeks become months, become years?

Cecil's latest curt missive lay under my doublet, against my shirt; a word or two confirming that the Lord Lieutenant's enquiries—so far as they might go without causing suspicion—found nothing.

Found nothing yet, I corrected myself.

From this higher station on the path to Wookey Hole, I could count at least a hundred men among the tents: some being actors, dog-handlers, props-masters, armourers, and sword-instructors, but the most of them servants, boys, and a number of women too well-dressed or idle to be anything but harlots, waiting the time when King James's hunting party should finally be persuaded to join us. *Where is he now? Bedfordshire? No, Devon*. Both Cecil and Fludd—unknown to each other—agree.

As the last pack-horse went past, and I could walk on down the track, I smelled the not-unpleasing scent of horse-droppings, and the sun on dry grass. A skylark sang high in the pale sky. *I know where none of them are*, I thought. Gabriel. The Duc. Only Cecil's reports assure me M. de Sully still walks unharmed. As for Dariole...

Echoes of loud, harsh language disturbed me as I approached the mill. Englishmen standing in groups, talking the one with the other, but their faces further apart than is common in France, and with little of that aid to discourse that gesture gives. Cold-blooded English, in high-necked doublets, and wide stuffed trunk-hose, all in the court fashion—men crowding and hurrying about their business, in and out of the mill, up and down between the tents and the bridge over the mill-stream, rolling barrels of stage-decorations to be brought up to the main cave.

And no man knows whether we must be ready today, or a month from today. How long must I allow myself to be compelled to stay here?

Leave aside, 'Where is King James?' I thought, stepping with some care in the straw. *'Where is our young Prince?'* Would it not be amusing if Fludd has miscalculated, and his Henry Stuart is a picture of

filial piety, and never arrives here?

As I set foot on the mill-bridge, the mill-owner's son came hurriedly towards me. Ned Field did his best to meet my gaze. I politely did not draw attention to the fact that he had not, as yet, re-entered the Wookey caves. Even though his Witch was nowhere to be found—I having taken the precaution, when I first arrived, of removing her eight miles north, to where Cecil's company of thirty horsemen, under one Captain Spofforth, concealed themselves in a great gorge in the limestone rock.

Sister Caterina had been waiting ready to move in the first cavern, when I rode up to the Wookey caves, with her most essential documents wrapped in rags.

“At least be *decent*,” I had instructed her, passing the skirts and bodices I had brought with me from London.

She dropped a woollen skirt over her head, despite the summer heat, and thrashed her way up through it, buttoning it with nimble fingers, and lacing the bodice. “You are concerned only that I should not be a disgrace to you, Valentin?”

“Precisely.”

“Ostrega!” she had remarked, but would not consent to tell me why she laughed.

“I have no belief in your prophecy,” I said as we climbed the chiseled steps to the open air, craning my head to avoid the hanging limestone spikes. “But, if you have overheard anything from the mill-workers, or seen anything...do you know anything of where Mlle Dariole might be? Is it possible they have brought her here?”

Caterina's limpid dark eyes shifted away from me. The sunlight outside showed her face dirty and evasive. “Sometimes it is better not to know what is possible, Valentin. Better to wait, and discover what *is*.”

Exasperation moved me to rant—to plead, even; and to swear oaths a man should not in front of a religious woman. I could not persuade her. I put my hand down and closed it around her small shoulder. “You will have used your mathematics, signora, don't tell me you have not! Is she alive, at least?”

“That, I cannot tell you for certain. It is...possible.”

Her tone was not that of a woman who finds it inarguable good news.

“Possible? ‘Alive, but imprisoned?’ ‘Alive, but not for long?’ Come—what? Tell me!”

She only shook her head, refusing to say anything more.

I told myself I need not believe her any more infallible than I believed Robert Fludd to be. *That*, I resolved in my private mind, as I set up and began rehearsals of the assassination-masque.

Now, on the mill-bridge, with machinery rumbling dully in the air around us, I turned to business with Field fils. “I've timed the walk. Royalty will be getting their banquet cold, if they must use the mill-kitchens. But that's a constant ill with court feasts. Fontainebleau is the same.”

“Sir.” Ned Field nodded. He muttered words. I at last made them out to be, “Your tailor's looking for you, Master Herault, sir.”

Neither my height nor my face should, ideally, be the first things noticed by men; both being aids to

identification, and so not helpful to a spy. Noticeable clothing is better, distracting from all else. I'd commandeered a tailor who came down with the players, and (despite their complaints about leaving masque costumes unfinished) had him make me a suit in oak-green satin, with gold silk ribbons and points; the doublet slashed to show a gooseturd-green lining. Only the final fitting now remained. Then, with the feathers in my hat dyed a similar colour, I should have all of Fludd's men despising the foppish Frenchman. That never hurts, either.

"He wants me? Good." I slapped Field on the shoulder, and followed the direction he indicated, down among the tents. I brushed off other men's requests as I walked, with a curt, "Later!" I had taken the precaution of making a roundabout trip of the camp be my business every day, and so made men used to my presence at irregular hours. Some of my perambulations took me south, into the endless flats and marshes of the Levels; some towards Wells, or round by the hillocks north of Wookey, towards the great cleft stone gorge. That enabled me to contact Captain Spofforth. A man who is anywhere at any time is nowhere suspicious.

Where, in desperation, might a man begin to look for Mlle Dariole? I thought.

If I'm to consider the unlikely, perhaps she's escaped their custody and traveled back to France. I could forgive her an impatience with England and my business. She is rash enough, also, to think the Queen Regent would not have an interest in her. Perhaps she is even now back on the estates of de la Roncière....

The English sun fell hot on my back. I wiped away sweat. My thoughts by association went from Queen Regent Marie de Medici to my master the Duke. Of whom I know nothing certain since a month after Henri's death—only Cecil's acknowledgement that the English Ambassador has met briefly with him at the Arsenal, and a warning been passed on.

To be too dependent on one patron is another reason to dislike my position in England, I considered, as my stride ate up the ground.

Lost in thought, I was not aware of the tailor until the small man himself tapped my elbow. I stopped. He smiled, gap-toothed, panting.

"I will pay you when it's done," I said automatically, as one does with tradesmen. The little man's name escaped me; I recognised him mostly by the pale strawberry mark on his left cheek. "Is it done?"

"Monsieur can have it this time tomorrow. But I didn't come for that, sir. I thought you might like to know—there's a countryman of yours just turned up. Talks the same French language you do, sir."

A man spying at Wookey who speaks French—

Expansively cheerful, the tailor added, "And I wondered if you might recommend me to him, sir? He wasn't what you'd call *court*-dressed."

It's the Medici! I realised. At first cold as Winter ice with rage, and then burning with a savage joy. The Queen Regent has at last found where I am, and sent another man to kill me.

"Where?"

The tailor had his gaze focused about my twelfth button, possibly because he found it painful to look up at a taller man. He startled at the harshness of my question. Wilting slightly, he pointed at the paper-mill.

"Down there, sir; I saw him go to stable his horse."

I set off downhill without a word, heels skidding on the hot grass, yanking the Saxony rapier out of my scabbard as I went. *Too much time spent as quartermaster and Colonel of this play-actors' regiment!* Now let me relieve myself of anger by taking up the Medici's gauntlet—and letting her know what she may expect from Valentin Rochefort.

Mud and worse splashed up my boots as I crossed the mill's paved stable-yard, half-running. I plunged into the stables.

The light shining in at the entrance, succeeded by dimness, blinded me for a vital second.

As my vision cleared, I saw a man looking round from hitching up hay into his mount's manger. A man in a strange masque-costume all of layered linen over-ropes tied with a sash, his black hair drawn up in a brush-shape at the back of his head.

Two weeks and more since I have set eyes on him: he seems newly strange to me . Especially in his silence. "Saburo?"

His black eyes shone, unreadable in the dimness.

A slighter figure stepped around the horse, that had lowered its head to champ, and threw down the brush that had just curried the beast.

Realisation jolted through me.

Dariable.

"I...am forever meeting you in stables, mademoiselle!" A stab of joy went through me. I stepped forward, intending to swing her up into my arms. "Messire Saburo, *indeed* you are to be congratulated!"

The samurai grunted. He stepped between me and her, swinging saddlebags over his broad shoulders—and walked past me energetically enough that I must step hastily out of his way.

I turned about, staring after him. "Saburo...?"

Pain slammed through the back of my thigh.

As if I had been struck a blow with a workman's sledge-hammer. *I recognise such pain.*

I looked down.

Something glinted in the light from outside.

It took me a moment to realise what I was seeing.

A black metal blade wide as my thumb, and twelve inches long, stuck *out* of the front of my trunk-hose.

Out of the front of my thigh.

Metal dripping with red blood...that ran down the flat of the steel, and trickled from sharpened edge and point. Wet red blood spreading out almost invisibly, but fast as spilt water, into the burgundy cloth covering my right leg.

Pain wrenched through me so hard that I could not cry out.

A rapier . Struck through the thigh from behind, with a sword. *Oh dear God, the artery?*

Blood ran and dripped, pooling in front of me, soaking into the yellow straw inside the stable. I tilted, slowly; fell—did not desire or intend to; knew, even as I did it, what the cost in pain would be—but fell, as a weakness went through my leg and took it out from under me.

The dripping blade jerked back, vanishing inside my leg; then pulling away with a sickening sucking noise.

I pitched my shoulder against the wooden wall of the stable, full weight hitting it, hearing it creak. I tried to look about me; tried not to fall on my own sword that I held.

A dark silhouette stepped towards me, in the light from the stable doorway. Pain blurred my vision. I could not see her face. A harsh, absent part of me realised, *Such strength in her wrist and shoulder, to put her point clear through a man's limb!* The rest of me stood on the point of freezing like a green boy. Seeing the blood-dripping sword sticking out of my flesh before my rational mind identified it broke me out in cold horror-sweat.

I yelled out in anguish. "Dariole, *why?*"

Her sword caught the light, flashing forward.

I brought my Saxony rapier up and took her edge on the flat metal ribbon guards. No more than the triggering of instinct. The screech of sharpened metal against metal set my teeth on edge. I tasted blood—had bitten my lip, when the sword thrust clean through wool and linen, skin and muscle; piercing the meat of my thigh a span below my groin.

"*Dariole! It's me! Rochefort!*" For a heartbeat I had hope that, yes, she had mistaken me for another man; that this was error on her part.

She flicked into a return; her sword going for my chest.

I shoved with my shoulder against the wooden wall, hard enough that impetus got me upright, balanced in a swordsman's stance, all weight on my left leg. I parried, swords clashed; her guard catching and bruising my thumb-joint.

So close to death, salt sweat ran down into my eyes. I felt blood pooling in the leg of my drawers. Not the pulsing spurt of an arterial wound. *I am not a dead man standing here. Yet.*

"What are you doing!" I yelled, fending her off as the dark figure thrust, my other hand by instinct drawing my dagger. *And yet I cannot hurt her.* The wall at my back held me upright. "*Dariole! Stop!*"

The light caught on her blade as it licked out. I got a waft of the smell of blood, my own blood, that tightened my throat. She dropped her point swiftly under my hand and cut.

Cloth ripped across my belly as, with a frantic reflex, I slashed her blade out and away with my dagger. Every muscle tense, waiting for my stomach to fall open and spill intestines—

No pain.

In peripheral vision below, I caught the flapping of slashed wool below my belt, trunk-hose opened, stuffing leaking out.

She took a step closer. I saw her face in the brown-gold light. She frowned like a child engaged in school-work. There was not time to think that I was fighting to live: her sword cut back, curving up from the straw-strewn earth towards my groin.

I caught her blade under mine, forced it down—relaxed the necessary fraction that would bring her sword sliding up the length of mine in a rebound, and made the twist to catch it between my guard and cross-hilt, that must either disarm her, or break her blade—

She thrust her dagger-point into my ring-guards instead, ripping up the brown kidskin of my gauntlet; locked her hilt with mine, and kicked me hard up on the outside of my wounded right thigh.

Pain whited out my vision, my thought.

Pain in my hands did not tell me I fell; I was too disorientated to recognise the earth under me. Dagger gone, sword gone; wrenching myself over with a choked gasp, so that I did not lay on my butchered leg—

“You son of a bitch.”

The voice of Dariole, Arcadie de Montargis de la Roncière, hissed at me, I couldn’t tell from where. Ahead? Behind? I scrabbled with my left leg, to put myself against the wall and be defended.

I put my right foot down, to push myself upright.

Blood squelched in my boot. Pain shot through me from knee to hip, harsh enough to rip a scream out of my throat. I fell heavily back down.

“You never told me.” Dariole’s whisper filled the silence, after my shriek. *“You never told me he could use me as a hostage.”*

Her voice came from beyond anger. I couldn’t see. Coming laggardly to the reason why, I wiped streaming tears of pain hastily out of my eyes.

Sunlight flooded the dusty shadows of the mill’s stables. I lay with my back to the wall. Past her now, closer to the exit. The light fell full on her.

She stabbed at my face with her rapier. A shaft of sunlight caught some brightness about her face—her teeth exposed in an expression that would be ludicrous in cold blood. A mad clown’s grin.

Grunting, without sword or dagger, I flailed wildly with my arms, praying the wool of my doublet might absorb some of the cut. Eighteen inches of her blade, from tip to near mid-point, dripped dark. I spasmed to avoid it. *“Dariole!”*

Cloth ripped down my right arm. I could neither see, nor judge, nor get up from where I huddled. Her sword’s point skewered into my biceps, close by the healed scar that Fludd left.

I’m going to die here, I thought, with such perfect clarity that I was not afraid. Disturbingly, I felt relief. The death-wish of the professional duelist: it’s over, it’s done, I need not keep fighting, I can rest.

No, I have never given in to that.

The tip of her sword blade entered my focal distance and paused.

The brown shade in the stables only let me see the white of her ruff above her dark body. Light ran up her blade as she lowered the tip.

Calculations went through my mind unnoticed. Grab her sword and I’ll be gutted by the dagger from her off-hand. Kick her legs from under her, and a foot of steel goes into my belly. If I *can* kick.

“Rochefort,” she said.

I heard a ragged, raw, new edge to her voice, just in that one word. Her stance was economical. I saw the abandonment of any flourish that was not directly aimed at killing. By her face, it could have been a week since she last slept.

The automatic instincts of a duelist assessed her. *Sleepless, she'll lack stamina; but she's the more dangerous because half-crazed.* . . .

As Valentin Rochefort, the man and not the duelist, I wanted to push myself forward and sprawl on my face, at the toes of her boots.

You did not tell me.

She could have put her point into my throat and I would not have noticed. It was realisation that went through me.

I did not beg.

I choked out, “I’m sorry!”

Something in her expression altered. In the brown-gold light, I saw her lips pull back from her teeth, like a man eating something that produces in him the greatest disgust.

Sweating, feeling the weakness of my wound bleeding heavily, I managed to separate in my mind the young woman holding this sword from the last dozen inches of its length. Which is nothing more than plain English forged steel; a blade she may have picked up in any bladesmith’s workshop. Except that if I do not speak the right words to this woman, that part of this blade will be what painfully kills me.

Without thought, I reached out and closed my right hand around the blade, where it hovered in front of my gut.

Only my glove kept the edges from slicing open the webs of flesh between fingers and thumb. My breeches-lining was all that lay between her razor-point and the shrinking flesh of my belly.

“How could I ever have thought I *wanted* this?”

Not until I saw her face change did I realise I’d spoken aloud.

In that second we were as close as if we shared one mind. I saw her remembering the School of Defence and M. Rochefort defenceless, on his knees to her, his prick as stiff as his sword. I saw her see me, now; prostrate, bloodied, helpless.

Tension informed her voice; the same tension that made her shoulders taut, her eyes too wide, her smile disturbingly bright. She said, “You disgust me.”

I found myself making a noise part laugh, part sob. I have desired her to be suitably disgusted with M. Rochefort. Now that she is, I can only wish that she weren’t.

“I often disgust myself,” I said, my voice coming out choked. “Dariole. *Why?*”

Her expression took me into a different realm from other duels. I saw, not anger, spite, nor sadism, nor even the efficient joy with which she had killed on the Normandy beach. Now is no time for *mercy!* and *spare me!* and *please, mademoiselle, I’ll do anything!*

“Please, mademoiselle,” I said gently, “why are you doing this?”

She looked down at me.

In the silence, a great fart cracked out of my breech.

It was loud enough to resound off the stable walls. I cringed. Every inch of me tensed, waiting for her sudden, scalding laughter. *What will she say? How will she mock me? Will she kill me out of sheer contempt?*

Dariole neither laughed nor moved. She only continued to look down at me, sword in hand. A faint impatience appeared on her face.

I felt myself flare hot with an embarrassment not at all erotic.

Had this happened before, she would have laughed like a street-brat. Now, she looks at me in the manner of an adult regarding a tiresome child. And I am not moved by any physical response.

“I cannot even beg in a way that is fitting,” I got out. “Mademoiselle—yes. I should have told you Fludd might imprison you. I am sorry.”

Her face altered. My mouth and throat closed up. I thought her features twisted like a child before it weeps—then: *no, she is about to laugh.*

She did neither.

She removed her blade with one skilful movement. No pain went through my hand. I realised it was undamaged. Swirls of straw-dust swam in the sunlight as she took a step back, a white figure against black shadow.

“Imprison,” She said, slowly. “Robert Fludd might *imprison* me...”

I couldn’t name the emotion in her voice.

“Get up,” she said.

I fought to get myself up off the earth, clutching at my thigh. Both my weapons lay on the stable floor, yards away. With my back pressed to the wall, I got myself half-upright, hunched over; both hands pressing the cloth of my breeches-leg into the wound.

“You’re bleeding.” A neutral statement.

I nodded, staring at her, dizzy with loss of blood. My boot sloshed, filled to the ankle. *She can put her sword through me, I am disarmed, I can do nothing.*

She put her rapier uncleaned back into her scabbard.

The soft click of the friction-fit of steel and wood veneer made me physically startle, like an old woman when the wind slams a door shut.

Dariole walked forward. In reach. I could have struck her.

“Is this...” I found it difficult to speak, “...this pain. Is this how it was, for you, with Fludd? He wrote that you’d been hurt?”

Her lips thinned as she pressed them together.

Before I could realise what she intended, she stepped close and ducked her shoulder into the pit of my arm, hauling my arm over her shoulder and straightening up.

If I could have laughed, I would. Short enough that she couldn't prop me fully upright, she supported me hunched over. I didn't like to consider how much of my actual weight I did, in fact, need to lean on her. *And why does she aid me, now?*

Without a word, she shifted her stance and pushed her shoulder into my chest, with her other arm about me; forcing me into a stagger towards the door. I abandoned the thought of weapons, the weakness of blood-loss washing through me. I smelled the delicate scent of her sweat. As we came within reach of the sunlight I could see she wore brown linen doublet and breeches, the colour making her face pallid and strained.

Under the lintel of the doors, she stopped, drawing a harsh breath. Her voice sounded metallic.

“Robert Fludd wants King James dead. That's a good enough reason to keep James Stuart alive. *I want Robert Fludd dead.*”

Her tone did not shake or alter; her expression didn't change. I searched her face, for one sickening moment not sure that this was Dariole.

I nodded down at the soaking leg against which I pressed my hand, trying to staunch the bleeding. “Do you want me dead?”

“I don't know.”

The blank truth in that made me shudder.

“If you're here...” The implications of her presence came to me sluggishly. “Dariole, there's nothing to tie me to this lunatic assassination, now! I will find some way around Milord Cecil. We can *leave* here.”

She nodded her head in a vaguely north-westerly direction. “Go to Bristol. You and Saburo both. You can get ships. I'm staying here.”

“Here...”

She looked up at me, from under my shoulder. Her hair fell over her forehead. “You're leaving. You got me into enough already. Just get out while I *settle* this!”

As her voice got loud, it grew higher, and wavering. I reached to grab the pillar of the doorway, part-supporting my own weight. “Dariole...”

She dropped her hold on me, stepping away.

“You know what? *This?*” She hauled the new, plain English rapier out again, brandishing it in the sunlight. Her face turned up to me, white in the light, gaunt and drawn. “*This* doesn't matter. It's a cheat. It's not there when you—It's nothing! It can't do anything! Because I'm only one person, and where was it when I *needed* it?”

She took a step back, into the open yard. My left side felt cold. I tightened my grip on the door-frame, too late. I slid down to the flag-stones, collapsing, blood from my thigh welling up over my fingers and soaking my gloves. Pain rose up, drenching me with sweat.

“You know what?” she snarled.

She turned and I thought the stained blade would go straight through my heart.

“*Fuck* this!”

Dariole dropped her point down to the flag-stones in the yard, stooped over, and put her foot on the blade.

I shouted. In the same moment, she trod down, and yanked the hilt of her sword up.

The forged metal snapped like a pistol-shot, six inches down from the ricasso.

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I had never seen her stand as she did now: shoulders hunched up, head down. For thirty heart-beats, she stared down at the broken hilt.

Slowly, she squatted and picked up the snapped blade from the flag-stones.

“He should have known,” she said, exhaustedly. “He should have known you wouldn’t care if I was kidnapped. If he’d known that, he wouldn’t have done it. Why didn’t you tell him?”

It was barely a question, said under her breath, but I answered it. Slumped down on the flag-stones and bleeding as I was, I said simply, “I suppose because he would not have believed it, mademoiselle.”

There was no sound but the mill-wheel, turning leisurely and unstopably.

Her head came up. Her eyes fixed on me. She straightened, the broken hilt of her sword in her right hand, and the blade in her left.

“You lie for your living. You could have made him believe you.”

She lifted the halves of her sword and threw them down. Hard metal skittered off the flag-stones and into my legs, catching me with pain.

“I got raped,” she said. “Not ‘imprisoned.’ Raped.”

She turned and walked out of the yard.

The master of the mill sewed up my wound.

Dazedly, I thought that a man like Field *père*, with the machinery here, should be capable of doctoring accidents to the standard of a barber-surgeon; I therefore permitted it. He cut away the cloth of my breeches and drawers, and set about washing the bruise-blackening wound out with wine, and sewing the torn flesh together, at front and back. The thrust through had missed the great bone, and the arteries.

I vomited from the pain, despite the brandy he fed me.

Leaning back in a battered armed chair, in one of the mill's upstairs chambers, I reached for the glass at my elbow. Blood seeped into the linen bandages bundling my right thigh. I thought, dizzily, *It will indeed be necessary for M. le tailor to complete my other clothes today.*

One of Field's servants cleaned the floorboards, and opened the windows; Field himself packed his ancient instruments and left.

I looked up at Saburo. "I thought her at first only in a fit of wounded vanity. Hurt pride, that she'd been captured: the 'great duelist' Mlle Dariole...."

Saburo's brows came down in a ferocious scowl. "A samurai does not break her blade out of vanity or misplaced pride. Only disgrace, Rosh'fu'-san. Not in defeat. Only in dishonour. Dishonour, inflicted on her body."

On her body.

I felt numb, in the way that a man is numbed when he strikes his elbow or knee against an iron bar on a Winter morning: waiting for the impact of pain.

"It's...common," I got out, "for a man to accuse his enemy of just that same vice which he, alone, cannot perceive in his own character. I was too vain to think she could be—assaulted—while in the company of M. Rochefort."

I reached for the green glass again, and sipped at the brandy. *It will not do well to be drunk, given the apology I must make....*

"There can be no apology, can there?" I said softly. "She blames me for this. Conceivably, she's right to do so."

"She blame Furada, when I see her in the castle." Saburo turned, correcting himself. "In the Tower."

I stared at him. "Northumberland *did* have her in the Tower? That's where she's been? How did you discover it? How did you get her free of the place safely?"

Saburo gave me a triumphant look. "I went to King-Emperor's court, to find the Lady-daimyo we saw at Dari-oru's kinsman-house. I think that she maybe know Dari-oru, because she was in clan-household, with Mark-ham. I heard rumour, she knows six languages already. So I ask if she want to learn another. She tell me she's wanted to learn language of Nihon, so I begin to teach her. Her name," Saburo added succinctly, "A-be-ra."

The glimpse I had of her: red wiry hair, a look of joy that made an ugly face beautiful. *Ar-bay-rah....*
"Arbella?" I choked out. "Lady Arbella *Stuart*?"

"Hai. The King's cousin, Daimyo Abera." The corners of his mouth turned down. "I find she *doesn't* know Dari-oru-sama. But, the wedding we saw, there at Mark-ham house? Abera, there, she marry a man King-Emperor James not like. Young man, from the wrong clan, with a claim to King-Emperor James's throne."

I roused myself from physical pain and shock, as much as I might. "That has *what* to do with Dariole, monsieur!"

Saburo folded his arms. "Not long later, they come and arrest Abera-sama. But not execute her—I

haven't understood why gaijin do this. Then, she's taken into Tower!"

He gave me an unnerving beam.

"Some days go by, then Lady Abera-sama ask to have me come in, continue with lessons in language of Nihon. I judge that is safe, ne? Furada's men, if they watch, they see I have no choice to come in Tower. I am not suspect."

Pain and shock might confuse me, I thought. "How could that make it safe for you to search the Earl's quarters for Dariole?"

"No need. When I say I am look for her, describe her how she looks, Lady Abera-sama says, 'There is a young servant woman who is ill. This young woman is like your Dari-oru-sama. I have her here with me. Come see if it is she.'"

I stared.

"*She*—? How?"

The samurai shook his head after the European fashion; I supposed his time at James's court to be having an effect on him.

"Dari-oru told me, after. She sees Mark-ham come to visit the Lady-daimyo Abera in the Tower. She doesn't trust *him*, but when Dari-oru walking on the battlements, she finds a way and speaks with Abera."

"I..." I frowned. "Walking on the *battlements*?"

"Under Earl's guard. Furada hopes Dari-oru-sama jump off, kill herself." The samurai gave a pragmatic shrug. "What man takes notice of what women talk? Dari-oru can say to Abera, she is not servant, but prisoner of cruel man. Lady Abera say to Northumberland—"

Saburo mangled the name sufficiently that I recognised it only by whom it surely must be.

"—say to him, 'This woman, she is servant of yours—she is very sick, she has been violated, *I* will care for her.' Lady Abera-sama told me, the Earl-daimyo already think noblewomen do charity too much. Like black-crow priests. So he think this 'caring for a servant' more charity. Doctor Furada probably not hear yet," Saburo added, "because Earl-sama won't want tell him he lose Dari-oru-sama. Furada think she's in the Tower, because Abera says, 'Dari-oru probably die from sickness of rape, so she can be in bed for a long time.'"

Out of the dizziness of pain, I snatched at one fact. "But she's not sick?"

Saburo gave a curt shake of his head.

"As soon as Dari-oru sees *me*, she ask for maid-servant's clothes, and we go out with Dari-oru disguised as woman."

"Disguised?"

I snorted, on the brink both of laughter and something that tightened my throat. *A girl disguised as a boy disguised as a girl*....

"But—she *has* been raped?"

For a brief irrational moment I allowed myself to hope it only a part of their pretence. I would have shouted down the sky in my joy.

The pain biting into my leg spoke otherwise.

Saburo grunted. “*I think she violated. She afraid of having a baby. Maybe her blood-flux comes, on the journey here. Not certain.*”

I flinched, that being too much like common court gossip at St Germain. Swallowing, mouth dry, I said what, if I had not been subject to pain and brandy, I would not otherwise have spoken aloud:

“If you were—in part—responsible for such a thing... what would you do?”

“Kill self.”

The answer came so prompt, along with a stab of guilt that took my breath away, that I might almost have laughed. “Forgive me, messire, that’s an answer to all too many questions in your country!”

“How else to make such an apology?”

In Saburo’s land, men prostrate themselves with equanimity, by way of habit. I wished, for one moment, that this was Nihon. I might prostrate myself in front of her and beg her forgiveness for my part in this. Nothing of passion or perversion in it, only remorse.

“I...don’t wish purely to make an apology,” I said. “That would only ease my conscience. She...”

The brandy stung my mouth as I sipped, but my head only grew clearer, as if alcohol could have no effect on me at the moment.

I began again. “She desires that you and I leave here.”

“Hai. She told me on the road. I don’t leave. Giri.”

If I could not feel the brandy, I could certainly feel pain. “But if she remains here, in this lunatic’s conspiracy, waiting for Fludd—”

Saburo’s head came up. One hand rested on his curved hilts.

Thumping footsteps outside the door gave way to Edward Alleyne, his face between his copper hair and beard reddened by the sun.

Alleyne gave me a manic grin, in which was some relief at seeing his play-manager not dead. “Duelling again, Master Rochefort? I heard from Master Field that you’d been in need of surgery. Catso! Should I ask, how does the other man look?”

“No.”

His shaggy brows rose at what he took to be my irritation. He nodded civilly to Saburo. A little uneasily, he said, “Then...if you are well, Master Rochefort...all’s well, I suppose. When you’re ready, may I have your assistance? There’s a quarrel between the joiners and the carpenters over the masque-engines. They’ve stopped work. It’s the kind of dispute Master Henslowe was wont to solve....”

Like Alleyne, I regretted the lack of his partner and manager, Philip Henslowe, who had had the sense to refuse Fludd’s blandishments and stay in Southwark, making money from bear-baiting. My head clear despite the last of the brandy, I considered that I also might be better dealing with wild bears than what

faced me.

I sighed. “I’ll be there, monsieur. In a moment.”

He closed the door as he left. I heard his footsteps die away down the stairs.

The ache in my thigh grew. I resisted the urge to rub at the bandages, and reached out for the stick that Field senior had brought, saying it had been his grandfather’s; a stout thing of ebony wood with a silver top, not unlike that carried by Mr Secretary Cecil.

With a push against the wooden arms of the chair, I got myself standing upright. The hot winds of June blew in through the open casement, making me sweat; Wookey and Wells’s peasants would be out getting the last of the hay harvest in.

I looked at Saburo. “*Your* business, let us be honest, is with King James. You accompanied Mlle Dariole here out of obligation. I, also, have obligations elsewhere—the Queen Regent is digging herself more securely into power with every day that passes. But you speak of ‘giri’ . . .and debt. Mlle Dariole is determined to stay here until Fludd shows himself; the least I may do is attempt to persuade her that waiting is useless: he will not come. And . . .make what apology I can.”

Saburo rested his hand—small for a man—on the hilt of his cattan-blade. “Rosh’-fu’, I don’t think she’ll listen.”

“No? No, you may be right. But—I must speak to her.”

I am a man, not an impatient boy; I know, better than many, how unwise it is to pursue a woman when she truly does not wish a man’s company.

It would, besides, be humiliating, I thought. *She can run faster than I can limp.*

And I need to think.

The next few hours I spent seated on one joint-stool, leg resting up on another, resolving disputes with the construction of the masque-engines in the great cavern. I then supervised rehearsals. With a considerable part of the company back in London learning *The Viper and Her Brood*, the masque had every remaining actor doubling parts, and sometimes taking three. In truth, I found it an experience not so different from siege-works in the Low Countries—much carpentry, much confusion, and never enough men skilled in the right occupation. As one of the boy-actors stepped on his hem, ripping his costume for the third time, I reflected, *at least, so far, no one is shooting at us.*

“Or,” I murmured, “I may merely be premature . . .”

Alleyne’s junior, Lindsey, said, “Eh?”

“Merely my thoughts, monsieur.” My decision taken, I waved him to my place. “Continue this, if you please; I have more business I must be about.”

It tired me to limp out of the narrow stone passages, across the carpenters’ wooden bridges, and into the heat of the day, even with the stick. I hobbled first to my rooms, and then down into the encampment of tents, knowing where I must find the boy-girl. *In the tent of the kabuki actors*, according to M. Saburo.

The impact of the earth, dry from two weeks of sun, jarred my leg with every step. From experience, I knew it too early for a raw pain such as this wound to be put to the back of a man's mind.

It must be endured until it can be so ignored .

I left the knee of my new green breeches unfastened, so that I might continue to wear the bulky dressing about my leg, and made do with gartering my hose very lightly. The result was that I arrived at the actors' tent with my stocking rucked down into the foot of my boot, and sweating hard enough to soak the lining of my new silk doublet.

Taking a moment to compose myself, I set down the bundle I carried under the edge of the square pavilion's canvas. Sweeping aside the tent-flap and entering, I found the two youngest boy-actors giggling and playing dice in the centre of the tent.

"Back to Monsieur Alleyne, if you please." My look sent them quickly out.

Mlle Dariole's voice broke the silence. "If that's you, Rochefort, you can fuck off."

"You know it is I, mademoiselle." The sun through the bleached canvas walls cast a pearl glow over all the interior. Dariole, in the far corner, curled among bolsters and linen and a sprawl of opened printed pamphlets, looked over her shoulder at me. Her eyes were cold in the filtered light.

"I *said*, fuck off."

"I heard you. I am choosing to ignore you."

Dariole gave a snort. It seemed uncomplicated contempt. A man who knows her less well than I would not hear the uncertainty in her tone, I thought, and then halted, startled at the realisation.

For an object of perverse obsession, whom otherwise I do not like, I know her entirely too well.

The temperature inside seemed higher, as if the canvas reflected heat as well as light onto us. The young woman had her garters and stockings off, bare feet white in the light. A pale linen doublet lay open to her cambric shirt, unbuttoned halfway up her breast. She leaned on her elbow, looking away from me, and pretended to read.

To attempt to sit, and to afterwards rise again, made awkward by the savage pain in my leg, I thought must prove embarrassing. I leaned on my stick, instead, and took off my hat. *M. Rochefort stands uncovered before Mlle Dariole*, I thought. At another time, I would have cynically smiled.

"Robert Fludd chose to hand me a beating," I began, "when I first encountered him. You know this. It appears to be a principle of his."

My voice fell flat in the hot air. I persevered.

"If that *is* his way, I would expect him to attempt the exact same with you; to physically intimidate you on your first meeting with him—"

"I haven't met him yet." Her tone cut in, coldly dismissive. "Only his men. Luke and John. But I don't care about them. He's responsible."

She didn't look at me now. The general rubbish of a players' tent obscured her from my view as she curled up further. With all my weight on the ebony stick, I eased myself into movement again, picking my way between pallets, chests, cot-beds, spilled goblets, and abandoned hats and doublets, approaching

her more closely.

“Mademoiselle . . .” I must pause, I found, which allowed me to look down and gain my breath. Bending my right knee inflamed my wound, which several hours had swollen and made hot. A sudden jar as I started off again and caught my foot against some man’s abandoned boot made me swear, violently but quietly.

“You see I may not kneel to you,” I said when I recovered my composure, approaching to within a yard of her pallet. “I must make my apologies standing.”

Dariole did not look up. “I haven’t asked for an apology. You think you can apologise?”

I shrugged, making an attempt to lighten the atmosphere. “I have little enough practise, I grant you. In my profession, it’s not usual.”

“Your ‘profession’ is *spy* and *killer*, let’s not forget!”

She gave me her back. I found myself watching the crown of her head, and her hair that had grown out long enough to touch her neck. The diffuse light made it gleam.

Standing over her, I could see that as well as being burrowed into bolsters, she had one bolster clutched to her belly with her free hand. It made my eyes sting with a desire to weep; I could not have told any man why.

“I blame myself,” I said.

Dariole stiffened. Her head came up.

Abruptly, she pushed herself upright, spilling pamphlets, sitting and clutching the bolster to her with white hands. “*I* blame you, too! Or hadn’t you *noticed?*”

I bit back a sharp reply. To deal with her hostility—yes, that is easy. Easier than to closely examine her hurt, or grief.

In all truth, I would have felt more at ease kneeling before her. To be standing over her has nothing of submission in it. That, perhaps, is as well.

I persisted. “You have not thought things through, mademoiselle. Yes, I could have lied to Robert Fludd. I could have claimed you were of no value at all as a hostage for my behaviour. And if I had . . .”

I shrugged again, and found it hurt my leg; my body pulling against the great muscle of the thigh.

“If I *had* convinced Fludd of that, then—you would be dead, mademoiselle.”

Her white, pinched face glared up at me from her pallet.

“He would still have taken you,” I finished. “And then he would have killed you.”

She shrugged. “*So?* It’s still your fault for being obsessed in the first place.”

“Oh, I grant you that much.” I set my ebony stick’s ferrule down between the carpets flooring the pavilion, digging it into the flattened dry grass. “The only way for your rape—or murder—not to have happened is if I had not had those desires in the first place.”

Her eyes met mine. With some difficulty, I held her gaze.

“And—Mademoiselle, if I had *not* felt this obsession...then, *I* would have killed you. In Normandy.”

“Yeah?” Her voice spoke all contempt, and all anger. She glanced down as if she saw the bolster for the first time, and pushed it disgustedly away from her. Kicking the pamphlets away to give her a clear space, she got stiffly to her feet. She must still lift her chin to glare up at me.

“*You* would’ve killed me, would you, Rochefort? You and which other dozen?”

In her bleached linen doublet and her brown Venetian breeches, she might have been some high-status servant. No blade marked her as a gentleman. I found myself watching the swell of her hips, under the gathered cloth, and the curve of a breast under her shirt.

Dear God, no! Cold dread substituted for arousal in my mind. This is the last thing she requires to see. Obsession, desire; call it what you will. *Perversion*.

I wiped strings of hair off my forehead, becoming aware that I sweated, not just from the heat, but from a slight wound-fever.

Dariable lifted her shoulder; her movement more stiff than usual. “Either way, Normandy or London...it’s *your* fault, Rochefort.”

“Don’t make any mistake.” I gazed down at her. “I’m here to apologise. To take all blame. But I will say this—you came with me from Paris. You, also, were a part of what we did. You enjoyed it, mademoiselle.”

“Go to hell!”

I shook my head. *If this were Paris; if things were as they were before....* In both guilt and exasperation, I said, “I warn you, mademoiselle—if things were different, I’d do what I am severely tempted to do. Which is, to carry you off from here in a sack!”

She deliberately looked me in the eye.

“Yes. But someday, you’d have to open the sack.”

At another time, she would have been taunting me. Now she spoke with a mixture of hatred and apprehensiveness that made me ache. I rubbed my free hand over my eyes.

“Listen to me, mademoiselle. I have not the slightest intention of killing Robert Fludd’s King.”

I dropped my hand from my face, giving me a clear view of her. I wished nothing more, I realised, than to put my arm comfortingly about her. Impulsively, with the stick’s help, I began to move forward.

Her body tensed. As a duellist’s does when a sword is drawn. Every line of her shoulders spoke vigilance, suspicion, hatred.

She said, “Fludd’s going to come here. That, or someone will who knows where he is. Or I’ll get him here *somehow*. Understand me. I’m going to kill Robert Fludd.”

I eased back, making pretence to lean more heavily on my stick. As I did so, her muscle tension eased.

She does not realise she is reacting so .

Ah, but it is not unexpected.

I looked down at my hands for a moment, clasped on top of my stick, and then back at Dariole. “How?”

Her brows gained a furrow of skin between them. “How?”

“Pardon me, mademoiselle. *How* will you kill Doctor Fludd? You have no weapon with which to kill him. You broke it.”

Dariole’s mouth opened fractionally; then pressed into a thin, hard line. “If I *wanted* a sword, there’s swordsmiths in Wells. Hell, there are blade-smiths *here*, with Alleyne’s men; I’ve seen them. You can buy a rapier anywhere. If I wanted a rapier I wouldn’t have broken it!”

Certainty only came to me with the moment. *Yes, this is the right thing to do.*

I turned about, limping back to the pavilion entrance. She made a noise from behind me—possibly suppressed anger; perhaps surprise at my leaving. At the tent-flap, I supported myself on my stick and leaned down.

Managing to pull in the blanket-wrapped bundle I had laid under the edge of the tent, I straightened up, holding it.

It was not what she expected; so much was evident in the tension of her body. As like as not—despite my injury—she *did* expect me to fall on my knees before her and whimper. *If I did, it would be for my comfort only.*

“These are yours, mademoiselle, I think.” I bent over, with my other hand gripping my stick, and unrolled the length of old blanket, spilling the contents on the pallet at her feet.

Leather and steel. Belts, a hanger, sliders, buckles, and straps; scabbards with metal chapes; and glinting hilts and pommels. . . .

She did not pause. She dropped down into a squat, hands immediately going to the rapier scabbard and the grip. She slid the sword free of the sheath, exposing the brilliance of the blade to the air.

The bright swept-hilt and wire-bound grip looked odd against her naked hand. Abruptly she lifted the blade to eye-line and squinted down it. She brought it back to her, examining the remnant of every scratch and burr on the hollow-ground steel and swept hilt.

“This is my sword.” She reached out her other hand and took the dagger, sliding it out of the scabbard and gripping the hilt. “My dagger. . . .”

Her head came up: she stared at me.

“I carried them down from London.” Suddenly, I felt as shy as a boy. “There was nowhere in Dead Man’s Place to safely store weapons.”

Elegantly and neatly, she stood.

Her head came up, and she moved into guard. In the slice of sunlight that fell through the open tent-flap, light blazed from edged metal and left dark spots across my vision. She hefted the dagger in her left hand; brought the grip closer to her eye. “Did you clean this?”

“A good blade is worth maintaining.”

“*You* just want my sword-point at your throat—”

I interrupted. “I return you your property as weapons, and not for my...perversity, or chastisement.”

She shot me a look, and busied herself picking up scabbards and slotting the blades home. Two months ago, she would have insulted me. I found myself curiously missing her taunts. *She may call me what she likes—only so it breaks this cold in which she has wrapped herself...*

In a complete intensity of concentration, she first buckled on her belt, then hooked the hanger onto one belt-fitting, and brought the suspensor-belt across her stomach to hook onto the other. She tried the set of her scabbards with a few strides about the cluttered floor, feet placed down flawlessly.

Dariole’s hand went across her body to the rapier’s grip, index finger locking into the finger-ring. The blade hissed out to point at the tent’s entrance.

Without looking at me, she said, “And you expect me to use these again? When I *know* they’re useless?”

She spoke caustically, but I read a lost look on her face.

Unwisely, perhaps, I could not resist an observation. “Certainly no man may say that you have an excess of gratitude, mademoiselle....”

Dariole swung around to face me. “What’s there to be grateful for! You got me *raped*. These are my weapons. You’re not giving them to me, Rochefort. You’re just giving them *back*. And thanks for the apology—but that’s just words. *Goddam*, you’re worse than Fludd!”

It came out close to “Furada.” I was reminded of how much she had been in the samurai’s company recently.

If I were a man to make foolish wishes, it would be a wish to be of as much use to her as Saburo has been.

I will not regret my decision, I thought. Ignoring her anger, I spoke.

“Mademoiselle, it seems to me that when Prince Henry Stuart arrives, a man might make an effort to convince the boy he needs to summon Robert Fludd to him, here—either as advisor, if things go well, or scapegoat, if they go badly. Henry *must* come soon—”

“*Rochefort!*” She rested her hands, one on each steel pommel. “What business is this of *yours*?”

Silence filled the pavilion.

“It’s my business,” I said, “if I’m staying here and attempting to save the life of James Stuart, to bring Fludd out into the open—for you to kill.”

She stared at me.

“If you’ll accept it,” I said, “my apology consists of time and opportunity. Kill Robert Fludd. When you’re done—then, we’ll go.”

Her face twisted, as if she would have wept, but could not; hate and confusion and hurt all visibly present. “You...got obsessed, Rochefort, didn’t you? A woman kicks your arse a few times—well, more than a few times—and you decide you get off on kissing her boots.”

She didn’t pause for a response. I could not have given her one; my breath gone.

“Because of this—perverse—thing you have with women, Fludd could blackmail you. Right? Otherwise it’d be, oh, Mlle Dariole: just another person who got in the way of spy business. That’s *pah!* and a shrug, isn’t it? And now you feel guilty. That’s not worth *shit.*”

Her face flushed; not merely from the heat enclosed by the pavilion’s canvas.

“I don’t have anything to say to you, Rochefort. Door’s over there.”

One week became two.

My leg healed enough that I might walk without the help of the silver-topped stick. James Stuart remained resolutely away from the south-west of his kingdom; Dariole avoided my presence.

News came in by way of Fludd’s messengers: that his Majesty might travel south to Cranbourne Chase—and that therefore he, Robert Fludd, should soon send the young Prince to join me, so that an invitation could be extended to bring James Stuart westwards to the masque.

By the end of June, when I could exercise myself in combat practise again, a day came that I found Dariole still sitting and watching when I walked off the field from fighting *en chemise.*

I still carried my green-and-gold silk doublet over my shoulder. Awkwardly, with a wide stretch of my shoulders, I hauled the garment on, and halted, tying points and re-buckling my sword-belt. Dariole’s gaze, raised to mine, had nothing of pathos in it. That this must be handled correctly, I knew. If I but knew *how!* I thought.

From my informants in the players’ encampment, I knew that Mlle Dariole had occupied her time by interrogating (in no very subtle way) any man she thought might have an idea as to the location of Robert Fludd. Even those men who travelled between here and Aemilia Lanier at The Rose could not help.

That it would be twelve days and more since I had exchanged a word with her dried up my tongue, for all that Reason said it should not.

Dariole stood up.

Her last words excoriated me still. *Because of this—perverse—thing you have with women, Fludd could blackmail you.* And all I could have said was, Not *any* woman, mademoiselle. And that would hardly help.

Even standing, she must still look up at me. I gazed down into her face. Nothing came to me: no words of comfort or self-justification.

She pointed at the road that led north, out of Wookey Hole.

“I don’t have anything to say to *you.* But, you know what? I want to see this woman Saburo tells me about. This ‘Sister Caterina.’ Saburo says you’ll know where she is. So you’re going to take me to her. Now.”

Rochefort, Memoirs

The leather of saddles creaked, two stone horses ambling evenly over earth that the sun made hard as rock. Rock itself rose up to either side of us, the track running through great grey-sided clefts in the limestone hills. It was possible to see grass overgrowing the lip of the ravine, if one craned back to see up high enough.

Dariole looked all young man, in riding boots turned up to the canions of her trunk-hose, a small pie-frill ruff framing her face that the heat made pink. She rode well, controlling the bay's desire to stray towards tufts of grass. I could read nothing in the line of her shoulders except tension.

The heat of the noon sun brought out the odour of horse, and the scent of leather from the saddle and tack, and of a sweet flower from some white blossom that ran riot in the scrub-brush to either side of the road. The cliffs on either side rose threateningly high. As the road turned, shade fell across us, even at noon. The mounts whuffled in the bee-heavy quiet. The faintest echo came back from the ravine faces.

She had ridden in silence since we rode out of Wookey, eight miles back down the road.

“Mademoiselle—” I reached out my hand.

She did not flinch, but every muscle went stiff.

A duellist is used to reading such things. I turned my offered hand, making it a gesture of emphasis. An ache twisted in my chest. It was at the same time a great and searing fury. *This, also, Robert Fludd has done to you.*

“Mademoiselle, will you not tell me what you hope for, from this?”

“That's my business.”

The chestnut stone horse lowered his head, and began to nip at grass in the shade of the great cliffs. Rock radiated heat. I eased his head up, touching a spur gently to his flank.

Her voice remained even. “Is your captain a man to put pickets out?”

“I would suppose so. Why?”

“Someone's pointing a musket at me from halfway up that rock.”

It was not the sun that made my face pink as I stood in my saddle, waving my hat in the agreed signal.

Cecil's cavalry troopers, under one Philip Spofforth, had indeed set pickets; after the interception below the entrance to Cheddar Gorge, we were brought to the captain. He nodded a friendly greeting.

“My lord Cecil said we might have a young man with us.” Here he nodded to Dariole. To me, he added, “She's where she usually is; I'll get Thomas to take you.”

The troop and horses being quartered in the gorge and attendant caves, Suor Caterina had preferred a low-roofed abandoned farm hut in the woods that backed on to it, and guarding it was the only current activity of the men. Leaves and greenery surrounded the cob-walled single room, and the trooper Thomas abandoned us outside with a mutter—as scared of the nun as Ned Field was of the Witch.

As I am of the seer, I thought.

Will she tell Dariole that Dariole is to die? Will she speak of the rape, and blame me for it?

The inside of the cob walls had been painted white, making it bright despite the tiny windows. The silver-haired woman—considerably more clean—stood at our entrance, her hands clasped under her chin.

“No,” she said, before I could speak.

Dariole questioned, “No?”

“No. You’re healthy and you heal like a young dog, signorina. What poison there was, your body overcame. And—no. The greater flux you had, on the road, at Richmond? Had it been fated by God to be born, that would have been your child.”

I grabbed Dariole by both shoulders and steered her so that she sat on the bench, rather than dropping down to the packed-earth floor. She stared at Caterina, and I could see every minute dot the sun had brought out on her cheeks under her eyes.

“I’m not carrying a child,” she said flatly.

“No. Albeit a woman need not be a seer of the future. We had midwives, staying at the convent. I learned the signs of a pregnant woman.”

I expected Dariole to burst into tears. I felt, instead, how the muscles of her shoulders went limp under my hands, and a great silent sigh went through her body.

The elderly Italian woman pushed her palms flat against the table, helping herself to rise. “But, of the other matter—shame! My Valentin!”

Standing, she reached out both her hands to Dariole.

“Cielo! But you enjoy the game much too much, little signorina. Too much to be without telling him of it!”

It was incomprehensible to me at first hearing. I began to recall certain words between us in the past.

Mlle de Montargis de la Roncière developed the pinkest of cheeks. “I don’t!”

Dariole took the nun’s hands between her own. Caterina’s were smaller, and not covered in old white scars. If you saw them together, you could not have told both—or perhaps either—as female.

“All right.” Dariole had the air of a man conceding a great deal. “Not as much as *he* does, though.”

“Ostrega! Men!”

The atmosphere between them inexplicably lightened. I could not understand why. I felt it lighten me, nonetheless.

“Pardon me,” I said feelingly, “but if I find myself de trop among you women, I will be only too pleased to remove myself!”

Both laughed.

Dariole laughed, I thought.

And shame-facedly, at that.

“No, no; stay. Stay!” Suor Caterina gestured me towards a joint-stool in the same way that a farmer’s

wife flaps her napron at hens. I seated myself with what dignity a man may manage in such a situation.

“You didn’t tell me this woman was mad.” Dariole took her hands back from the nun. She hitched herself upright on the oak bench, putting her elbows on the table.

“You have the manners of a young man in a tap-room,” I rebuked her automatically.

The glance she shot at me made me think I would have swallowed the words back if I could. *Rocheport the fool!* I apostrophised myself.

For my part, I’m willing to bring you to this woman because I think only another woman can comfort you for the rape. And now...you are not with child, and you are happy, and something passes between you that I do not understand; but what do I do? Embarrass you in front of that same woman....

“I know what you want,” Dariole said, as prompt to read my thoughts as Robert Fludd. “You want me to break down and cry in her lap. You understand what to do when women cry. But I’m not going to do that.” She looked half-defiantly at Caterina. “Am I, signora?”

“I doubt it, child.”

Dariole folded her arms across her breast, and I thought of her woman’s body inside the man’s doublet, as indeed I could not help but do, now I had her under my eye again.

“Women get their ease by tears,” I proposed, stubbornly. “Suor Caterina, the girl here does not weep in the slightest.”

“Let me guess. She says nothing of what she has suffered, but demands vengeance for it, and wants to kill the man or men responsible?” At my nod, Caterina turned her black bright eyes on Dariole. “You have learned to be a man in all things.”

I made to speak, and cut myself off. Nothing I could say would do anything but leave me in trouble, whether it were “That’s in no way the behaviour of a man!” or “But she is a woman!”

“I won’t force you to weep. Ostrega! Why should I?” She looked at Dariole’s expression and gave a laugh. Her braided silver hair took the sun brilliantly. She smoothed it back with fingers on which the knuckles began to be knots, and then seated herself slowly and carefully on the bench beside Dariole. Reaching for the papers on the table, she pulled one from the stack. “Here is what you need.”

The boy-girl leaned over and frowned. “What’s that supposed to be? Something to make me weep and wail?”

Caterina shook her head. “No. This was my calculation on your likelihood of escape, once Roberto took you. You will see here and here, and here at the end, what conclusion I came to.” After a pause, her bird-head rose. “You don’t speak Italian?”

“I don’t speak mathematics!”

Suor Caterina gave a rich chuckle.

“I’ll read it for you,” she said, becoming serious. “This is what the London Master will have calculated, so I find it a little distorted and cloudy. Valentin will explain that to you later, as to why that is. Now, see. I had no expectation of you coming here—nor the foreign man, either. Saburo Tanaka.”

“Tanaka Saburo,” I corrected.

“‘Saburo’ is his given name.” She sighed, as if at a hopeless pupil, and kept her attention on Dariole. “The chance that you would escape from the prison in London, once he had you in there and abused you, was so small as to be nothing!”

Dariole didn’t speak. For fear the old woman should be offended, I murmured a comment. “Few enough people escape from the Tower, true.”

“So unlikely!” Her perfectly shaped nail underscored squiggles and cabalistic signs on the paper. “But here is something that is—that *was*—likely.”

Dariole took the paper and held it up to the light. The sun cast a pale shadow on her face. The rims of her eyes were bloodshot, I noticed. *She still does not sleep.*

“Is that where he raped me? Luke. Is that where he lay me down?”

“Yes.”

“And I was supposed to—what?” She thrust the paper back at Caterina. “Die? Hang myself in my garters?”

Her tone was acid and abrasive; self-protective, I thought. The nun launched into a full flood of mathematical explanation.

“Whoa!” Dariole held up both hands. “In French, please! Or English, or Spanish, or anything but mathematics!”

She had a hectic flush to her cheeks.

“Wait.” Caterina caught the girl’s wrist. Appalled, I reached out, a heartbeat too late. *The boy-girl will react with a duelist’s reflexes,* I had time to think.

Dariole’s hand stopped, jerkily, and did not snap up in such a way as to break the old woman’s grip and possibly her wrist.

“These calculations are to do with Roberto’s plans.” Caterina slowly loosened her fingers from Dariole. The two of them looked at each other. Dariole gave a short nod; I read only brief consent in it.

Caterina went on. “Here are the final calculations. He had planned it so carefully that it was almost inconceivable that he could not take you, given the moment he would be looking for. No one can live without slackening their watch, if only for sleep.”

“I was careless.” The young woman’s voice rang like iron.

“You could make no mistakes, little one, until you are the age I am, but you would still die at the end of it.”

“I don’t care about dying when I’m *old!*”

The Italian woman gave a great ringing laugh. I put my head in my hands, briefly.

“Excuse her, Suor,” I said, looking up. “She is a mannerless brat, and I have been meaning for some time to turn up her behind and wallop some manners into her!”

“Yeah, like you *could* . . .” For the first time in two weeks, Dariole’s mouth curled up at the corner.

“I see I don’t convince you.” The older woman sat with a nun’s quietness, and air of being self-contained. She made me look over-large and over-violent, even sitting at the table as I was, and Dariole...*the young duelist looks a thug*, I concluded in my own mind.

Caterina leaned forward, looking into Dariole’s face. “People will not *always* attack you, the moment your guard’s down, little one. I haven’t calculated that, but I know it’s true.”

“So tell me. *Do* I live to be old?”

“Dariole.” I protested her interruption, not desiring her to hear the answer. “Sister Catherine, if you care to continue with what you were saying—”

“Your fortunes are tied in with the Stuarts. If James is dead, your life is not long.”

“How long?”

“Dariole,” I began again. She ignored me superbly.

“*How* long?”

“Merciful heavens, what a girl! If you want to hear it, then: less than a year.”

The young woman took it without a blink.

“What about if we keep James alive?”

“Longer, then. But a word of warning: you cannot win every duel you think about fighting. No man can.”

Dariole, with her arms folded tight across her chest, jerked her head towards me. “What about him? When does messire die?”

“From embarrassment?” I put in. “You see me dead a good half hour already, mademoiselle!”

Suor Caterina did me the kindness to laugh. Dariole glared.

“He has not asked me,” the Italian woman said.

Dariole switched dark eyes to me. “Coward. But hey, we all knew *that*.”

The blood rose in my cheek. I know where these outbreaks of spite have their source. Why did *I* never think to ask her if a bastard had been inflicted on her womb?

I spoke with deliberation to Caterina. “Let her insult me, if it eases her. Sister, I have no desire to know the day of my death, even should you have it among your papers.”

“It would be a paradox,” Caterina admitted. “You might begin to live in such a reckless way that you die sooner, thinking you can’t die. Or you might think you need to be so careful, to bring it about, that you hang yourself out of sheer disgust at the tedium!”

“It seems to me there is too much paradox in this,” I said grimly, tapping the papers on the scrubbed table. “Fludd speaks as if there is no room for error; given what I’ve experienced, why should I not believe him?”

Caterina extended a finger, pointing. “Her.”

Mlle Dariole, raising a brow, put the heel of her boot up on the bench, and clasped her arms around her

bent knee. *Boy!* I thought.

“What *about* Mademoiselle Dariole, Sister?”

The Italian woman put her hands on the paper in front of her. “I wish I could make you comprehend this. Not all of Maestro Bruno’s students could, and they were of the academies of Europe—”

“—and not a pair of thugs,” Mlle Dariole completed. She didn’t look at me as she said it; I thought she had no idea that she had, for the first time, linked she and I as two of the same kind—no matter how inaccurately.

“We’re not going to understand *this*.” Dariole pointed at the calculations. “What *about* me, signora?”

“This is the conditional number of events that must happen for you to be rescued from imprisonment,” Caterina said. “And this—Ostrega!—*this* is how much must happen before you might rescue yourself! You found the Signore samurai yourself, did you not, in the Tower?”

“I found Arbella Stuart,” Dariole said flatly.

“Ah, yes? Ah...here. *That* is a tiny possibility; no more than a blink in the eye of God! And for the rest—infinitesimal! Dependent on your saving of Signore Tanaka, and putting him in your debt. And dependent also on your own strength. Here....”

Caterina tracked a finger down another set of calculations.

“...you die from infection from your injuries. Here, you are struck with a melancholy afterwards, either for months or, here, until you commit the sin of taking your own life. *Here*, you make decision that, since Maestro Fludd has enough power to have you taken and hurt, he is the man you should assist, and you work on his plans *with* him—his sword, as Valentin here is the sword of the Duc de Sully.”

I flushed at that; fortunately, neither woman glanced in my direction.

“*Work* for him?”

“There are men of violence who make worship of power.” Caterina prodded the table with her finger, seeking words. “Who go in awe of any man more violent than they are. You could have made yourself Roberto’s servant, merciful heavens! And if that was not likely, signorina, consider this. The chance that you would ever free yourself was less than one hundredth of that chance. And I know very well the London Master will have dismissed the first. I don’t think he has even considered this second!”

Dariole looked bemused.

Slowly, I deciphered the old woman’s excited speech. “You’re of the opinion—what? That he didn’t know? Foresaw that she *wouldn’t* escape?”

“*Cielo!* Not *wouldn’t*. *Couldn’t*, Valentin! He thinks she *couldn’t* become free. He has calculated on her being in this Tower. And now she is free!”

“So?” I frowned.

“So,” she echoed. “A thing has happened that we have barely bothered to calculate, I and the London Master! Something...something Roberto will not have been expecting.”

Dariole shot a sideways glance at me, and made a shaky but credible attempt at arrogance. “Can’t think why not. *I* expected to escape.”

It was not the audaciousness of her lie, but the audacious act of boasting that made my throat choke up. Before, it would have been genuine; now, I saw it an attempt to bolster her courage.

“Saburo was your assistant in that escape,” I reminded her mildly, and had the satisfaction of seeing her scowl in a thoroughly self-absorbed and familiar fashion. It made me ache now to see these traces of the brat she had been. *Better this than the broken sword.*

“How does this matter?” I asked Caterina. “Of itself, I mean, not in its significance to Mademoiselle, here.”

“But, Valentin!” Caterina reached out and took Dariole’s hand. “Who knows what will happen now? Where one thing so uncertain has become reality, then all else must be recalculated to take account of it—and unless he has already done that, in past years, he now can’t. There isn’t time!”

She gestured at the boy-girl.

“Valentin, who knows what else she can do! She could throw out all his plans—if we knew how to act.”

Silence filled the cottage. Even as I perceived where her logic must lead us, I found myself making a sour face. Dariole caught my eye. As if she could not prevent it, a smile moved her lips.

“We should do...” I sought a harmless way to phrase it, “...what is un likely, it would seem.”

I met Caterina’s gaze. She beamed. “But yes! And who is it that we hope Roberto can’t expect, for all his calculations? Who can direct you to unlikely acts? She!”

“That’s—absurd.” I glared at her. “If you think I’ll put the execution of this design into the hands of a seventeen-year-old woman in breeches!”

“Sixteen,” Dariole stuttered.

“*Sixteen?*” I offered myself as a target for her wit, in the hopes that it might prevent her falling from laughter to pain. And then, cold truth dawning on me, I could not prevent myself saying, “Sixteen—you are *now* sixteen? And when I met you, in Zaton’s...mademoiselle, I beg you: tell me you were not, then, fifteen? Please!”

The smile she had on her face when she looked up at me, under her lashes, was no grin, but a woman’s smile. “Oh yes, messire. Fifteen. Just.”

“*Sweet Body of God and the bones of His Saints!*”

Dariole leaned forward, wheezing, and slid off the bench onto the floor. She sat with her arms tight about her ribs, her face turning pink as she breathlessly whooped.

“You see?” I appealed to Caterina. “It’s absurd!”

“*Yes . Valentin!*” Caterina reached and grasped my arm. The nun’s fingers attempted to bite into the muscle of my forearm, through my doublet, and made no progress. “Stupid man! Don’t you understand? When you come to decisions, let *her* decide. What better could you do, that the London Master won’t expect? Otherwise you are at the mercy of a man who has thought out each one of your decisions for ten years before they present themselves to you!”

Slowly, breathlessly, Dariole straightened up. I held her gaze, wondering what went on now behind the darkness of her bright eyes.

In the French of the gutters, she remarked, “Couldn’t I just make you shit, now, to get me to make decisions for you?”

The sudden coldness in my belly, and the heat in my cod that accompanied it, were, I think, known to her; or at least supposed with perfect accuracy. *She knows me far too well*, I thought grimly.

I pictured myself, for a brief and unsafe time, on my knees before the young woman, beseeching her co-operation.

“I won’t make a game of it.” Dariole changed back to English. “It’s too important, messire. I want Fludd. I don’t want to be running around doing things that someone has foretold for ten years! If I do things that are as unlikely as possible, then I think we might, *might* just stand a chance.”

I did not like to admit the rightness of her course.

“Caterina, I am a man of experience and wit; I have been trusted by the first minister of France—only I can be trusted safely to do this. I *may* go so far as to ask her advice, but...do you think I will put my plans into the hands of a woman, who,” I finished, with honesty that I had not expected, “who bears me a well-deserved grudge?”

Caterina didn’t speak. She turned towards Mlle Dariole. One of her silver eyebrows cocked, questioningly.

“He didn’t tell me I was in danger of being taken hostage.” Dariole sounded, not bitter, but sulky, and much younger than her years. I could not help staring at her.

Caterina snorted. “And this you could not guess, without being told? Misericordioso! Are you a fool, girl?”

To my astonishment, a blotched red colour spread across the face of Mlle Dariole, where she sat on the floor. “He never said anything.”

The Italian woman threw up her hands, and made an exclamation of impatience.

“You *knew!*” she accused Dariole. Her finger stabbed out. “He left France because of his Monsieur Sully. He can be forced that way, you know this! I have *that* here!”

She thumped her finger onto a sheet of paper.

“You have had him, *so!* around your little finger. And tell me you cannot guess you were an Achilles heel? Pah!”

I had not seen the young woman blush so completely before; it fascinated me.

Better to watch how the pink flush crept up to the very tips of her ears, than to think what the Italian woman said, and apply it to my own case.

Slowly, the boy-girl got up, and slid back onto the wooden bench.

“Messire Rochefort feels guilty.” Dariole traced the grain of the table with her finger. “He has done ever since he found out I was a woman. He was going to *shoot* me, signora, before he found out. After that...”

Her shoulder lifted in a shrug that was not dissimilar to Caterina’s; I supposed that she must have picked it up from the Concinis and the Queen’s other Italian favourites. Something about her seemed so isolated

that I most desperately wanted to make some consoling remark.

I have not the slightest idea what to say.

Sounding not particularly satisfied, Suor Caterina observed, “You knew. For whatever reason. Was it not up to you to take precautions? Do you not wear that as if you have a right to it?”

She pointed at the rapier at the young woman’s hip.

Dariole’s lips pressed together. The red flush, that had not left her neck and cheeks, darkened. She shot me a look, rapidly blinking.

“All right.” She straightened up where she sat. “Messire, I’m sorry; it wasn’t your fault I didn’t think.”

I could say nothing. She had all the gallantness of a boy or young man, caught out in a falsehood and making handsome apology for it.

But all the same, I wondered, just how far is Caterina manipulating her, for her own purposes?

Am I forgiven? Or has Mlle Dariole merely been backed into a corner?

“Signora.” Dariole spoke quickly, as if to cover up the pause. “You worked this out ahead of time, right? So tell me. I want to know where Robert Fludd is, now. I want to know where I can find him.”

Caterina looked at me, as if for support. “I’m sorry. I cannot foretell. He uses Bruno’s mathematics too much and too often for me to predict anything certain of him.”

The frustration on Dariole’s face would have been comic, had it not hurt me as it did.

“You can’t tell me *anything* about him?” She stood up, gazing down at the woman. “Where he is? Whether I can find him or not? Whether I kill him?”

“Merciful heavens, what a girl! So bloodthirsty.”

Dariole moved away from the bench, standing and staring into the grey ashes of the cottage’s hearth. She spoke, continuing to stare down. “Lady Arbella...gota physician in to heal me. I hated it. I hated being prodded and poked, up inside, even if it was behind a sheet so I couldn’t see the man—”

“Dariole—” I broke in, but she ignored me, turning her head to gaze at Caterina.

“So don’t tell me I won’t find Fludd. *I’ll find him.*”

Caterina climbed to her feet. She rested her hand on the younger woman’s shoulder. “*Bene!* You have all the questions. And I, none of the answers. Let us see what we can do. Such fire should not go unrewarded.”

A knock sounded on the door-frame of the cottage. Swiftly, I looked up. The trooper Thomas blocked the light, looking in, and I could not see his expression.

“What is it?”

“Message from Captain Spofforth, Mon-soo.”

“And?”

“Scout came back in from Wells,” the soldier said. “The Captain told me to tell you: he reports Prince

Henry and his entourage are about five miles from Wookey now, heading into the camp there.”

Rochefort, Memoirs

26

The scent of lathered horse haunted the air, together with the smell of the blacksmith’s tent, where a giant of a yeoman had set up an anvil to mend and shoe. The smell of his burning coals drifted across the grass, with the smell of horse-hoof also burning where the hot shoes went on.

Fortunately, I was not missed, or not in any way that might draw suspicion to me. I seated myself on an oak chest, not far from the Prince’s pavilion. It would take some time before the first formal ceremonies were over and done with. Too many local dignitaries wanted to be introduced to their Prince—and having to ride in from Wells and the surrounding estates didn’t prevent them.

The town of tents about Wookey grew considerably with Henry’s arrival: great royal pavilions in his colours, and a court-full of brave younger sons of the nobility, all tagging on to the Prince’s faction.

My attention snagged on one white beard as the man passed me.

Hariot.

Here as the deputy of Fludd, I thought, watching the weather-worn, middle-aged man walk away. Evidently the Doctor-Astrologer does plan to keep his promise, and not approach the vicinity until all’s done and James dead.

I sat for some considerable time, soothed by the cool of the evening, setting in order in my mind what plans I might utilise to ensure Fludd’s arrival.

It is her right to kill him, one supposes. But—I wish it were mine.

Summoned in, I uncovered and stood waiting. Prince Henry’s tent had a great deal of black-and-gold-chased armour leaning about in it, among padded joint-stools, cushions, hawk-furniture, and weapon-racks. The armour I thought somewhat out of date, by at least a generation. His swords—all three, hooked up on one of the pillars of the pavilion—were variations on English and Italian styles.

“Have you read Master Silver?” the amber-haired young man asked, entering from the curtained-off section of the pavilion and finding me examining the weapons. “Silver swears an Englishman with a plain broadsword is the equivalent of any three other men with bird-spit Italian rapiers.”

I would have bet money that, in this Master Silver’s book, the “three men” were French—or Spanish, according to his political sympathies.

“Very much of the wielding of *any* blade is luck, my Prince,” I observed. Even at sixteen, I thought he might take my hint—especially a blade aimed at your royal father!—but no flicker of expression made me suppose he did.

Now I saw him close, Prince Henry Stuart had little enough of his father in his face. He was handsome, very white in his skin, and with a dark foxy colour to his hair. I thought him well-knit and of good frame

for a sixteen-year-old; athletic, outspoken; I saw at once why he was so popular with his father's subjects.

"My Prince," I said, with a look at Hariot as the older man slipped into the tent. "Can it be that Doctor Fludd has not fully informed you what is to happen here? This is not a kidnap, nor an abduction, that is planned—"

Henry Stuart interrupted me with the ease of a young man who does not know that "rude" or "unmannerly" can be applied to him; broke in so straightforwardly that it was almost charming, except for what he said.

"My father is to be disposed of," he said, his clear eyes meeting mine. "Deposed, killed, murdered; whatever plain word you like for it, Monsieur de Rochefort. You have the players ready for their parts in the masque?"

Although he spoke pleasantly, it was evident the only acceptable answer would be *yes*.

"The Engineer of Shadows' is learned, all bar a few lines here and there. I'm told by Madame Lanier that rehearsal for *The Viper and Her Brood* goes forward in London, but there is some likelihood of the play-houses being closed by reason of plague."

I put my hands behind my back and stared down at Prince Henry. You do not see such flinty young men often; the last I remember was the youngest of the Valois brothers, Anjou. He, also, could be charming—and murder while he charmed. This is where Dariole's Master Webster gains his wild ideas of the Italian courts, I thought. No further from his home than Whitehall. England has a line of vipers to rival France, at last.

I added, deferentially, "The masque-engines still require some repair. We will have them complete within a few days."

"I wish to begin my rehearsal." The young man took a cup of wine from Hariot without look or acknowledgement. "I will be perfect with my part, upon the day."

Something about this boy makes my skin desire to creep off my flesh, I reflected. I moved the conversation to the sticking point.

"Do we know, my Prince, when his Majesty is liable to come here?"

Henry Stuart nodded earnestly. I had a brief but pleasurable image of the boy-Prince in irons, under Captain Spofforth's arrest. Henry might have enough courtiers with him to sink a galleon, but courtiers are not always professional soldiers, and that is a difference that tells.

"My father will be here soon," Prince Henry said. "A week, perhaps two. I have told him there is excellent hunting of the hart to be had in these Mendip Hills. Certainly I will have him here before the second week of July."

"And Doctor Fludd?" I met his gaze with subservient concern, so near as I could manage it. "Would it not be best for you to summon him here, sire, in case his mathematical advice is necessary?"

"Doctor Fludd is not a man of action." Prince Henry seemed to stand up a little straighter as he said it; I guessed the armour on display here not purely for my benefit. "This is, besides, my kingdom, Rochefort, and I neither have nor need any other man's hand in taking my own."

"Suppose the King, your father, fails to arrive? Doctor Fludd will be needed to calculate the next—" I

kept my expression severe, “—auspicious day.”

“I will contrive my own.”

It chilled me that there was no note of adolescent pettiness in the Prince’s voice. He regarded me with cold eyes.

“Send me one of my player-company’s men,” he added, turning away, “so I may begin to learn my speeches.”

There being nothing else I might do, I bowed and took my leave of him.

Outside the tent, I glanced about. Mlle Dariole looked at me from where she sat watching the smith shoe one of Henry’s stallions. I shook my head.

She said nothing—indeed, she fell into company with the younger men of Prince Henry’s players, where they sat at hazard, and began to throw dice with them—but I guessed her to be thinking as furiously as I.

It being more difficult for me to contact Spofforth and his men in person, now that Prince Henry’s courtiers swarmed worse than the summer flies over the horse-lines, I took advantage of Saburo’s visibility as “King James’s Demon” (as the court called him), and often made him my messenger. Few men will suspect so conspicuous a figure of secrecy, for the very reason that he *is* conspicuous. I had no concern about that—although I had much when, on several occasions, Messire Saburo also reported Dariole present again at the Gorge, and in Caterina’s company.

What does she ask? I could not help but wonder. Women go to fortunetellers to ask about their husbands, their lovers, their children—but Mlle Dariole is as likely to enquire how her death is linked with King James Stuart. . .

She would answer none of my questions, but, if I judged her frustration aright, Suor Caterina was likewise answering none of hers.

As if even the calendar conspired with the Stuart Prince, King James arrived in Somerset on the fourteenth of July. As Kings are greater than Princes, so a man waits longer to see the one than the other. James Stuart arrived in the morning, and I did not see him until noon. I sweated clean though my shirt in the scalding sun.

“Monsieur de Rochefort?”

At that unusual *de*, I looked up. A gentleman-usher bowed to me. “The King will see you now.”

Entering the royal pavilion, which, like King Henri’s, had carpets covering the spread straw, I made my bow to James Stuart. Saburo’s *kabuto* helmet, sitting in splendour at the foot of the throne, indicated the Nihonese Ambassador to have been received before me, which I could not begrudge. Ned Alleyne and his players stood already present. The fat, fair, red-bearded Englishman seemed to be in some kind of panic, but I could not question him, being led forward to the dais to kiss hands.

I bowed with as much flourish and finesse as I judged the King might expect from a Frenchman. “Your Majesty.”

King James, First of England and Sixth of Scotland, sat in a carved armed chair. He looked dyspeptic. “Monsieur de Rochefort.”

He had picked up the undeserved *de*, also, but I did not see attempting to correct him.

The King wasted little time in small talk. “It seems this masque is over before it’s begun?”

I shot a glance at Alleyne and did a rapid head-count of the other players. Eight. Eight, and it should be nine. If we are missing one, who—ah.

“Master Alleyne will tell ye the problem,” James grunted. He had evidently had a good noon meal; I could smell the wine on his breath where I stood.

Alleyne cast his hands up like the player-manager he was. “We have lost our Clio!”

The Muse of History had the masque’s central role (apart from James as “Brutus, King of Troy”), and a considerable number of lines—*interminable*, I had thought, rehearsing him over the last month and more. *It will be impossible to run the masque without someone in that role.*

“Clio is ‘lost,’” I inquired, “or merely mislaid? Your Majesty, ‘Clio’ is a youth of the age when young men begin to wine and wench—”

“More likely wine than a wench,” the monarch of England and Scotland interrupted. “Master Alleyne here has reports that his meal this day has left him spewing continuously, and with a bad case of the flux, also.”

The word *poison* remained unspoken, but I would have bet a gold louis on it being in James Stuart’s mind. Poison is always in the mind of kings.

“I cannot think of a man here who does not desire to present an entertainment to your majesty,” I said smoothly.

And of those not here—Fludd, Cecil, Northumberland, Lanier—truly, they all also desperately desire ‘The Engineer of Shadows’ to go forward!

“It is not unusual for a man to eat that which eventually sickens him,” I added. “The question is, will he be well enough to play his part tonight? If it’s a mere matter of an hour or two—”

“He will not.” The English player-manager shook his head. “Not within the time allotted. The Prince’s physician examined him. He can’t!”

Dear good God! I thought, keeping every emotion off my face. Is Fludd’s great and universal plan to be circumvented by so small and random a thing as an unforeseen case of the belly-gripes?

James leaned his elbow on the arm of his great carved chair. His features fell into a petulant scowl. “Master Alleyne, you must get some other member of your company to play the Muse of History.”

A vast babble broke out from the players and Alleyne, which would not have happened at Whitehall-palace. From Henri of Navarre’s fondness for the chase, I was familiar with the liberties that attend kings upon it.

“*How* can another boy rehearse it?” Alleyne protested, quietening the rest. “We have all parts played by actors, most of whom change their costumes and play two; some three. Seven Virtues and seven Vices and there are nine of us! Who am I to remove and school in a thousand new lines between now and the masque this evening!”

James harrumphed. I would have done the same, had opportunity presented. When M. de Sully had

business with actors, for his theatre in the Arsenal, I had always made it my business to be absent. And truly, I thought, I have been wise in that!

I caught Alleyne by the arm, so that he should stop waving his hands in the air. “Monsieur, all your cast have sat about this past month and listened to ‘Clio’ drone out ‘her’ lines! It’s not as if his part were difficult.”

“*You* do it if you think it’s so easy!” Alleyne snarled.

I smiled darkly. “I rather think ‘Clio’ is not a woman of my advanced age, monsieur, despite History being among the oldest of the Arts!”

King James Stuart passed a remark in Greek at that, laughing loudly enough that he slobbered, and must stop to wipe his mouth. His sweat wafted on the air.

“We will find you another Clio, your Majesty,” I said, firmly reassuring, because in the presence of kings one is. In truth, Alleyne was right, but that was not a thing to tell James I and VI.

If Fludd should be close at hand, I thought, may I use this accident to lure him in closer?

“But!” Alleyne protested.

Over his protestations, I said, “Your Majesty’s players will not disappoint. Do I assume they have been showing your Majesty your own part in the masque?”

Not that James would play it, now, but it rarely fails to distract a king (or many lesser men) to be asked to talk about themselves. It is true that matters in the court of Henri IV were conducted with unusual bluntness, compared to the other courts of Europe. Experience there had nonetheless schooled me in the attributes most useful to a courtier—an appearance of honesty, coupled with shameless flattery. James did not appear immune.

While his Majesty educated us as to the history of Clio, Virtue, Vice, and a number of other abstruse subjects, I took care to look attentive, and promised myself the pleasure of bracing up Edward Alleyne’s failing nerve by unloading on him all the frustration being overseer of players had caused me.

“Ay, Master Alleyne, you and your men may leave us,” James said irritably. I bowed, with another flourish. Halfway to the pavilion’s doorway, the King added, “You, Monsieur de Rochefort, you know much of this masque—we have a question or two to ask you: wait behind.”

The remaining courtiers he dealt with speedily, in an increasingly thick Scots accent, and the ushers were clearing the tent before the quarter-part of an hour passed. I stood towards one side of the pavilion tent, in the shade now that the sides of the pavilion were being affixed for privacy, and candles lit.

Either I will be asked some obscure literary question in Greek or Latin, I thought—none of which I recall—or this James of England and Scotland is practised in making a pretext to speak with a man alone.

At least James knows nothing of any conspiracy, I reflected, cooling my heels. Like enough he does wish to consult with me about his role in ‘The Engineer of Shadows.’ Is this a moment to send word to Cecil that, without the Muse Clio, neither he nor Robert Fludd will get a masque? No, there is not time to get word to London....

The last of the ushers bowed his way out, closing the porch-flap of the tent, and exchanging quiet words with the guards outside. James lurched up onto his feet and got down from the dais, one hand each on

the shoulders of a pair of pretty page-boys.

“Do you come with us, sir.” It was not a request.

As the servants leaped to clear the main part of the tent, the King led me to the canvas wall dividing off the sleeping-chamber half of the pavilion. The pages held the curtains apart. He passed through, beckoning me to follow.

Now suppose it were I with a dagger down my shirt? I thought, on his heels.

The pages stripped their King, offering him a thickly embroidered day-robe, and I stepped past the group of them, into the space beyond. An intact and complete tester bed took up most of this room beyond the curtain, with a chest at its foot, and a hound asleep beside it; and a cluster of candlesticks set on a low table, despite the sunlight sifting through the painted canvas.

A little dark hunchbacked figure stood up from the table and bowed to the King.

“Ay, Robbie,” James Stuart said, sounding good-humoured.

“Milord Secretary.” I bowed, chiefly to give myself a moment. *Robert Cecil here at Wookey!*

I had little enough time to think.

“Master Secretary has informed us of this nonsense of a conspiracy,” James remarked, stomping across the room and settling himself in the opened bed-covers of the tester bed. “‘In danger of our life,’ ha!”

He waved us to sit. I took a joint-stool beside Cecil, trying to read his face in the dimmed sunlight, and gaining no wisdom from the attempt.

“It may be lunatic, your Majesty,” I ventured. “That does not, unfortunately, prevent it from being factual. Milord the Secretary is correct when he says your majesty is in danger of your life.”

“Ay?” James’s gaze drifted to his first minister. I saw a hint of friendly irony in his expression. “You’ll be right, then. We doubt anything less could ha’ made him bring the matter to us. He likes his secrets, does Robbie.”

The hunched back stiffened. “Your Majesty—in front of a broken-down spy and adventurer—!”

I thought what I had thought six years ago: that there is something of the old married couple between the Scottish King and the English courtier who put him on his throne. M. de Sully had been pleased to speculate, at the time, which was the husband and which the wife.

I devoutly wish it *were* six years past, I thought, and I not where I stand now.

“Milord Secretary would not wish to worry your Majesty unnecessarily,” I said as smoothly as I could. This is not Henri of Navarre, who called a spade a spade; this is James Stuart, who would prefer not to know what a spade is for, nor when another man must wield one for him.

Querulously, James said, “This scholar, this physician Fludd, we may think him guilty. We are beset by conspiracies! God reaches out His hand to save us, however, as is to be expected. But we will not believe this nonsense and blather—that my *son* is involved!”

There is a little too much bluster in that, I thought. I stood, and moved to kneel by the bed, in front of the King. A man in his late middle years, dis-robed now to his gown and cap, seemingly chill among blankets, gazed down at me, not quite able to conceal his dread.

“Your pardon, milord King. It is true. If the evidence that Milord Secretary brings is not sufficient, then...I, myself, have had Prince Henry say to me that he will take the throne.”

“Ye misunderstood him.”

I raised my head where I knelt, aware that if I rose I should tower over the stout King. “Sire, I wish I had. I did not. Your Majesty will see it when you take the conspirators, when they’re all gathered together before the masque—my advice is to let them think it will go forward, though it cannot now, and take them all together. Then, sire, you will find that the Prince carries a dagger about him.”

“We do not believe he carries it for any ill! *Any* man may carry a dagger.”

I managed surreptitiously to catch the eye of Mr Secretary Cecil. The politician had an expression that led me to think I went over well-worn territory.

“We will not believe it.” James thumped the bolster passionately. “We will not believe it until we see him with the dagger and feel him strike home! Monsieur de Rochefort, this is our Prince, our son, our heir—we cannot believe this of him!”

Arguing with kings is often futile. I bowed my head, as of a man submissive to his monarch’s will, and momentarily wondered why I desired to keep this obstinate and deluded father breathing.

Dariole. To flush Robert Fludd from cover, and let her heal her ills by putting an end to him. And because young Henry is a little viper, himself. As well as my present connection to France depending on Cecil’s good graces.

Seating himself at the table, Cecil said, “There *is* a way to establish this, your Majesty, but you must indeed let him strike. Monsieur Rochefort has been a soldier, he can arrange to conceal upon you a gorget for the throat, and a jack of mail.”

James Stuart’s head came up like his hound scenting a deer. “Very well, very well. If this serves to prove his innocence, we shall do it!”

The sight of this much backbone in the King surprised me—and, evidently, surprised Cecil, I established with another glance in that direction. *Milord Secretary has outsmarted himself, it seems.*

“It can be done,” I said cautiously. “You must bear in mind, sire, that it is possible to conceal mail in a doublet, and a gorget under your Majesty’s ruff, but if an assassin strikes for the face...then your Majesty is not safe at all.”

Cecil, difficult to read as he generally was, seemed to have an air of relief, hearing me say this.

“He won’t strike his father in the face,” James Stuart said, with a quiet dignity at odds with his usual stiff formality. “You may believe us in that, Master Secretary Cecil.”

I thought the little man was all but wetting his trunk-hose, and I couldn’t blame him. Here he is, first minister to a king, with his informers set up to protect his King from spies and assassins. And here is that same King prepared to step out like a bull-calf into the slaughter-house.

“We will issue no orders for arrest until we do this,” James said.

Cecil slammed his fist down on the table in a small, tight arc. “Your Majesty does this entirely against my advice!”

“Our Majesty is not constrained by your advice, Master Secretar’!” James’s accent became impenetrably thick. He ranted at Cecil. I understand how *I will do this!* sounds from a king in whatever accent or dialect.

It will do no harm to have Robert Cecil think I try to assist him, I decided. “But, sire, the masque cannot go forward. It’s as Master Alleyne says. We have no Clio, and no time to train a boy as a replacement before tonight.”

James Stuart harrumphed again. He shifted his ungainly body, getting off the bed, and—despite the Summer day outside—called in servants to bring in a brazier of coals. In his robe, he paced up and down the length of the carpet while Cecil and I stood at the King’s pleasure.

Abruptly, James stopped in front of me. He looked me up and down.

“You are very fluent with the Muse of History’s lines, Monsieur de Rochefort?”

“I’ve been much at rehearsals, your Majesty.” I did not add that, for a player, the boy playing Clio had a dog’s memory.

The King’s head wobbled as he tilted it to one side. His gaze on me would have been unnerving to a lesser man. “And will you tell us, do you think, that you recall all the lines of Dame History as she spoke them?”

“It would do no good, sire,” I said. “I could not teach another boy to say them in the time, even if Master Alleyne had an apprentice.”

James Stuart turned and walked back to the table, where Mr Secretary Cecil stood. The King muttered something in his impenetrable brogue that made the little man’s eyebrows shoot up. James turned back to face me.

“Well, now.” He put his hands behind his back. An expression of satisfaction bloomed on his face. “Monsieur de Rochefort, it seems to me that you’ll make a bonny lassie.”

I gaped.

“A little old, mayhap, as you said, but Dame History has been with us for many a year.”

I stared, not sure I’d heard what he appeared to be saying.

“But, *yes!*” Robert Cecil stepped forward. “It will put Master Rochefort on stage in the best position to *guard* your Majesty. Beside you! Sire, if you are determined on this rash action, then I beg of you, do it with this man for bodyguard!”

The King did not even make objection to the word *rash*. He smiled. From the depths of my shock, I thought it a smug smile.

“Well, well, Robbie. We thought you would like that.” James lumbered awkwardly back to bed, and seated himself, gazing at me. “We had thought we might bring you into the masque beside us, in a small role, Master de Rochefort, but players have always such complaints about that. Here is a thing no man may argue with! You fill a role which they cannot. And without you, the masque cannot go on.”

I am not completely sure what I said. I spluttered something in French, but not a pure enough French that the King of England might admit to understanding it.

“I can’t do this!” I protested, my wits coming back to me. I looked at the King and his minister. “I’m no player!”

“You are a spy, that is close enough.” Cecil limped across the carpet and looked up at me. “You know the part.”

It is unfortunately too late to deny it.

“The most part of it,” I admitted, with reluctance. “I might con it over between now and the banquet, and have it adequate in my mind. But—” I turned to appeal to James Stuart. “Your Majesty, I do not know how to behave on a stage! I shall be walking into other players. Dancers. Scenery.”

I do not know why it gives shorter men so much apparent satisfaction to see a man of my size reduced to abject confusion. Certainly Robert Cecil rubbed his elegant small hands together, and his King beamed with amused satisfaction.

“We shall spare your time from us,” James remarked, “so that you may rehearse on the stage. We plan to rest now, before the banquet. There’s time, the while.”

I can’t argue, I realised.

The bitter truth of it is, if James *is* to survive a masque with his homicidal son in it, then all that stands a chance of preserving his life is an armed man at his elbow....

Myself on stage, Cecil’s soldiers, James’s household guards—yes, that comes close to giving the King the overwhelming force on his side that may bring him out of this alive. *I must send urgently to Captain Spofforth.*

“You shall play Clio for us.” The King hauled bedding over his lap. “And Dame Clio will be a wee bit more belligerent than she is usually played, will she not?”

“Yes, your Majesty,” I said, keeping my voice neutral with an effort.

Dear God! Caterina desired unpredictable actions—she has one!

It was not until the meeting broke up, and I walked out into the afternoon sun, and away through the tents, that it occurred to me.

What will Dariole say when she hears this?

Rochefort, Memoirs

27

Are you sure *you* would not like to change your clothes, Monsieur Dariole?” I enquired bitterly.

“Certainly you’ll be pissing in your breeches if you continue so!”

Ned Alleyne glanced across the cavern that had been converted into one of the players’ back-stage dressing rooms. “Do not deride Monsieur Roche-fort, young Dariole! He is doing us an inestimable service by taking this role and allowing us to perform before the King.”

Dariole leaned up against the limestone wall of the cave entrance. She waved a casual hand. “Oh, don’t mind me....”

Her voice came breathless with the aftermath of a paroxysm of laughter.

“No, I swear!” she added. “I truly *do* appreciate the actions of Messire Rochefort in this.”

“See that you do!” Alleyne said.

So it comes to this, I thought gloomily. I am defended by a theatre-owner, a tradesman, an *actor*. If I had preserved any remnant of pride in my forty years, this would extinguish it.

Likewise, had I known I would be standing in a state of undress before a young “man” who, by reason of there being no modesty between players, is not asked to leave this place....

The floor of the cavern was covered by three or four layers of carpet thrown down underfoot. It was not cold to be standing there in my stocking-hose. A vast number of boxes, crates, trunks, and chests had been shoved against the cave walls; most had a motley array of candle-sticks and nips set on top. The smoke and heat went up to blacken the limestone ceiling, and caught in the back of my throat. I coughed.

Habit moved me to wonder if the players might be sensibly aware of fire—and, yes: at the far end, where the cave roof sloped down towards the sandy floor, a still pool of water gleamed. Five or six wooden fire buckets had been stood along the ledge around the pool. And another two, full with sand.

My tailor—dear good God, the day has dawned when I must call a *tailor* friend!—sat with his apprentice, frantically tacking and altering a costume. He muttered, swearing, as he had been doing for the past several hours; the more frantically now that the hour of performance was close upon us.

The apprentice rose and hovered around me, getting himself in Alleyne’s way. I folded my arms across my bare chest and stared as they shouted, the one at the other.

“You’re not taking *everything* off?” Dariole’s enquiry held a text that I deciphered, although it appeared only polite to the general audience.

“Hose are hose, no matter who wears them,” I said, straining for dignity. My burgundy-coloured knit silk hose sagged, ungartered, below my knees.

“But—”

“No,” I said firmly.

Despite the lack of a corresponding female garment, I had not seen fit to abandoned my under-linen.

Dariole, in bleached linen doublet and a pair of charcoal Venetians, the very picture of a court page, stepped further into the cave and sat down on a beech-wood chest.

“Don’t let me keep you, monsieur,” I emphasised. “There must be much you have to do, with the banquet now beginning.”

“Oh, I’m not busy....”

“Then be quiet!” Edward Alleyne interrupted her faux innocence.

Probably as well, I reflected, finding myself within an ace of hauling the brat over my knee and dusting the

seat of her breeches for her.

No...she has suffered too much indignity this last month.

That thought touched me with a feeling I could not identify.

“I’ll help you con your script a last time, Valentine,” Alleyne announced, searching a stack of scribbled-over paper, and glancing anxiously at me. “A shame there’s no time for Will to walk you through your part on the stage in costume, but they’re dining shortly. No matter, we’ll succeed! Now. ‘When grave the Muse of History stood’....”

“When grave the Muse of History stood,” I remarked grimly. My tailor approached me with a woman’s chemise.

I managed not to glance at Dariole. It would at this moment be difficult to see myself through her eyes. In Paris, I knew how she would have reacted to a Spaniard-looking man some two yards tall, standing in nothing but stocking-hose and under-linen. Now, after the assault on her, I felt that my bare upper body must be an affront to her, woman as she is.

I could think of no way to appeal to a modesty that does not exist between older man and younger man. *If she is distressed....*

“‘When *brave* the Muse of History stood,’ I think you’ll find, messire.” Dariole grinned at being able to correct me.

One moment it is as if nothing has happened to her. The next....

Ned Alleyne wiped sweat from his red face, glaring at Dariole. “If you know this part, Master Page, perhaps we need not trouble Monsieur Rochefort?”

Her features assumed a look of innocent reasonableness. “I don’t know it all, Monsieur Alleyne, and my English isn’t so good. *I* wouldn’t like to have to go on stage, in a role I don’t know, speaking lines I haven’t rehearsed....”

There was a deadpan look of devilment under her innocence; I wondered Alleyne did not see it. The player-manager grunted acceptance and turned away. Over his shoulder, I saw the young woman’s eyes glow, almost with warmth. Swiftly, she put her hand up to her mouth. Not quickly enough—I saw the smile that she couldn’t prevent her mouth shaping.

The King, I thought grimly, while I strove to remember Clio’s next line, and the two tailors built the Muse of History’s costume with much reference to my body. I am in this role to protect a man I need to keep alive. There is *no* shame in it.

Measurements done, I was permitted to don my boots and garter my hose—which felt odd enough without breeches. Two words into the next couplet, I found myself suddenly swathed in linen. The tailor and his assistant pulled at it, settling about my body what I saw to be, as my head emerged, a woman’s chemise.

The tailor smiled up at me, fussing about settling the fine linen straight on my shoulders, and getting my arms into the sleeves. “Lift your arm, monsieur.”

I did, and found it taken between his two hands to bend. With the flexing of muscle, I heard the seam split.

He shook his head, smile becoming strained. “We’ll adjust it. Now . . .”

He pulled the draw-cords at each wrist. The gathered neck hung wide open, halfway down my chest. Ned Alleyne leaned in and—without a word of apology—pinched the flesh of my upper chest.

“Don’t make the bodice with too much showing,” he said. “Even with padding, there won’t be much there. And there’s some need for shaving.”

By the door, Dariole made a choked sound. I did not turn my head to look at her.

“Shaving?” I got out.

“Yes, monsieur, we’ll take this off.” He flicked my shoulders and pectoral muscles, where dark hair begins to cover my torso. “I regret, also, your moustache and beard—”

“No!”

I swore, violently. Behind me, Dariole choked again.

“But, Clio, a lady—cannot have a beard!” Alleyne also choked, but because I had my hand in his ruff. “Rochefort!”

“I apologise.” With an effort, I unclenched my fist, and loosed him. “I merely had not thought of the matter. Since I hardly expected to be playing a stage-part.”

I suppose I thought—if I thought—that player’s paint would hide all. Plainly not. *I have not been smooth-cheeked since I was a boy of Mlle Dariole’s age.*

Keeping my back turned to her did not assist me; I could feel her amusement as clearly as if it were radiating from her, like a hearth’s heat.

Alleyne rolled his shoulders, settling doublet and ruff back into their proper places. The tailor took off my chemise, altered it with a swift rip of cloth and half a dozen stitches, and threw it again over my head. It smelled of perfumes layered on, one over the other. I discovered I was standing the more fiercely upright, as if there must be no aspect of the lounging catamite in my pose.

The great muscles in my thigh still twinged as I did so. The first few nights, I had sought brandy to aid me to sleep, quieting the nagging pain. Wounds to the flesh heal: I am expert as a physician in knowing how long before I might put trust in the limb again. I do not heal as fast as I used; for all that, I am healed for all that matters.

The tailor tied the strings at my wrists, and pulled the drawstring at the neck of the chemise, tying it off when the fine gathered fabric barely covered my nipples. He flicked at my hair, where the long coils caught under the cloth.

“What about this, Master Alleyne?”

The player-manager reached out and weighed a handful. “We’ll crop it close, for Clio’s wig.”

I closed my hand around his wrist.

In theory I could snap it as a twig snaps. But this is Alleyne, whom we need for the masque in forty minutes. . . . In practise, it seemed I mightily arrest his hand that held the thick coil of hair, and give him a look that held all my absolute refusal.

Alleyne's eyes widened. He said rapidly, "Or we can dress your hair, and add a hairpiece! Yes...that and the jewels we used for *Sophonisba*...It will look very well. Very well!"

The tailor, back at his table, stopped sewing. I caught his eye, and Alleyne's white face in the corner of my vision. It may not be so evident to them, I thought, that I will not break a man's hand over a matter of my vanity.

I loosed Alleyne, and gave him a sharp nod. It was beyond me to consent to hairpieces and jewels aloud. Fortunately, this did not seem to be needed.

He continued to rehearse me, and I responded automatically. Movement made me miss a line: I began again. Dariole crossed the cave, walked down to look at the pool and pinnacles, and walked slowly back. Once in the centre of the candles, she sat herself down on a rock-shelf, one ankle up under the opposite buttock, and both hands down in support.

I permitted myself to meet her eye. It was that or blush, most unfortunately, at being observed by her, and in that way look even more ridiculous.

Half in my mind was the conceit that, if I could withstand *her*, stage-fright would have no terror for me.

True, I am on stage as a bodyguard. But I must still give Madame Clio's words, aloud. On stage, in a part you do not know, in a role you have not rehearsed....

Bitch! I thought, meeting her gaze.

In my forty years, I have done any number of things which do not become a gentleman. I wondered where I would find anything in memory to compete with this: standing dressed in women's under-garments, under the gaze of Mlle Dariole.

She looked up, and spoke without a quaver in her voice. "This Dame History—she's a large woman?"

Alleyne glared. "I won't warn you again!"

She held her palms up in surrender. "No, Monsieur Alleyne."

That contrite look should not fool any man. Least of all a player!

I was about to riposte when the tailor returned with another garment and began feeding my arms through the straps. Only as the garment hung from my arms, and he went behind me to tug it onto my body, did I recognise it for a corset, or, as the English call it, a pair-of-bodies.

He got the straps over each of my shoulders, loosened their ties to the main garment, and began to whip the cord that would pull the side-seam closed through the eyelet-holes.

In the face of this indignity, I was almost immune to whatever should come after. I dared not meet the eye of Mlle Dariole. The tailor laced up the corset, coming around to tug the chemise under it downwards, so that it was merely a frilled edge along the top.

Women wear their pair-of-bodies a little clip-fitting, to act as a restraint on their bosoms. Until now, I had thought my acquaintance with them would be confined to removing them from willing partners. I felt the garment tugged more tightly about me, as the tailor returned to the side-seam, swearing oaths under his breath as he caught his fingers under the cord. The pair-of-bodies squeezed me tightly.

I looked down. My enclosed pectoral muscles bulged up over the tight bodice, giving an impression—if a

man were in dim light and at five yards' distance!—of a woman's breasts.

I heard something slide, and a weight hit the carpet. I looked towards the noise. The boy-girl sat on the cavern floor, her arms wrapped tightly about her ribs, and her face pink. It relieved me only a very little to see her incapable of speech.

I stood, my gaze taking in only the limestone of the walls, while the tailor and Alleyne put on me a farthingale, a number of petticoats, and the under-skirt, skirt, stomacher, and bodice that made up the Muse of History's masque costume.

"You should sit, while Matthew attempts your hair." Alleyne set a joint-stool on the carpet.

Meekly, and after considerable difficulty with the frame of the farthingale, I sat. What seemed endless fathoms of black silk hung from my waist. My only consolation was that I could not see myself.

With my natural hair wound into a hairpiece, I was fitted with a gold net for the bun of braids, jewels for my ears, and a wire-supported ruff of spider-web gold lace. It felt odd and appalling to have a weight of hair piled above my temples. The fine cloth that served for modesty's sake to cover the hair was threaded through with gold beads, crude up close, but doubtless effective at the distance an audience would be. I thought I must stand all of six feet and ten inches tall.

Conscious of the ludicrous spectacle I must make, I allowed Matthew also to shave me, and the dresser to persuade me to stand, and pin the folds of my farthingale skirt so that they draped to the floor. The boots did not show under the farthingale—there being no woman within fifty miles of a like size of foot, I was permitted to keep my own footwear.

A hysterical voice summoned Ned to another one of the caves. I realised, *We're close on the hour*. Alleyne darted out, then stuck his head back around the rock and bellowed for the tailor and apprentices. In the silence left by their departing footsteps, I found myself tensing, waiting for the sound of Mlle Dariole's voice.

"Come here." Her voice sounded from further down the cave. With difficulty, I turned around, kicking my skirts and petticoats out as I walked. I felt myself growing hot about the face, knowing that the young woman must comment.

She stood facing away from me, looking down into the black, perfectly reflective surface of the pool. A drip of water plopped from the limestone pinnacle to the surface, ruffling it. I walked up to the edge, where stone rose up to form a natural rim, and looked down.

Yellow light blossomed to my side. She held up a pair of candle-sticks—usefully, as a page might do. *She intends for me to see myself*. I did not dare meet her eye.

Masque-paint felt sticky on my skin. I barely recognised my own face. White skin, lamp-black eyes, and paint that shaped cheek and lip to something neither masculine nor feminine. . . .

Haec vir, I thought. And lo! there's hic mulier beside me.

The noise of voices outside in the main banquet-cavern was somewhat muffled by the intervening passages. I opened my mouth to speak, and could find nothing to say that would not make me sound, as well as look, ridiculous.

I deliberately put myself into the frame of mind in which one enters a duel, or a battle in war. Her presence could not then disturb me so much. I glimpsed the Vices, outside in the passage, being checked a final time for costume, shoes, and identifying icons. Past them, I knew King James and Prince Henry

and their courtiers banqueted. And soon I must go out and keep a man alive in the presence of his impious and patricidal son....

Who may *have* the throne, for all I care! If it weren't for Doctor Fludd.

Dariole held up the candle-stick. "It's only for an hour more...." Demurely, she added, "You look very beautiful, messire."

I braced to roar at her. She forestalled me. "Did you manage to stay armed?"

"One might as well wear a table!" I exclaimed, discharging some of my frustration. I reached into the heavy silken folds of my skirts, below the "table" of the farthingale. A cord hung from my belt, decorated with pearls—the tears that History sheds, or perhaps brings. Picking up a dagger from one of the chests, I fastened the scabbard to the end of the cord, making it both hidden and available.

"Better than nothing, I guess." Dariole shrugged philosophically. She grinned, and nodded back at the joint-stool. "I didn't like to say, messire, but ladies don't sit with their legs wide apart. Or if they do, they're not ladies...."

"That will hardly matter on stage," I said stiffly.

"And you should walk from your hips. You'll look more of a woman if you do that."

I bit back a curse. "Mademoiselle, the wrong one of the two of us is about to go on stage."

"Oh, I don't think so. You're *far* prettier than I am. Even if you are a bit of an Amazon...."

I recognised the smile that curved up the corner of her mouth. *I have barely seen it since she came here.*

Paradoxically, I found my heart lifting.

"I doubt a more curious reflection has ever been seen in this water, made-moiselle."

The black pool below showed us in perfection, side by side. A young page, some sixteen or seventeen years of age, eyes wide, mobile mouth for once still. And beside him—in jewelled bodice and great farthingale, and with a great framing ruff behind my head, like England's Gloriana—stood Clio, Muse of History.

Reflexively, I passed my hand above my shaven chin and upper lip. Clio's face was adequately bare. I felt exposed. Clio's features were also, I thought as I looked down, too large and too craggy for a woman.

Above them, what seemed an improbably complex nest of braids was contained by a net of gold and margery-pearls; the false braids making my head ache where they were pinned in to my own hair. The hairpiece held a tiara of fake gems, mostly pearls, and they sprayed up on wires, giving me a radiant halo.

"Conceivably the only halo I shall ever have," I remarked.

"Very pretty!" In the water, Dariole's grin reflected against the blackness. Startled, I saw it had as much wistfulness as malice about it. Does she envy a woman her role? I thought, starkly amazed.

"I wish I could show you to our court like this," she observed. "King Louis's court, I guess it is now."

“The Medici’s court.” I tried not to scowl, for the sake of the face-paint, and wondered suddenly how many emotionless beauties of Henri’s court had seemed that way for that very reason. How small a thing, to have such an effect.

“I’d like them to see you at Zaton’s! Arnaud. Andre. Maignan. Sully.” She stopped her rapid-fire recitation. In another tone entirely, she said, “Sorry, messire.”

When I had control of my voice, I said, “That, I believe, is the second apology I have had from Mademoiselle Dariole. The shock may do me harm.”

She smiled. I did not look at her, but at her image. Two white faces, reflected in black water. It appeared that she came barely higher than my breastbone.

I turned away from the pool to look at her profile.

How have I not seen before, that she is beautiful?

Admitted, it is not a beauty that yet shows without careful examination, but she has the most infallible mark of it: eyes set widely apart. Eyes almost sea-dark in the cavern’s candle-light as she watched me.

“Accidents will happen, mademoiselle.” My voice sounded rough, to me. “If I can persuade you to nothing else—as: you should now leave Wookey until this is done and over with—can I persuade you not to enter the caves? Wait outside; guide Captain Spofforth.”

“Saburo-san can do that.” She spoke carelessly, but there was nothing careless in the way she looked at me. “Why so anxious to keep me out of danger, messire? Feeling guilty again?”

I startled myself by exclaiming, “You got yourself into this by your own stupidity!”

I took a breath.

“That, and a desire to hand me my arse on a plate, as the English saying is. If you had not been so anxious to humiliate me, you would not be in this country—”

“You started it.” Her oval eyelids lifted, showing me her dark eyes. “The quarrel. You started it. Otherwise I wouldn’t have come looking for you that morning.”

Outrage left me speechless.

“Mademoiselle,” I managed at last, “was it not you who decided that M. Rochefort was a duellist who deserved defeat at the hands of a younger—man?”

“If you mean I saw a great lean streak of a man who needed taking down a peg or two....”

“It is not my fault you are in England,” I emphasised. It is difficult for a man to tower commandingly in a dress. I settled for holding her gaze.

After a moment, I looked away.

“So much is true,” I said. “That much is your own fault. The...reason that you have, to kill M. Fludd...that is my fault.”

She reached out and stroked the black silk ruffles at the rim of my farthingale. Her fingers were bare, gloves clasped in her other hand. She felt at the fabric, mercer-like—and as if she had never seen or thought of women’s clothes before. As if she reassessed skirts, bodice, petticoats....

She raised her eyes, gazing up at me: the ruff that sat supported on my shoulders, and the braided hair that I saw reflected in the pool.

“You won’t fight easily in that, messire.”

“No. I doubt any woman could.” The last remark, intended as self-deprecation to put her at her ease, I suddenly wished I had not said. What happened to her, happened when she was in gear easily mistaken for women’s clothes.

Her eyes glinted. She reached into the folds of silk hanging down from the farthingale’s supporter, and I made no move to prevent her. She took the dagger and bared it, the blade slipping into her hand like a living thing. With an odd smile, she stretched out her arm to threaten my midriff.

“A little higher,” I said helpfully. “The bodice feels as if it is made of steel. You may usefully stab me in the crotch, if you can find it through these petticoats, or the thigh again. My throat is at your disposal.”

I gestured towards the area of exposed, fresh-shaven skin between my nipples and the hollow of flesh above my collar-bone. It felt ridiculously exposed, even without a female duelist pointing a dagger at it.

She smiled, as I hoped and intended.

She stepped forward, well within my reach if I should have desired to attack her, and lifted the dagger. I did not respond. She laid the point of the blade between the pushed-up flesh bulging over the top of my bodice.

Never having been possessed of a cleavage before, I do not know if women are particularly sensitive to temperature in that area. I had all I could do not to squeak.

With that realisation came a familiar heat. I shifted a little, foot to foot, without volition. *To have my cock stand, in all this women’s gear, will be beyond disgraceful!*

Mlle Dariole was not, now she was close, so small as she appeared in reflection. The top of her head came just below my collar-bone. It put her eyes directly on a level with the top of my bodice.

She flicked her gaze up, unfortunately catching me staring down with an expression of consternation.

“That is...cold,” I said lamely.

“Messire.” Equal amounts of wistfulness, devilry, and affection seemed present in her voice. The last made me ache, at chest and crotch both.

She pressed the flat of the blade against my flesh, at the top of my pearl-covered bodice. “Would you like me to put you on your knees? I could make you beg a bit. And I doubt it would show through all these petticoats if you spent in your drawers.”

I spluttered inelegantly.

Her eyes were very warm, when I met her gaze.

I would have slumped, had the laced pair-of-bodies permitted it.

“To tell you the truth, mademoiselle...I would like nothing better.” The sound of my voice in the cavern, louder than the crowd’s noises out in the banqueting cave, made cold sweat trickle down my back under my chemise.

I held her gaze. “I dare say that having a man of hard reputation at your feet, begging for your mercy, will give you—whatever it is that women call a stand.”

What had begun to be a hard grin on her face faded to a smile, with so much unselfconscious affection in it that it frightened me.

“I like doing it.” Her eyes were clear. She seemed to have no shame in making her admission: I envied her as much as I have ever envied man or woman. “I’ve known that ever since Zaton’s. It gave me a feeling, down *here*.”

Equally unselfconsciously, she gestured at where, in boy’s breeches, she should have had her cod.

“I wanted to do it again.” Her eyes met mine. “You know why? You needed humbling, messire. And you weren’t humbled at Zaton’s, you just *lost*. It’s not the same thing. I like the thought of you at my feet. I like that you *hated* it.”

I put the back of my hand to my face. “What distresses me, mademoiselle, is that this is the precise dress for a womanly blush...”

She spluttered into laughter. The heat in my face did not diminish, but I confess it did not distress me.

I said, “If having me humbled will steady your nerves before tonight—” Which, privately, I think may be a disastrous blood-bath, should it go amiss: fighting indoors is ever a bad thing, “—then, mademoiselle, I am at your feet.”

She pressed the tip of the dagger against my skin, in no wise hard enough to draw blood. It pricked. She said, “Especially when you have the disadvantage of being a woman...”

I risked all, saying quietly, “Yes, I can see it is a disadvantage.”

She shut her lips together, hard enough that the flesh around them went white. With a movement economic and sure, she sheathed the dagger and dropped it to the end of its cord, concealing it in the folds of my farthingale again.

She looked up directly into my face, her voice neither cracking nor breaking. “I could have forgiven him if he’d raped me himself. He *knew* what would happen, and he left me with his thugs. He *knew*. He didn’t even have the balls to order it done.”

“Perhaps he thought it would leave you tractable and obedient.” I shrugged when she stared at me. “Men have thought such things before now, when it comes to women.”

“At least he kicked you in the cod himself.” Her lashes dipped, rose. “You’re a man. He has to intimidate you personally—”

“Try to,” I interposed. The rigidity of her expression broke. She let a second pass, and then nodded, her face soft.

“Try to intimidate you personally.” An actual smile came to her lips. “Though why he thought Messire Rochefort would be amenable to that...”

Her mockery was not unfriendly.

“Me,” she said, “me, he just had to know that *somebody* would do it.”

I have faced enough in the way of danger in my years as a grown man, and enough of men who are

powerful, brutal, and possessed of political influence. I should sooner have faced all of them at once, now, rather than be looking down into the face of this young woman.

“To tell you the truth,” I said, “I don’t take Monsieur Fludd to be any great judge of a man’s character.”

She gazed up at me, her spine stiffening. “Oh—you think?”

In the face of that acid sarcasm, it was difficult to continue. I wondered for a moment, *Is it worth what honesty will bring me?*

Something behind her surface emotion moved me to it.

“I will tell you the truth,” I said. “For all Monsieur Fludd’s apprehensions, he might have had my loyalty when I met him. For the price of a purse, or for what Milord Cecil offered—informers who will tell me what passes at home in Paris.”

She nodded, after a moment, her gaze level now.

“Fludd claims to calculate men’s actions,” I added. “With no knowledge of their thoughts while they perform them. It is true that he may have...misconstrued matters between myself and Marie de Medici, so as to think that intimidation might constrain me to do what he ordered.”

After a moment, she said, “You mean he thought you could be threatened with violence?”

Her brows went up.

“He *doesn’t* know you, does he?” Here she grinned. “Not like I do.”

“Dariole...”

I took her right hand in mine, and, as gracefully as possible under the circumstances, went down on one knee and kissed her bare fingers, as I might have done to nobility or royalty.

“His calculations make no difference.” I looked up at her. She stood no more than a few inches taller than I, even with me kneeling. “One is just as beaten. Just as raped. What matters is that his assessments are wrong—I am not intimidated; you are not...tractable.”

Soberly, and showing neither petulance nor outraged vanity, she nodded.

I want nothing more than to stand and embrace her, I realised. Hold her until I may warm her fears into dissolution.

But she will hardly welcome male embraces now.

Besides, comfort will come ridiculous from a dame of such comedy-jig grandeur as I now represent in her eyes.

“Mademoiselle...” I caught her gaze.

She smiled; that curve of one corner of her mouth that is a bare wickedness peeping out at the world.

Does she appreciate my dilemma? No, surely....

“I will eradicate Fludd’s conspiracy, root and branch,” I said quietly. “If this English Earl is more than a dupe of Fludd’s, I’ll bring him down also. Robert Fludd himself I leave to you. Unless circumstances

absolutely dictate otherwise. He's yours, Dariole." I gazed up at her, let the words hang for a moment, and then added, "You see I am humbled. I do not protest at having my just revenge performed at second-hand. He will be just as dead."

A tiny chuckle sputtered from her. My chest became one hollow ache.

Does she know? I wondered.

Her small, hot fingers closed tightly over my hand, and I do not believe that she realised it. Certainly, I thought, she does not realise how I treasure this trust of hers—nor how that realisation makes me, Rochefort, feel fear.

"I'm not going to tease you," Dariole said. "We're both afraid of Fludd, at bottom, messire. Aren't we?"

That she should express such honesty to me, who has been her enemy, wrenched my guts. I thought, It is almost enough to make me shed the tears that properly belong with this raiment.

"The better reason for killing him," I managed to observe in a level tone. "The dead are not impressive, I find."

"No, indeed, messire." A relaxation went through her expression. "I find them far less impressive than living men."

That she had sword and dagger to her person gave her the unconscious swagger of a duellist, even here, and even now. On impulse, I shifted from my courtier's position on one knee, down onto both my shin-bones, feeling the rock hard under the carpets and my skirts. Riding boots under petticoats are by no means comfortable. I knelt down on both knees, in the unmistakable position of submission.

"Messire?" she said.

"I am humble. Not, perhaps, for the reasons that you would wish." I reached out to take her other hand. "Humble, nonetheless."

Holding both her hands, I bent my head over them, reddening at the memory of the reflection in the pool—young man and grotesque older woman.

That I should be lustfully obsessed with a boy-girl so much resembling Henri III's feline boy-courtiers: such did not surprise me. The desire that tightened around my heart, that I should comfort her, protect her: *that* surprised me. And yet it had been evident and obvious to Robert Fludd.

"Pardon me, mademoiselle," I said.

"What for?"

"If I had confessed the true extent of this my—obsession—to you before, you might at least have known you were in some danger from my enemies." With difficulty, I raised my head and looked her in the face. "You being of a keener mind, mademoiselle. You would have guessed. Pardon me that I didn't speak."

She freed one of her hands. At first I thought she pulled both her hands away: would have held them, and then realised how much of an imposition that would be—but by that time she had one hand out of my grip, and drawn back.

I realised I was tense, in anticipation of a blow across the face. I did not take my hands from her hand to protect myself.

She cupped her hand and brushed my cheek.

“Dariole.” I could say nothing further.

“Messire.” She took the warmth of her bare hand away, and absently rubbed her palm on her breeches, in case she had player’s paint on it. The unselfconsciousness of that boy’s gesture made my heart ache. Her image blurred in my sight.

“Don’t cry, messire.”

A man does not weep.

“I beg your pardon,” I got out. My voice was not steady; I, who have faced kings and their ministers. “I am as womanish as my dress.”

My heart put such a thunder of blood through my body that I had to clench myself together in control.

“Beg,” she said, with a soft grin.

“Dariole.”

“Beg.”

The straining, absurd desire that began to move my flesh, finding myself where I was, and the shamed urge to prostrate myself at her feet, she must have seen in my face. I felt my skin flame.

“I am ashamed to impose this perversion on you.” I could not look her in the face. “I am not able, honestly, to beg your pardon.”

“Don’t,” Dariole said. “*I* like it, messire. I like that I can put you on your knees and make you spend. I wish you wouldn’t call it perverse.”

Taken aback, I stared at her, I dare say with my mouth open.

“Didn’t you know?”

“You have said—merely to provoke me! I thought...Mademoiselle, I—no!”

“Why do you think I kept picking fights with you in Paris?”

I flushed. “Excuse what little vanity I have left—I took it to be for my reputation as a duellist.”

“Oh, yes. Or at any rate, you wouldn’t have been such a proud son of a bitch if you *hadn’t* had your reputation.” The corners of her mouth tweaked up. “I never wanted to kill you, messire. Except for ten minutes after you messed me up at Zaton’s.”

“I underestimated you,” I admitted. “Perhaps it’s truer to say, I underestimated the vanity of a young woman who has had her clothes spoiled in public.”

That, which would have had her prostrate me with her foot on my neck, she only giggled at, now.

“Death was too good for you, messire,” she said, gamely attempting a serious face. And then, her smile fading, she became genuinely quiet. “I didn’t want to kill you, messire. But I did want to put you at my feet, humiliated and begging me for—for anything, really. Mercy, mostly, when I thought about it. I did think about it a lot.”

The amount of affection in her gaze appalled me.

“I thought I would corrupt you,” I admitted numbly.

“If I was ‘corrupt,’ it happened before I met you! You just brought it out.”

“You should not....”

“What?” she prompted, when I could not gather my thoughts.

Should not be perverse, I thought, but had sense enough not to say aloud.

“I beg you,” I said. “I prostrate myself, mademoiselle. I am absurd. Nevertheless, I am on my knees to you, as you wish, and I—humbly—beg you for mercy. Rochefort begs you, mademoiselle.”

Her smile was soft, and her eyes bright. My throat constricted.

“I forgive you,” she said. “That’s what you’re asking for, isn’t it, messire?”

“For what?” I blurted, like a callow youth.

She glanced over her shoulder at the cave exit, and I saw her listen to hear how much the banquet had advanced. Her expression didn’t change, unless the seriousness of it was informed a little by warmth.

“For getting me used as a hostage. And everything that happened afterwards.” Her eyes were clear. “I’m not putting blame your way, messire. Yes, you could have told me. But I should have known what he could do. I’ve been thinking. Caterina’s right. Messire, if any part of it was your fault—you’re forgiven. And I’m sorry I was unfair to you.”

I could not speak.

Outside, Ned Alleyne’s voice echoed through the caverns:

“Vices, to me! And Dame Clio! We begin in ten minutes!”

Rochefort, Memoirs

28

Clio, Muse of History, strode forward through the assembled Virtues (triumphant), her hand upon the arm of James Stuart, First of England and Sixth of Scotland.

The Vices (defeated) were not present—by virtue of them being, indeed, these same hurriedly dressed Virtues in different masque-costume. Which is perhaps not so different from court life as we live it.

“Lay low the corpse of Vice confounded!” I proclaimed. Behind me, masque-engines squeaked as wooden scenery rearranged itself into a pastoral aspect. *Et in Arcadia ego*, I reflected.

Clio had all of the projection an officer in the field lends his voice when giving orders, but that seemed to me an adequate substitute for a player’s skill. Clearly, I could be heard to the back of the cavern, despite

the dampening effect of the low ceiling—the young man in white satin at the head of the banqueting table stood up, on his cue.

“Behold the hope and victory of the Stuart line!” I declaimed, wondering who had written that, and if I should ever get the chance to remonstrate with Madame Lanier about matters of poetic diction.

The players representing Virtues went forward to the edge of the shallow brooklet flowing across the cavern. The heat of many torches made their gowns shimmer. Temperance—the best and youngest speaker, after the sick-abled young man Clio, and so most like a maiden—spoke his lines, calling Henry to cross the wooden masque-bridge and join his father.

Squinting to see past the drunken courtiers at the long table in this bad light, I caught sight of “King James’s Demon” standing in the cave-entrance. Saburo nodded, unemphatically; a man might have taken it for the samurai easing a crick from his broad neck.

Cecil’s men in position, and the men of Henry’s household guard taken by those of James. The agreed signal. No noise had come to me here, but with the racket of sackbuts and other musicians, I doubted it could have disturbed any feaster. Including young Henry Stuart.

The young man stepped boldly over the bridge (which creaked), lantern-light reflecting from his brushed-back auburn hair. Temperance and Justice took his hands. He wore clothes not unlike a masque-costume in splendour: ivory ruff decorated with silver lace, stockings of white silk, shoes with white ribbon roses. All the colours of virtue, as humbly suggested by Edward Alleyne.

I heard, in my mind, as clearly as if Dariole spoke to me, “*At least the Prince isn’t wearing a skirt....*”

I turned my eyes from where she stood with the other pages. No need to draw attention to her, now that—with Henry’s appearance on stage—she would be moving to stand with M. Saburo.

James’s arm quivered under my hand as the Virtues led Henry into a dance that must end with him facing us.

End with death. Assassination.

The King of England and Scotland had taken no suggestion about costume except mine. Under his oyster-silk doublet and hose, his stout figure was covered by a shirt of mail; his ruff concealed a high-necked gorget. His vast trunk-hose were so stuffed with bran that I thought I would defy any man to put a sword into them, never mind Henry’s dagger.

“You will not let him come near my face,” James muttered. I tightened my grip on his arm.

“Your Majesty need not be—” I revised my vocabulary away from my master the Duke’s bluntness, “Need not be concerned.”

Need not be terrified.

If any man was wetting his drawers as this ludicrous masque drew to its conclusion, to the courtiers’ applause, it was James of England and Scotland. M. de Sully once called him “the wisest fool in Christendom,” in acknowledgement of his devious mind; no man ever called him a soldier.

“Steady, monsieur,” I said absently under my breath, as I might have to some ensign new to battle. Henry circled us with the Virtues: moons about the sun, satellites of the King’s glory. *Didn’t you say you need this proof your son would betray you?* I mentally urged James to bravery. *Prince, make your move soon....*

Prince Henry Stuart danced with the players, under a ceiling blackened by lanterns and flaring torches. They trod the steps of a masque-dance constructed simply enough for English royalty to follow. Courtiers edged forward, crowding now at the streamlet's edge.

Certain men, by twos and threes, drifted towards the torches, ready to dowse them on my order. My word to Hariot and Henry an hour ago had been, "As much darkness as possible; then I may put in the servant in the Prince's costume unseen. When you re-light the lanterns, I will stab him in my anger at his terrible crime."

And he swallowed the bait, I thought bleakly, seeing Henry's face as he passed me again, handing off Justice to Courage. He had a pallor that might have been fear or determination.

The turn in my dance brought me to face the audience again. I glimpsed, beyond the raucous banqueting table, Mlle Dariole, restlessly speaking to Saburo. No sign of Robert Fludd yet, despite "King" Henry's royal summons.

Surely he *must* arrive, to calm his puppet's fears? Or if his murder fails, will we not see Doctor Robert Fludd again?

At least I have Saburo and Spofforth ready with lights and muskets, I thought, scanning the table again. The dagger in my farthingale skirts was not the reassurance it might have been.

I realised Thomas Hariot was no longer present at table.

A cold fear went through my bowels.

With absolute certainty, I thought, *We have been betrayed*.

The feeling of a conspiracy going wrong is unmistakable, and I have learned not to ignore it. I owe my life in other such circumstances to prompt action.

"Your Majesty." I gripped James's arm firmly. "In a moment I shall ask you to run. Towards that cave, there—you see? To our right-hand side? When I command 'run,' run, and stop for no man, sire!"

With my other hand I caught the cord that held the dagger and pulled it up. The hilts caught on the edge of my farthingale. I ripped them loose, hearing silk-thread tear. James goggled up at me, his lips shining with blubber.

"Man, you said we'd stand here! That we had no cause to move!"

"Circumstances alter cases!" The young Prince, in his dance, was revolving out to the bridge for the last time. Prudence and Justice were about to lead him back through the column of dancers who even now began to line up, singing paeans.

James's fish-eyes opened wide, startled. "I will go nowhere. It's you who are the traitor, man! I see it now! Help! Help, ho! To your King!"

He yanked his arm—and, to his evident surprise, did not get it out of my grip. Seeing his guards begin to run forward, I got the dagger securely into my other hand, and said, straining for reason, "I'm saving you, sire, not threatening you!"

The fat man froze.

Prince Henry's courtiers overturned the torches, throwing them into the stream and dashing them out on

the rock. Men yelled orders, courtiers at table jumped to their feet, a rush of flame went up delicate draperies, a woman screamed.

Justice and Prudence revolved to stand in front of us, their wide costumes screening Henry off from the audience. Desperately, I thought, Why do *I* have to get players whose devotion to their Art outweighs the natural desire to scream and run!

Henry's glance went over me without acknowledgement, and his hand went into his unbuttoned doublet.

I smiled grimly as the majority of the lights sputtered and died, darkness flooded the cave, and screams resounded. Grabbing James with both hands, I swung his heavy body about, so that he stood behind me, my body between he and his son. *If I cannot disarm a sixteen-year-old puppy of his dagger—!*

"Henry, child!" James got himself out of my grip as I made to defend him, and slipped past me, directly into the boy's path.

Prince Henry shoved his dagger forward in a brutally hard stroke.

The point jammed into James's belly.

The English King grunted, looking down at himself.

I cracked the pommel of my dagger down on Prince Henry Stuart's knuckles. His dagger went instantly, lost in darkness. He wrung his hand, stared at me; *really* looked at this player beside his father—

I punched him.

Unlike the young Prince, I have no compunction about striking a man in the face, whether with fist or blade. Why not attack the most vulnerable area?

Do not kill the son of the English King, I reminded myself, in a heart-beat's calm among the screaming confusion. My punch was not hard; I felt no bones crunch under my knuckles. I swore as Prince Henry Stuart collapsed back into the streamlet, like a coal-sack thrown into a pond.

Verity and Temperance backed away, screaming like the girls they were dressed to resemble. All this end of the cavern filled up with black figures, fleeing or fighting in darkness. Prudence shrieked in an adolescent boy's cracking voice:

"He killed the King! The King's dead!"

"The King lives!" I bellowed back louder. Monsieur Saburo, Monsieur Captain Spofforth, you are on the verge of being late—

James stood, hands to his belly, staring with sweating face and wide eyes. Roughly, I pulled him to one side, groping down at the belly of his doublet. I took my hand away and found no blood. *Yes! Stout mail: he will be only bruised.*

"Run, your Majesty." I did my best to haul him bodily across the rocky floor towards the players' caves. He went down on his knees, legs not moving, and I caught my heel on my skirt-hem and swore.

"You were right, sire," I tried to encourage him. "Your son could not stab you in the face."

He collapsed limply at my feet with a banshee-howl.

"Not perhaps the best thought," I reflected aloud. The Prince wants his father dead badly enough to slit

open his belly: not a comforting thing to think on.

Noise came from the main entrance. I lifted my head and saw, over men's heads, a flicker of torch-light—musket barrels with the light on them. Saburo, and men with him.

“Almost prompt on their cue!” I took my stand over James, dagger in hand. “Saburo! To me! Captain!”

The troop of Cecil's men fanned out. I saw two of them hauling a man towards the cave-exit; recognised the tiny, hunched figure of the Secretary of State. The flaring shadows and new yellow light of armed men's torches showed me the banqueting table overturned, one man screaming as fire leaped up his short cloak, Alleyne peering goggle-eyed from the floor, Mlle Dariole splashing across the streamlet, ignoring the courtiers that Cecil's troopers roughly manhandled past her. Rapier and dagger in her hands, a wide grin on her face.

“Look to the King!” I stepped back, sheathing my dagger, as the samurai came up to me with Dariole, and both of them faced outwards as I squatted to examine James Stuart. Bearing only a dagger, and in skirts, I am not the most effective king's bodyguard.

Dariole looked over her shoulder, all swagger, grinning widely enough for her teeth to gleam in the intermittent torch-light. “How *about* that! We won!”

“The King lives.” I stood up from the crouching man, not injured except in his heart.

I could not be severe with Dariole. I put my heels together, under my farthingale, and made her a small bow. “Doubtless you think you played some crucial role in this success?”

“Of course I did. You know you'd never manage without me!”

The sound of men being hurried out under arrest began to diminish. The noise of players shrieking at Alleyne grew louder. A moment or two, when Spofforth's men should be at my side, and we might move James with safety out of the cavern.

Dariole's attitude was inexpressibly careless: all of a young man's disregard for the realities of fortune eloquent in how she stood. I saw that her brow shone in the lights nonetheless. If I were to feel her there, should I feel cold sweat?

Her eyes were wide and clear in torch-light. I thought I saw a flush making two high spots on the bones of her cheeks.

“Messire,” she said quietly, “I'm going to kill Fludd...but now I don't even know where to start looking. I don't have so much experience as you. Is your offer still open, to help me find him?”

That she should ask for my help!

All of it rushed through my mind in a second. That with Robert Fludd dead, my reason for being in England will vanish—and so, also, will vanish Mlle Dariole's reason for having any more to do with M. Rochefort.

Yet it may take time to find Doctor Fludd—

Why? I interrogated myself. Why seek out opportunities for this young woman's company, now that I have the perfect excuse to give her the go-by? Take my perverse desires and remove them from being any danger to her. Go to the Low Countries, or Italy, or any land from which a man may observe France. Business with M. de Sully becomes urgent. Tell Dariole she needs must seek Fludd by herself;

vengeance is hers by right.

“Messire?”

Whatever I say—if I hesitate a moment more—I shall see the growing trust in her face turn into anger. She will have every right.

It will . . . hurt me, to see that change.

It will hurt her, I think, to be in my company; I have already called out of her cruelty, and perverse desire.

If I had been another man, I might have said that I felt fear.

A jet of flame seared across my vision.

Simultaneously, a musket-shot slammed painful noise into my ears, crashing every other sound into obliteration.

I dived, hitting James Stuart as he rose, and crashed down on the Englishman among the sound of farthingale willow-wood supports snapping.

With my body covering much of his, and tangled in my skirts, I looked up. *One of Spofforth’s troopers has fired his piece by accident; I’ll cut off his cod for it!*

The stink of burning match pierced my nostrils, too strong for the number of muskets Cecil’s men bore.

Muskets fired.

Flame spurted sideways out of the touch-holes, and red cones of fire blasted from the weapon’s muzzles. Twenty, in a ragged volley. Chips of stone shattered and fell on me from the cave ceiling, and I reached up and hauled Mlle Dariole down on her arse.

“What?” She snarled between outrage and disbelief.

“*Stay down!*”

“HENRY! *King Henry!* God for Harry Nine!”

Deafened, I heard deep male voices bellow. More men ran, silhouetted at the cavern entrance. Men armed with muskets.

“They won’t shoot low until they have their ‘King’!” I shouted in Dariole’s ear, and simultaneously found Saburo beside me, the samurai heaving at James Stuart by his other arm. The Scotsman spluttered and swore.

Flame blasted in a ragged line from the entrance to the cavern. *Too soon for the first troop to have re-loaded—they have more men than I thought: forty or more—*

The cavern ceiling exploded in a fusillade of musket balls, rubble raining down.

All their men re-loading from half-volleys: our throw of the dice is, will we move before one or other troop is ready?

“This way!” I shouted.

I got up on my knees, hauling the vast tangle of my skirts up around me; grabbed the King, dragging him forward, bodily, with Saburo; and fell into the only shelter the torch-light presented us—the overturned long banqueting table of ancient oak, brought in in sections and reconstructed in this cave.

Splinters flew. The heavy, iron-hard wood shuddered. I heard a stranger's voice bellow, "Shoot high!" and glanced back in my tracks.

Prince Henry lay with his body half in the streamlet, hair flowing in the water.

"Hold the King!"

Saburo and Dariole both gripped onto James Stuart; she with her hands in the lace of his ruff. Her wide, bemused eyes followed me; I had not time to explain. *Henry will be a hostage, if we have him.*

I glimpsed movement behind me, and swung about on my knees as a figure hurdled the fallen table.

If I *had* possessed a musket, I should have shot Captain Spofforth dead on the spot.

Twenty or so of Cecil's men came with him, falling into cover, loading their muskets. Spofforth swore vilely, hat gone and sword bloodied. Crouching rapidly down, he stared back over the edge of the wood. Too dark to see if bodies clumped toward the exit, where the first half-volley fired. One man's screams ripped the air apart.

I demanded, "Who is it?"

Spofforth gave a wry, rasping chuckle. "The young Prince's men."

"His household guard? Not under arrest?"

"No, those men are held. These are soldiers, wearing the Prince's colours."

I hit my fist into the wood, bruising my knuckles. "Merde!"

If Cecil can conceal a company of troopers outside Wookey, for this day—why, then, so can Henry Stuart.

Henry Stuart, with the precognitive advice of Robert Fludd.

I crawled back around on hands and knees. "I'll get the Prince—"

I stopped.

Two bodies made dark lumps on the "stage" floor of the cavern, black liquid snaking out from under them. One of the players crowded himself back behind a bulge in the rock, at the rear wall, apparently not willing to run for the entrance to the dressing-room caves. No man else stood at the rear of the cave.

Except Dariole, ankle-deep in the streamlet, both hands gripping Prince Henry under his arms, and her body straining to drag him across the rock. Her scabbard caught against the stone as she bent, straightened, dug in her heels, hauled.

The stage torches show her up, I thought, cold and contained. Likely they will not shoot her, if they realise that is Henry Stuart there. If not—

I stood up from behind the overturned table, slung my heavy skirts over my arm, and ran out, hunched over, to the stream-bed.

The Prince, half-recovered, staggered up onto his feet, wrestling with the young woman.

Only let her draw her sword, and he's a dead man!

In the same second that I reached them, he broke her grip and staggered back. A man moving behind him raised a pistol. The black hole of the muzzle lined up with my chest.

Pistols are uncertain at close range. Nonetheless, I took Mlle Dariole by her upper arms and threw her bodily across the cave, aware that she skidded across the rock when she hit it, into the shelter of the over-turned solid table.

“I *had* him!” her voice bawled.

A loud bang deafened me, drowning her outrage. The pistol shot spanged off the rock floor a foot to my right-hand side, leaving a smear of lead that gleamed in the torch-light.

The officer grabbed the stumbling young man. He raised his voice. “*The Prince! The King! King Henry's here!*”

He yanked the Stuart princeling away as if Henry Stuart weighed nothing, leveling his second pistol at me. Two more men ran up. Wildly loosed pistol-balls put hemispherical holes into the limestone.

Giving up on Prince Henry, I hurled myself towards the table's shelter.

“Son-of-a-bitch!” Dariole's face shone white and wet in the wildly moving torch-light. She breathed fast, now, and shallow. Her bare hands were grazed and bleeding where she had hit the rock.

The count in my head ran steadily on: nineteen, twenty, twenty-one—

Shafts of fire shot from touch-holes. In the light of the cones of muzzle-fire, that blasted forward a full yard, I glimpsed men inside the cavern's entrance. The multiple crash of musket fire stabbed my ears. On the battle-field, the noise of a full musket volley is shattering. In this enclosed space, it not only deafened my attackers, but put a blinding cloud of powder-smoke between us. As the full musket volley crashed out, dirt and loose rock and fractured pinnacles showered down from the cave-roof.

Forty or so musket-balls hit the banqueting table—separated from us by three inches of age-hardened oak.

One musket-ball clipped the table-edge, spraying splinters that tugged at my hairpiece. Pearls spilled and bounced on the sand.

“God and His Saints damn to hellfire the lot of them!” Spofforth exclaimed precisely.

“Have you a spare pistol? And the samurai is a good man with one, also.” I took a wheel-lock pistol as it was thrust into my hand, and set about loading it as quickly as I might. “How many down? What's your strength?”

“Twelve or fifteen men down.” Spofforth's face showed powder-blackened as the light caught it.

“Twenty standing. You said nothing of enemy soldiers!”

“Regrettably, I was myself unaware, until now.”

A glance at King James, propped up by M. Saburo's free arm as he held his pistol up, told me the situation there. Tears ran down James Stuart's slack face.

Spofforth shouted the last drill command: “*Give fire!*”

The line of his men’s muskets behind the table jetted fire and smoke. Before that cleared, the count-down in my mind hit twenty. The enemy volley crashed out. Each man of us flinched at the same instant, like a flock of hunted birds, hunching down from the rock-splinters.

Musket-fire slammed into the table. Heavy as it was, it jerked. A man screamed, struck by one ball that burst a weak place; the men around him cursed and beat at splinters in their hands and faces.

I leaned forward, deeper into the table’s shelter.

Under the noise of men shouting frantically, and the wounded squalling for their mothers, and the next count running down in my mind, I said gently, “Dariole?”

She sat with her back to the wood, among linen and broken crockery, her hands shaking. One yet-unextinguished stage-torch made her face clear to me. Her skin showed waxen, as I had never seen it in any duel, not even on the Normandy shore.

Shock. A battle in war is not the same as duelling, and this is her first.

Her voice almost inaudible, she whispered, “I think I wet my drawers.”

Carefully, I stretched out a hand to her where she sat, shivering, on the limestone. I gave her a wry smile. “Then you’ve joined an old and honourable fraternity. I suggest you do not enquire too closely into the condition of Captain Spofforth’s linen, experienced soldier that he is—no, and not Monsieur Saburo, neither. I suspect his ‘way of the samurai’ to be the exact same way that a European pisses down his leg...”

The soft nonsense works, as it usually does. I saw so many young men in this condition in the Low Countries, in their first assaults. The shock of war overcomes many determined prides.

“I did the same, myself, mademoiselle, the first time I heard guns at war—which caused me some embarrassment: they were our guns.”

She gave a tiny, involuntary splutter. She looked still as if she might vomit, but the blankness had gone from her gaze.

“You may guess at how old I was, mademoiselle...”

“Fifteen? Sixteen?”

“Twenty-two.”

She laughed out loud, taking my hand and letting me pull her out from the deeper part of the table’s shelter.

“This won’t take more than one.” Captain Spofforth slapped at the wood, evidently with the same count running in his head as I had. “They’re behind rock, up there, or I’d carry it at the charge.”

“You may have to, yet.”

He pursed his lips and nodded, a curiously precise gesture for a man so blackened and bloodied. “I thought so. Well, I think we cannot take another volley. Will you take his Majesty to safety?”

I jerked my head toward the caves behind us. “You should best fall back with us, Captain.”

“Ah. Yes. But I haven’t the men to make a convincing volley; it must be an assault.”

“Can we look to Milord Cecil for rescue?”

Spofforth’s level voice said, “I imagine they have taken Mr Secretary a prisoner, or killed him outright, knowing him to be James’s man. If he is free, there are no more troops closer to here than Bristol.”

“Then Bristol is where I’ll take King James.”

I did not know Spofforth well, but the man gave me a look of gratitude that convinced me he was serious in his talk of an assault.

“Stand ready to go, Frenchman. I must do this while I have men enough to make it appear a respectable charge.”

I kept the count steady in my head. *Not yet, not yet* . . . The taste of powder and lead was sharp on my tongue. “Monsieur Saburo, can the King walk?”

The samurai’s face was tranquil in the flaring light. “Not yet. I’ll carry him, Rosh’-fu’.”

“Good. Stand ready to move. Dariole, help Saburo take James,” I ordered; glanced up, and gave Spofforth a sharp nod. “Captain—prepare, if you please.”

A single shot cracked out, ahead of Spofforth’s half-volley, and I heard a man scream at the cave-entrance. It catches somewhere between a man’s breastbone and his belly, that sound. Up on my toes, crouching, skirts flung over my arm, I coughed as powder smoke caught in the back of my throat.

The smoke from the muskets eddied about the enclosed space, torches barely penetrating it, so thick it was. I found myself squinting to see the caves at the back. *And that is good*. “When they charge,” I said, half-choking, “M. Saburo, Mlle Dariole, we shall take the King straight through the caves directly behind us. Once we start, you must not stop. Is that clear?”

“Hai!”

Dariole gave me a sickly look over James’s head and nodded with complete determination.

I stuffed apostles, shot bag, and pistol down the front of my bodice, and nodded to Spofforth. He stuck his hand out. I switched the skirts to my other arm and reached out to shake his hand. *Doubtful I shall see you again, Captain—Fludd will not have thought to give orders to take prisoners*.

“Good luck, monsieur.” I looked him in the eye.

“Thank you.” The spare, leather-faced captain grinned. “And good luck to you, too—madam.”

The enemy’s musket-volley blasted. The air vibrated. Splinters and chunks of wood flew. The English captain stood up, bawling through white smoke, “*Give fire!*” A fusillade, of even so few muskets from his men, spiked deafening noise into my ears. Without hesitation, Spofforth hurdled the disintegrating table, twenty men with him, dropping their discharged muskets and pulling out rapiers.

“*Go!*” I ordered. “Quickly!”

Dariole and Saburo hauled James up. I followed, letting my back shield them as much as it might, as we scuttled across the cavern floor. A tremendous din of fighting and screeching came from the main entrance. Pistols cracked. A man howled at a soprano pitch.

The edge of the cave caught my shoulder as we slammed through it. I pushed ahead, kicking boxes aside, sending cowering members of Alleyne's company screaming out of our way.

"Say you saw nothing!" I bellowed at Alleyne—although I thought it useless. I snatched up my Saxony rapier and dagger, where I had left them ready with lanterns, and thrust one lantern at the female duellist. Buckling my sword-belt most absurdly over my farthingale, I fell in behind Dariole and the samurai. They had the Scotsman's feet off the ground, running him along between them, Saburo lending most of the brute strength, Dariole yelling encouragement to the King.

The floor grew uneven, straw diminishing. Snags cast black shadows. A brick wall loomed up in the darkness.

"Stand back!" I strode past. Hauling up my black silk skirt and the snapped remainder of the farthingale, I planted a hefty kick with my riding boot.

Soldiers do not mortar as well as bricklayers. The wall bulged, and dropped abruptly, breaking into clumps. A cold wind blew out of the darkness beyond.

"Leave go of me!" James Stuart bellowed, loudly enough to make me startle.

"We must leave, your Majesty." I considered a punch to the point of his jaw. *Then we must carry all his weight. And, with the way my fortune runs, he'd die on me.*

His wide, beard-fringed face caught the lantern-light. "Henry *stabbed* me! My *son!*"

"We have to go!" Dariole shifted from foot to foot, looking up at the Scottish King. "Messire, tell him! We have to go!"

I took the King's arm, hustling him into the darkness of the caves beyond the demolished wall.

Perhaps a quarter of an hour later, when no sounds could be heard, I paused. "They'll come after us—will be, now, on their way."

"Is there way out?" Saburo demanded.

"Yes, I was shown—" I stopped.

I was shown it by Caterina.

If Fludd already knows of it....

"We must think." I set one of the lanterns down on a limestone ledge. Pinnacles shot the shadows of great forests against the wall beyond us. "There's no use in witless flight. *Think.*"

"What?" Dariole demanded, reaching uncomfortably around behind herself to adjust the seam of her breeches. I did not know whether a man should laugh or weep, under such circumstances.

"Accept that Robert Fludd has calculated this," I said, waving my hand in a gesture that took in caverns, the camp outside, Henry Stuart, the bleary-eyed King standing beside me. "Accept that he's had years to do it. What do we conclude?"

The young woman shook her head dumbly. Saburo and the King only stared. I addressed myself to all of them, but I looked at Dariole.

"If he calculates what's conditional on this day happening as he desires," I said, "then he'll also have

calculated all the different ways in which it may fail. He calculated on Cecil's men, or Henry wouldn't have his own soldiers here. Perhaps they're intended to flush us out, so James can be quietly put to death here, not on stage. I think Fludd will have calculated *every* way that events might go, after musket-fire began—because nothing produces so unlikely chances as war. And so....”

The young woman nodded. I completed the thought only for James Stuart's benefit; Saburo, I saw, anticipating me as much as Dariole.

“And so he will have planned for the assassination failing, and King James escaping,” I said. “And so, one of the things he will have the mathematics for is where we shall escape—and the precise time of it.”

“But you may choose to follow a different course of action,” a voice said out of the darkness, “and Dariole is the one to put astray the calculations of the London Master.”

Saburo gave a grunt; Dariole whipped about, staring at the old woman; King James gazed absently into the darkness, no attention given to the world outside his thoughts. As Caterina walked into the lantern-light, her dark eyes flickered momentarily up and down my dress. I found myself looking at her defensively.

“Heavens!” she remarked.

“Sister Caterina.” I had been expecting her so much that I did not even startle. I suppose her to have walked the miles down from Cheddar Gorge earlier in the day—or else to have persuaded some hapless trooper of Spofforth's to let her ride pillion.

Dariole, from behind me, spoke to the nun. “You said I should make decisions. Stay here, or go. And I say we should get out of here! *Now!*”

Glancing back, I saw the Stuart King stand shakily on his own feet, no longer supported by the samurai. “True, we cannot stay within these caves. We are all agreed, I believe.”

Saburo made a bow to James that was some way between the English and the Nihonese, and that therefore put him very low indeed. “King-Emperor, my daimyo and my Shogun sent our embassy here to begin trade agreements with you, and with no other king. For that, it's necessary that you remain on the throne. My sword is in your service, lord. We must leave here.”

I couldn't blame him for taking advantage of his situation. Who wouldn't be a hero to a foreign king, if he could?

The Scotsman stared at him with watery eyes, then extended his hand. I leaned forward, speaking quietly into Saburo's ear:

“Kneel, kiss hands; don't argue.”

The stocky dark man did as he was told, and the Stuart King nodded several times.

“You can get up.” He gestured for Saburo to rise from the cave floor. “We appreciate your kind offer, Master Saburo Tanaka.”

“Hai!”

It spoke well of James Stuart, I thought. Mordieu!—were he twenty years younger, and the matter did

not concern his son, I think he might almost approve the adventure.

“We should go now, sire,” I said, holding up my hand in the lamp-light.

Caves distort echoes: it was not possible to tell the direction—only that someone, far away, shot off a musket, shattering the quiet.

“Run!”

I followed the others, bulges of rock knocking at my elbows as I pelted on, scrambling at a pace consistent with safety in the lantern-light.

Not fast enough. But there may be drops, cliffs, sink-holes, if we miss the way—

And there is Caterina. And James. Neither of whom are young.

“Suor Caterina!” I held up the lantern, forging forward to the front of the group. “Which way? Are we still correct?”

“Yes! Cielo, yes! Keep going, Valentin!”

The light touched limestone, and I recognised patterns of beasts on dark cave walls.

Ahead, water glistened, motionless as black ice.

I dipped my hand under the surface, groping for the guide-rope; thrust it at Saburo and the King, and gathered my skirts and weapons up to my waist. As Mlle Dariole and Caterina passed me—the boy-girl lending her arm to the Italian woman—I glanced back, and entered the water behind them.

The splashes of our passing in the underground lake or river broke the ancient silence. If there was noise of gunfire, it was too far behind now to be identified. As we splashed up the far bank, I held up my lantern, casting ahead as we passed into a long, low cavern. *The cave-exit is somewhere ahead here....*

For the first time since I was six years old, a woman out-ran me, passing me on the rough limestone slope.

The old woman’s panicked! “Caterina!”

Swearing, I scrambled up the rise behind her, leaving the rest to follow me; held up my lantern so that I could see where I stepped—and realised that the blackness up ahead of me was not rock, but the cave-opening to the outside air.

Caterina, panting, reached the entrance.

A pistol muzzle appeared at the edge of the rock, catching the lantern-light. It pressed into the side of the Italian woman’s head.

A jet of flame and smoke shot out.

A bang shattered the silence.

Caterina’s brains and broken skull splattered up against the other side of the rock-cleft, with the sound of a hard gust of rain hitting a glass window.

For a split second everything was still, except the slide of blood clots and brain matter down the limestone wall.

I sprinted up the slope. “Ambuscade!”

Her body hit the ground; I hurdled her corpse, sword out.

Blind luck let me knock the carbine out of the attacking man’s hand. I dashed the lantern at his face, hauled it back, and stuck my rapier through his chest, taking him directly through the heart.

He dropped as Caterina had: solidly, with no sound.

His carbine vanished onto the black ground, the long slow match sputtering. A brief flare of fire ran through the grass. I smelled burning grass, blood, excrement, the sweet smell of death, and threw the lantern to one side so that it broke. A flare of oil shot up the rock. I hauled Spofforth’s wheel-lock pistol out of my bodice. The flare showed me moving figures: no telling how many—

The rock-face grated hard against my elbow. I used it to guide me, sliding down until I knelt in concealing shadows. A rock-chipping flicked my bare shoulder, painful enough that I knew it had drawn blood. I urgently threw myself to one side and the man above me clipped my shoulder with his boots as he jumped down from above. He jarred my sword aside, and all but fell into my arms, grappling me.

The new moon came out from behind a cloud; I heard shouting to one side, and a lantern flared; I fell with the man and rolled on the ground in dew-damp dust.

He grabbed my left hand; the hand with the loaded pistol. *Of course*. He has been schooled in this. Paced out the distances....

No. The *first* pistol was meant for me. Meant to take me in the heart, at that height.

And this man all but missed me.

So he has not been schooled to attack *me*, he has my pistol-hand because he sees it; and Caterina has already thrown Fludd’s plans out of gear, at the cost of her life.

I rolled, bringing the man over with me, sent my forehead hard into his nose, and it gave under the force of my blow. I felt his hand twisting mine in towards my body, struggling to push my finger on the trigger.

The disadvantage of a wheel-lock pistol is that the powder may stay in the closed pan. Rolling in the dust with a match-lock carbine or musket would put out the match, and spill the powder from the priming pan, and he would not be in danger of blowing my belly out with my own weapon.

I rolled over on my back. He came with me; bent forward, and pushed his teeth against my bare throat, his hand tightening over mine.

His teeth closed hard about my windpipe. I felt his grip tighten where he had my other arm, holding my biceps. I could not pull my elbow back, to thrust forward with my sword.

But I am free to rotate my forearm below the elbow.

Ramming my chin down to protect my throat, I pivoted my hand and brought the hilt of my rapier around in a short, hard arc.

The Saxony rapier has for its cross-piece a bar of solid steel, diamond in cross-section, and with a pointed finial at each end. It extends out from the guards a good five inches to either side: five inches of

sharp-pointed metal.

I slammed the point of the rapier's cross-piece into the man's ear.

His squeal cut off almost before he had time to issue it, his wet mouth opening on the skin of my neck.

I twisted the metal up and down and around, stirring the contents of his skull. The drum and small bones of the ear can be pierced, as if a man pushes an awl through a cork into a bottle. His body slumped on me; relaxed in death.

Kicking him off, I got to my feet, the silk skirts tangling between my legs an impediment to my progress.

A rock bounced on the earth, and I lifted my pistol: all but fired—a rock as large as a gourd, and *no*, I saw by the moon's light. *It is not a rock.*

A decapitated head, still spilling blood.

Saburo.

I looked for the samurai; searched for some enemy target for my pistol—now is not the time to hit one of our own side!

A man's shape folded forward as if he made a deep bow. Something separated from the shadow beside him, hauling a blade across the man's belly. Momentarily, a curved sword caught the moonlight.

"Samurai!" I put my rapier into a third man's heart, warned by the running scuffle of feet to my rear. "Cecil' is the watch-word!"

"Cecil!" Dariole whipped out of the shadows and stood side by side with me. She glanced up at the grassy rocks above us; whirled about to look behind. "Any more?"

"None yet."

"Seso-sama!"

That was unmistakable: the samurai's version of *Cecil*. I grinned, moved out from the cave entrance, and loped over to the woods.

Coming back, an alto hiss of "Cecil!" greeted me from Dariole.

I found her with her knee on the chest of another dead man. The moonlight shone on the black splotches of blood down his body. Her face shone white in the moon's light. The dead man was by now headless.

"Five horses in the trees," I said curtly. "Have we five dead men, or is any escaped to give the alarm?"

Her doublet was wet from chest to belly. Her dagger dripped as she gestured with it. "Ask Saburo-san. He's the one counting heads."

"You should know better than to grapple," I could not help saying. "You are better keeping a man at a distance with your blade."

"Tell me about it!"

She stood up, a fierceness about her movements. No more than five men. This is an affray the size of a duel, I realised. *And not a skirmish of war.* Dear good God, it has given back her confidence....

“Is the King alive?”

“He’s in the bushes. Saburo-san! Seso!” Her intense whisper sounded loud. I signalled her to silence. The samurai walked out into the moonlight, his swords unsheathed and black.

“Have we five dead men?” I pressed him.

“Hai!”

He pointed at the flat area of rocks beyond, in the brighter moonlight. More clearly than a man might wish to see them, five decapitated heads stood on the trunks of their necks. One had bled severely from the ear: my own adversary.

Dariole re-joined us, her arm entwined with that of James Stuart. She stood on his right side, her unencumbered hand carrying her bloodied blade. “I don’t hear anyone else. If there were more men than horses, the rest have gone.”

“Perhaps this is all. Plainly Fludd took cognisance of the fact that we *might* come this way, no matter how unlikely...and relied on rehearsing his men in our probable actions.” I walked across the open ground, back to the entrance to the caves.

Caterina was so small, in the moonlight, that I all but fell over her before I properly saw her.

The features of her face were untouched, although spidered over with black blood. The side and back of her head were missing. Stripping off my glove, I felt her cooling skin.

Dariole’s voice came sad and bleak from behind me. “I got her killed, messire. Didn’t I? *I* said we should leave.”

“She knew, mademoiselle.” I stood up, aware that I spoke over-harshly, but not able to stop myself. “Think. Fludd did not predict *this*. If he had, he would not have wasted the key pistol-shot on an old woman who could be easily subdued. She calculated this beforehand.”

I faced around, looking at Dariole and the samurai and the King, splashed with moonlight and darkness.

“She pushed past me,” I said. “Else I should have been first out. The pistol was meant for me. The second man for you, I think, sire. But the pistol for me. She took it in my stead, knowing we could then win free. All of us.”

Dariole knelt below me in the darkness. I saw her fingers stroke Caterina’s eyelids down, holding them until they stayed closed.

Dariole’s own eyes caught the moon’s light and glinted, as she looked up. “Messire, if Fludd calculated what could happen here—that you’d be first out, and he could shoot you and then kill the King—what happens *now*? Now that we know Caterina’s changed it?”

Rochefort, Memoirs

If I had a gold louis for every time I have ridden through the countryside at night with my plans in confusion, I should be as rich as any man in France.

Dariole rode behind me, beside the King. Saburo touched his heels to one of the late troopers' horses, riding with all the skill of a sack of corn, and brought his fortunately co-operative beast up with us. I had attached the spare mount on a long rein to my saddle, and thanked the good God for the new moon, which made riding at least possible.

In an ideal world, as Plato speaks of, a band of men with a plan once made would then ride direct to their destination, carry out that plan, and succeed or fail. In my experience, once such a plan is made, men complain of all its details, repeat arguments endlessly, alter their minds, change their tactics, and in general sow more confusion amongst themselves than ever the enemy can.

"I'm going to find Robert Fludd!" The moon did not let me make out her face clearly, but Dariole's voice came stubborn and set. "I don't *care*—I'm going back there to kill him. He *has* to be somewhere around. He'll want to know he's won!"

And then, I reflected, commonly such bands do not contain a woman, nor a foreigner, nor a reigning king.

"Fludd may be anywhere in the near country," I snapped, "or in London, or Muscovy! I forbid it!"

To myself, I sounded appallingly like some elderly husband or father. I held my breath, hoping that to her it might seem the rebuke of a captain of a very small force, faced with the loss of one of his number.

"When you're taken," I added, "you'll give away the rest of us. Trust me. You *will* betray us."

"What can they do to me now?"

Her voice held a sulky martyrdom, that both pained me and made me desire to shake her.

"To make you talk? Oh, that will be easy, mademoiselle. Let us suppose that I stick my thumb into your eye, as if it were a grape, and pop it out onto your cheek. What will you *not* tell me, to keep your other eye? To prevent your total blindness?"

Nothing came out of the silence but the noise of horses' hooves, muffled, and the soft ring of a bridle. Which would be enough to betray our presence in open ground, but not within these deep lanes.

I did not intend to frighten you, mademoiselle, I thought. And then: No—I intended to give you the fright one puts into impulsive junior officers, to stop them from being killed on their first campaign.

In French, I added, "Be grateful I think as a soldier. If I were to think as the spy that I am, I might decide this intention makes you an impulsive danger, too liable to betray *me* to capture and torture—and I would put this pistol to your head and blow out your brains, as happened to Suor Caterina. I could be two miles hence before any man investigated the shot. And it would, besides, give us another remount."

A soft snort came out of the moonlight.

"Mademoiselle?"

"Another re-mount?" Her voice sounded rich. What she controlled, I realised, was dark laughter. "You're a pragmatic man, messire."

I had been sure she would be offended. *Once again, she surprises me.*

“I *am* a pragmatic man,” I said. “Time passes. We should be further on the Bristol road. You will *not* return to Wookey, even if you think Robert Fludd may be there.”

Her mount moved up, so that she rode boot to boot with me. She shot me a glance that, even in the new moon’s light, I could see was from beneath her lashes. “I guess I couldn’t find him now, in that chaos, even if he *is* there. Shit. You’re right, messire.”

I put my hand to my chest—startled to touch bare skin rather than a doublet—and made her a bow, as well as I might from my saddle; smiling at her puzzled look.

“You admit me in the right? Mademoiselle, a man of my age cannot bear such shocks!”

She neither went into a sulk, as I half-expected, nor gave me that blank look that had not been present until after her abduction. In the moonlight, the corners of her mouth seemed to move.

“You’re like hazard, Rochefort—even unlucky dice have to come up winners at *some* point.”

“You do me too much favour...”

“I know. I always have, messire. It’s very remiss of me.”

Her words, coupled with the demure tone in which she said them, made it my turn to splutter a laugh, somewhat over-loud for the night silence.

Her voice and expression, so much as I could judge in the moonlight, changed. “He doesn’t know he’s lost. If he has. Suppose he did know about Caterina? Then all of this could still be his plan.”

“Perhaps.” I could not deny it. I re-loaded the pistols we had taken from dead men; doing it by touch as much as by the moon’s uncertain light.

“Sister Caterina thought I made his plan ‘unlikely.’ And then, what she did...I can’t *believe* she did that!” Dariole leaned forward in her saddle, speaking quietly and intensely. “You know what, messire? If I was Fludd? No matter *how* unlikely I thought anything was—I’d have my extra calculations done, just in case. And a back-up plan for if I failed.”

“Consider, he’s far from failing.” I put each pistol in its saddle holster. “Fludd is alive. The Prince is alive. And James is supposed dead—you heard them bawling like stuck cats. If he fails to return to the capital...then all Fludd’s failed in is killing James Stuart here.”

She caught my emphasis on the last word, and shot a glance back in the darkness, where the King’s horse padded behind mine.

The samurai rode up on my other side.

“Furada may capture a man of Captain—” Saburo’s rendition of *Spofforth* was completely indecipherable, had I not known who he meant. “Under torture, he will tell that we go north.”

I nodded. “Bristol is the obvious road. Therefore...I intend to cross over that road, when we come to it.”

Saburo gave me a questioning look.

“We will ride west,” I said, “a mile or so, into the wetlands. Then we’ll ride up parallel to the Bristol

road. If it takes us longer by the Levels, still, we shall not be so easily found when it becomes light.”

Saburo gave a grunt, which I interpreted as agreement. “How is the King-Emperor?”

I glanced back. *If one man must be continually led, that is yet more delay.* I could see nothing of him, under these trees.

The branches creaked above us, up the lane’s banks. Out of the mass of sounds came a man’s voice. James Stuart spoke for the first time in an hour.

“We will go to London.”

His cold tones sounded another man to the frightened fool of the masque.

That he should be moved by these events not to cowardice, but to new courage, surprised and cheered me. “Good, sire! The sooner you’re back in the capital, the better.”

James’s voice came out of the dark. “We shall deal with this Earl of Northumberland and his lackey Fludd. We shall deal with our ungrateful, unfilial... I will not call him ‘son.’ They shall all stay in the Tower. For just so long as it takes to set up the executioner’s block.”

Saburo gave a grunt that, I thought, signalled both approval, and relief at a recognisable Nihonese custom among gaijin.

The Somerset Levels made a maze of lanes, dikes, small square fields, standing pools, hedges, and paths, with the odd farmhouse and hamlet among them. If I had not spent some of my time this last month riding the countryside, I should not have risked it.

A new moon’s light is deceptive when it comes to travel. We rode, continually, slower than I desired to. Despite that, before moon-set, I had to confess myself lost.

As the east yellowed and the birds’ song grew to full chorus, we made a deliberate stop. What rations there were in the troopers’ bags, at their saddles, I gave orders we should eat. Mlle Dariole, rummaging further, found a man’s spare hose and breeches, and without speech went into rushes to wash in the mere, and swaggered back wearing a pair of cherry-red Dutch slops more than a little too large for her.

The swagger I guessed to be preventive, in case M. Rochefort should twit her about her reactions to being under fire, that should make such a change of clothing necessary. I found no desire in myself to give her embarrassment.

Which is strange, I reflected, as I checked the tack on my stolen horse. Three months ago I would have made a Bartholomew Fair exhibit of her. Is this pity? A mere sympathy, for her suffering?

“Rosh’-fu’!” Saburo pointed.

I looked.

A horseman stood skylined on the Mendip hills, against the eastern light.

Quite deliberately skylined, I thought, picking out a second, third, and fourth rider. To panic the quarry, so that they run, and expose themselves to pursuit.

I shielded my hands with my eyes, looking at the foot of the Mendips, and the dark green slopes we had left behind us.

It was difficult, but I made them out. Twenty or more horsemen, spaced not far apart, spreading west in a cordon, moving out from the Bristol road.

Rain poured heavily down out of a bruise-coloured sky.

Three of our mounts we had to abandon within the hour, completely broken-down as they became, wrenching themselves through the mud of the marshes. The King's mount and the King's spare mount (as the last two became) foundered before morning was well advanced.

We continued on foot, tense with the knowledge of Prince Henry's riders behind us. *Foot-pace will not allow the out-distancing of mounted pursuers. And they will surely have hounds with them...*

"I must have words with Monsieur Fludd about his troopers' purchase of inadequate horse-flesh," I said—I confess, with the goal of moving Mlle Dariole to amusement.

I saw her flick a humourless glance at me and look away, as we fought through reeds and underbrush. The sight of pursuing horsemen silenced her; she had walked, without a word, an hour and more now.

Why? I thought. And then: *Yes—before this, she thought she need not fear being taken prisoner. She will not be done with that fear in a few weeks, or a month.*

I elbowed my way forward and out, emerging to find us in another hedge-sheltered lane. Not very sheltered, in truth. My wet skirts slid and clung to my boots as I walked, yards of silk sodden and weighty with water.

What I had never before appreciated about wearing women's clothes is how often one treads on the front hem. I would suppose this to be why women have that neat posture, each hand catching up the cloth, lifting their skirts as they walk. Not so that they seem poised, delicate, ladylike. Simply so that they don't fall flat on their arses.

The hems of my petticoats ripped, several times, as I stepped on them. They were draggled enough in rain and mud that I supposed no man would notice. If they looked lower, and saw that this "woman" was, beneath her skirts, wearing men's boots...

"I suppose," I observed absently, "that the better part of my life has been devoted to making myself ridiculous."

A small snuffling laugh startled out of Dariole, where she walked beside me.

I turned my head to gaze down at her. A gruff chuckle from behind let me know that James Stuart was within earshot, plodding beside the samurai.

The rain fell cold on my face where I had been shaved. I felt bare, without beard and moustaches. Lowering my voice, I added, directly to Dariole, "Is it necessary to state that I feel myself to be absurd?"

Her mouth moved, as if she were pulled out of her fear against her desire. Half-willingly, she smiled. "No, messire. Not necessary at all."

I glanced down. "I wonder if I might claim, in the circumstances, that I wear boots because they're superior to women's fragile footwear? Or am I so self-evidently a man?"

Dariole blinked against the rain and, to my joy, gave me a look that was very much the young duelist. I read her mind as plainly as if she spoke it. At something over six foot tall, and for all M. Rochefort is laced into a pair of bodies, not the most garish stomacher in the world is going to make M. Rochefort look as if he has women's breasts...

"You would think, mademoiselle, in a world where there are so few mirrors, and so few of them full-length, that I would be spared the idea of exactly what a spectacle I must make? Not so. I see it in your eyes."

The summer rain darkened her doublet and Dutch slops; water running down from her short, stringy hair into her eyes, making her blink. Her boots sucked out of the mud as she walked, splashing back down.

She reached out, plainly needing to brace herself to do it, and clumsily grabbed at my arm. "I'm not scared enough that I have to take it out on you, messire. Believe it or not. You're safe."

She gripped hard, once, and released me.

I felt an ache in my throat. Humiliation can go deep: she has not yet forgotten the banqueting cave. And yet *she* attempts to comfort *me*.

She is afraid, I thought. I know no cure for it, with young men, but to throw them at their fear. I know no cure at all for young women.

"I believe you, mademoiselle." I pointed towards a bend in the lane, coming up ahead of us. "Do me the favour, if you will, of scouting ahead. You and M. Saburo."

She gave me a concise nod, as if there were no dread in her; and turned and walked backwards while she beckoned the samurai.

"No more than fifteen minutes," I warned, "as close as you can judge it."

Our riding and walking both seemed to have made no impression on the land, in terms of distance. I drew the King into the cover of the hedge as Dariole passed me, with Saburo. Their footsteps faded under the drumming rain.

I stepped back out into the lane, unable to be still. *With no sun to judge by, I will have to give them leeway....*

I stared east, as the minutes ticked past in my mind, keeping the rain out of my eyes with my hands. A grey line marked the horizon.

Now that I see them again, are the Mendip hills smaller? How far west have we come?

Somewhere between us and those hills—and, if we are unlucky, beyond us as well—Prince Henry's men are searching. With as many re-mounts as they need.

If we fail in rounding the end of their cordon... What's west of us, here? Sea? Against which we may be trapped?

James Stuart thrust his head out through the thick-leafed hawthorn hedge to peer into the lane. His oyster-coloured silk banqueting doublet and hose were now something better described as mud-colour; he was no less wet than I. Rain clotted his spade-shaped beard into soggy clumps. He blinked wide and already-watery eyes at me.

In an almost unintelligible Scottish accent, he asked, “Where are they? Are they back yet? Is there anyone here?”

“I’ll look, sire. Wait here.”

He glared soggily at me, not liking to be instructed, evidently. “Are we to be left to lie up, like a deer, in this hedge?”

I would have felt sorrier for him, accustomed to courts as he was, had I not been equally filthy. “My apologies, sire, for your discomfort.”

“We do not care for spoiled clothes, or the rain.” James wiped water out of his eyes. “We have been wetter, colder, more uncomfortable, in the hunt. But never so uncomforted. We had not believed our son would raise a hand to us. We were wrong.” He glanced at me, his flabby face determined. “That wrong requires we right it.”

I begin to see what qualities my master the Duke perceived in this man.

James stuck his head further out of the hedge, looking about him. “Now we’re being driven south-west. That is no way to Bristol, Master de Rochefort.”

South -west? Ah—hunters have an eye for the countryside. He hunts, obsessively, and he will know how far we’ve come, to within half a country mile; whereas I have no hope of being accurate to within a league. He’ll know by the sun, by the side of trees with moss growing on them, whether we’ve come north, south, east, or west. It’s his country, not mine. He’ll be a help to us.

As if he precisely followed the process of my thought, James said, “The men following us will have our hunting skills. We have seen our son at the chase, though it is no sport he loves. He will run us to ground if all we can do is walk. We sorely need to go east and north.”

“We need to move faster, sire, that’s true.” I took a step or two forward in the lane, hauling up the front of my long skirts with my dagger-hand, and trying to keep the rain out of my eyes with the other. I disliked to be out in the open, exposed, even for a short amount of time.

Through the falling water, I could see more hedges, and deep ruts where carts had been down this road in the recent past. Past the hedge-tops, I saw what looked like willow trees, trailing branches of long, spear-point leaves.

And willow trees mean more water, more rivers, more *marsh*, God in His mercy help us! More marsh to get lost in, dragging my skirts through it at barely a mile in every hour, and knowing—*knowing*—they can’t be more than two or three hours behind us. Catching up fast.

The bearded head spoke again from the rain-beaded twigs. “We are concerned. The samurai and your compatriot. Have they been taken?”

I would have thought it cowardice on his own behalf, were he not a different man out in this open country from the James of the court. “I believe them both capable of holding their own, sire—”

The sound of metal on metal rang out, thirty feet away in the rain, down the track.

That is a noise that will wake me from a deep sleep if I hear it three streets away.

The slide of edge on edge: razor-sharp lengths of metal moving faster than vision. Sliding, striking, and parrying. Licking in to bring blood flying out, in a liquid arc on the air.

My free hand went to my breast, leaving the drooping wet black skirts of my farthingale to tangle my feet. Desperation had moved me to carry one loaded pistol in the front of my bodice, down behind the stomacher. Only a fool carries one so, I grant. Unless the only other way out of the situation is to go tied in a sheet with a knot at your head, or however they bury people in this heathen country.

I reached for the pistol. *Am I confident of successfully firing in this weather?*

“Come into cover, Master Rochefort!” James’s bulk shot back into a tangle of spines, shaking leaves and wetness down onto his ruined clothes. He pried at the twigs with mud-stained gloves to see if I followed. “Come, sir! They shall not lay hands on this old fox, nor you neither!”

“Sire...”

I couldn’t keep exasperation out of my tone.

“It’s—not hunters, sire.”

If I hadn’t known how I looked—a man in bedraggled female-player clothes—I would have made a fist of my free hand and used it on one or other of my returning companions.

Their shapes came clear through the rain.

“I don’t know why I ever doubted it!” I snarled. “Who *else* would be stupid enough to spar with live blades, in the middle of a downpour, in the middle of the Somerset Levels, in the middle of a chase that, if we’re caught, ends with all four of us killed out of hand!”

James Stuart raised his brows at my rhetorical question—spat with more venom than is usual in philosophy—and detached himself from the hawthorn spines. Brushing down his ripped satin doublet as he stepped into the lane, he growled, “Is the way clear, boy?”

“I certainly hope so, sire!” Dariole, her cherry-red breeches brightly visible through the lessening rain, grinned, all the while keeping the rapier and dagger in subtle threat and motion.

I snarled at her, in part for discipline and exasperation’s sake, and in part because she seemed cheered by it. “Dear good God! Why in His Saints’ names do you choose to duel in the high road! There is cavalry out there, looking for us—we need to travel *without* drawing attention to ourselves!”

“Apology, domo arigato.” Saburo shot me a glance, carefully sober. Startled, I realised, *He knows, also, that this builds her morale, reckless as it is.*

And she—yes, she knows the same of him.

Because it will need every man of us to stand a chance at escaping the Prince’s huntsmen.

Dariole, her grin widening, stepped back from the sparring and lowered her sword. “I’m *so* sick of walking. Messire Rochefort, pull your skirts up, and flash an ankle at the next coach! That’ll get us a ride!”

“Be cautious, mademoiselle. I might think it worthwhile taking exception to that.”

I turned back to hide a smile and help the Scottish gentleman out of the hedge—which, with his mass, and my unhandiness in my clothes, involved more effort and taking of God’s name in vain than might otherwise have been hoped for.

Tanaka Saburo sheathed his bright cattan-blades, that shone like broken mirror. Above us, the clouds

were splitting. Some of the late morning sun shone through. I put James Stuart safely into the road.

It pleased me to see that Dariole smiled behind her hand. She made a bow to what any passer-by (I hoped) would take merely for a bewildered and middle-aged Scotch gentleman, and said, "We'll escape, your Majesty. You'll see. I just wanted to...."

She made an explanatory gesture with her rapier. James flinched, no more at home with naked blades in his presence out here in the wild. I could think of no words to explain to him how the feel of a live blade might comfort her.

By way of reassurance, I said only, "Sire, we'll get to London. All of us. Mademoiselle, let us stop standing out where any man can see us debating this! I take it you found nothing?"

"Nothing."

Saburo gave me a contemplative look. "We could steal horses. Find farm. Or we can kill local bandits and take theirs. That is faster than walking through mud."

"Horse-thieves, now!" It came out aloud, as a groan. "Just *how* did I get into this?"

Dariole smiled brightly and knowingly. I turned and made a bow to the Scottish King of England. "Sire, if it pleases you to advise us on direction—"

A sudden crackle of twigs brought me swinging about.

A heavy sound of boots punched through puddles.

Inside ten heart-beats, rain-soaked men surrounded us on all sides, flushed and grinning with the success of their ambush. Their voices rose in a babble.

If a man is not keyed up in preparation, spontaneous reaction comes much too late.

We have been exactly as foolish as fugitives often are, when they have been tense for so many hours that the nearness of danger becomes numb and forgotten.

Over the noise and shouting, I rapped out, "No weapons!"

Saburo gave me a curious look; so also Dariole.

I said, "They're peasants!"

Not men in hunting gear; not men in the Prince's livery. Not men with muskets, or rapiers. Or horses. Men on foot, with cudgels hacked out of hedges, and long rustic coats, and leather breeches. Countrymen.

"Eh," Saburo grunted. "Don't kill farmers, yes."

If I had a silver coin with me, I thought, I might win us out of this. Nothing is easier than to persuade Jacques Peasant with money, and I take it to be the same with the English. However, the handful of Fludd's pennies left in my boot-linings will not accommodate us in this desire.

Mlle Dariole tensed, her hand going to the swept hilt of her Italian rapier.

Which will get a number of these peasants killed, for no good reason, and possibly our swords and heads broken by cudgels—and may, besides, get James Stuart killed as dead as Robert Fludd could ever

desire.

“Careful of your decisions, mademoiselle!” I rapped out.

She halted. I saw her weigh up my expectation of her actions.

Very slowly, she put up her sword, and took her hand away from the hilt.

I raised my voice. “Who is your chief man, here?”

A man pushed to the front of the gabbling crowd. He wore a leather hood, dripping in the lessening rain. It showed the front of his head, his hair cropped unusually short. His eyes were much lined at the corners, I supposed from spending his times out of doors.

A year or two in the Low Countries, where shop-keepers have been killing the Spanish nobility for a generation now, cures a man of the preconception that a gentleman cannot be killed by a commoner. I looked at the newcomer. *In a duel I should take you out at the first pass, for fear you should kill me at the second.*

He was something over my own age, in his middle forties, and he squinted through the diminishing rain at each of us in turn.

He demanded, “What the *fuck* are you?”

I found his accent all but unintelligible. Indeed, I was barely sure that he spoke English.

I looked down from my greater height and said peaceably, in London English, “We might ask the same question, Master . . .”

“Richard Anselm. Constable of this parish.”

An idea began to form itself in my mind.

I made him a bow with something of a flourish to it.

The tone of small-town civic authority is something I have heard too often in my life to like it. There is often nothing more dull, more stupid, or more stubborn. *Fortunately*, I thought, *this Anselm sounds none but the last.*

I indicated my companions, opening my mouth to introduce us.

Anselm did not permit it.

“You’re under arrest,” the constable said. “The lot of you. For vagrancy.”

Rochefort, Memoirs

30

Traveling players,” I announced.

The flag-stones of the church floor felt cold under-foot. By the thickness of the stone walls and the oak door I now stood at, we had been put into the place for lack of any better prison in this hamlet—or for miles in all directions.

“Traveling *players*?” the parish constable, Richard Anselm, repeated.

Dariole came up to my elbow and gave a smile far too winning for a young man. Either she thought this Anselm prone to the English vice (underestimating the conservatism of the peasantry), or she thought he had seen her to be a woman. “We won’t be a charge on your parish rate, sir. We’re just passing through.”

How long have we been in here? A half-hour by the church clock? That means Prince Henry’s men now less than two hours behind us, at best....

The constable Anselm did not close the church door; I thought my idea might be appealing to him.

We look flamboyant enough, I thought, keeping a civil look on my face. And since I must find a reason to excuse my own dress and escape this custody....

Surreptitiously, I made what attempt I might to tidy my hairpiece. I suspected I still resembled the comedy-jig that, in an English play-house, comes on before the main play.

“Traveling *players*?” Anselm emphasised.

I gave him a piece of comment I had picked up from Aemilia Lanier. “There’s to be bad plague in London. We prefer to tour the countryside, away from any chance of contagion.”

Saburo, standing behind me in the church doorway, had his arms folded and a scowl on his face. I thought him not entirely clear on why we had been brought here—*which is as well, if it stays any outbreak of violence*. James, shielded behind the samurai, watched us intently but did not speak.

“We travel on to Bristol,” I said. “There’s a ship waiting there for us. No, we will not be a charge on you.”

Anselm grunted, in a tone so like Saburo’s that I must pass my hand over my face to hide a smile. “You’re out of your way.”

“The more reason we must hurry.”

The peasant constable folded his arms and gave me a sardonic look. I saw a heretic priest behind Anselm, flapping his hands, and making some accented protest that I could not decipher—about sinful actors in God’s house, I imagined.

“Frog, ain’t yer?” Anselm glared up at me. “How come you know about the parish laws? Used to going on the rates as paupers, by any chance?”

“By no means. We need urgently to leave here, if we’re to catch our ship.”

Dariole gave her dazzling smile, at my elbow. “We have friends in the theatres in London, constable. They warned us, when we came over from France, to avoid being whipped out of country parishes.”

“So what do you do?”

Before I could speak, Dariole said, “We could show you? Give you a little performance, before we go off to Bristol? We wouldn’t ask for more than our food....”

I didn't know M. Dariole had been out of Paris and in the company of peasants. Her tone was a fine mix of innocent and guileful: the cunning actor swindling a village out of a few onions and loaves of bread, while vaingloriously happy to show off her player's skills....

"All of us!" she added brightly.

"Hmm." Anselm nodded. "Yes. I suppose. Yes...."

All?

I dared not look at James Stuart.

The constable turned to confer with the priest. Their nearness gagged my tongue. I gave Mlle Dariole a look that should have reduced her to begging my pardon on her knees. She grinned sunnily back at me. I could not help my gladness that her resilience yet survived, albeit I found that combined with a strong desire to slap her.

"Give us a few moments," she said to Anselm, "and we'll put something together."

The constable nodded agreement. He offered his hand for her to shake.

"We shall need our swords back," I said.

The constable looked suspicious. "You will?"

"Two of our company do a demonstration bout with the foils, the like of which no man in England has ever seen."

He grunted a sceptical acquiescence.

Armed, and out of this prison. That's the good. The ill....

It must be a brief show. Or we shall have an audience we do not want.

"*And small beer!*" Dariole eased herself up on her toes, and then down on her heels, looking appealingly at the constable.

I rested my hand on her shoulder, quieting her, and nodded to Anselm. "Perhaps some bread, monsieur?"

Anselm took off his leather coif, rubbed his shaven head, and finally gave a grunt of assent. "See what I can do."

Dariole murmured at my elbow in our native tongue as he walked off, her tone a dreamily innocent mimicking of court manners. "Ah, that a son of the de Cossé Brissacs should beg his bread from an English peasant...."

I nodded equably. "I have not been a de Cossé Brissac for a considerable time. Certainly long enough to be hungry. As it seems a de Montargis is thirsty...."

Dariole gave an appreciative grin.

I felt myself confident of adding, "I did not realise you so readily remembered my family's name—since you never give me the *de*."

Her eyes shone. “Why would I, messire? You’re not a gentleman.”

I gave her a quelling glare.

Dropping her voice low enough not to be overheard by the Stuart King, she added, “You know, one day you really are going to have to tell me that scandal. . . .”

“What scandal?”

Unquelled, she grinned. “Ah—it’s a *good* one. I knew it must be.”

Outside, the parish constable turned about, and, to the priest’s delight and my relief, beckoned us all out of the heathen church.

“It’s a deal,” Anselm announced, eyes narrow as he watched us. “A trick or a jape out of each of you, and I’ll get the landlord to feed you, and you can be on your way. You’ll be gone before the sun’s past the yew in the bone-yard, there.”

Squinting at the bright sky, I judged it somewhat less than an hour. “Agreed.”

“All right, vicar, you give the church bells a ring, call up an audience. Start in half an hour, yeah?”

The only other major building of the hamlet was the inn, to which we were taken; Dariole leading the silent and bemused King.

“It is interesting.” Saburo walked up beside me. “Is like the story of a kabuki play. But with fewer ghosts.”

I considered the possibility that M. Saburo might be learning his humour from Mlle Dariole. Or at least, in her company.

“You and Dariole can show them sword-play,” I directed, in an under-tone. “As for him. . . .”

It will only take one peasant to shove against his royal Majesty, and James will have us all under arrest again—as soon as Anselm hears him “pretending” to be the King of England.

“Do his dance.”

“*What?*”

Saburo pointed at my stomacher and skirts. “King. Do King’s dance from yesterday, in the cave.”

After a moment, I nodded, making a resolution to find the one man in this village who could play a penny flute. There is always one.

As the gathering peasants of the hamlet debated the likelihood of the samurai being a tame demon, I advanced to speak with James Stuart.

“Your Majesty might repeat your part from ‘The Engineer of Shadows,’” I finished.

I have, on occasion, experienced the cold and fishy eye of an offended French monarch. This Stuart had him beaten by leagues.

“Very well.” James prodded me with a fat, dirty finger. “Foolery, but very well. We understand necessity—and we are a nimble dancer, when not. . . distracted. Mind, Monsieur Rochefort: nothing will

ever be spoken of this. Do you understand me, now?"

"Completely, your Majesty." I glanced down at my dress. "Don't worry, sire. This is such a romancer's tale that if any man heard of it, it would not be credited. It could not even be put on stage at The Rose."

Dariole folded her arms as she overheard, walking up to us. "But that's what we want, messire! How unlikely is this? If Fludd ever predicted *this*...I'll eat *your* hat!"

King James spluttered a wet laugh. "The boy's right, now." His expression softened. "Mistress Caterina has given her life to rescue us, papist though she was. Since you tell me this was her counsel and advice, we are inclined to continue with it, sirs."

What pang I felt at the Italian woman's death, I put aside until we should be more secure.

Having ate, with the swiftness of soldiers pausing on campaign, I set about my preparations for this farce, and was done before long. Wherever the low cottages did not block the view of the marsh, I searched the horizon for moving mounted figures.

I felt Mlle Dariole's hand on my bare shoulder.

"Let me fix that." Her hand pushed me down to sit on the churchyard wall, and I felt her nimble fingers move in my bedraggled hair. From behind me, her voice said, "You don't look much like a Muse, messire. Although you amuse me."

"I believe you're taking a player's role much too seriously, mademoiselle!"

It made my heart ache to hear her. In the middle of this most dangerous of moments, when none of us could keep our eyes from the horizon, she spoke to me in a tone of boyish comradeship.

Her lips pressed together in concentration. She walked around to stand in front of me, between my spread knees, disguising the damage done to the pearls ornamenting the wig. So close, I might smell her: the faint scent of her body, and the sun on the wool of her stolen breeches.

With the disguise the full red slops gave her, and her doublet buttoned up to her ruff, she might have been any boy of seventeen or eighteen. The bloom of her skin, despite the mud on it, and the perfectly shaped brows, accurately mimicked that moment of a boy's beauty before he passes into his twenties and becomes a man.

I felt my prick stir, under my petticoats, and put my hands demurely in my lap. She was too taken up with mending my jewellery to notice.

"Do you want me to shave you, messire?"

I passed my hand over the stubble on my cheeks.

"Vanity takes some very strange forms," I admitted. "Yes. We have time."

She came back from the inn with bowl and razor, but no mirror. I leaned my chin back, letting her put the edge to my throat with as much insouciance as I ever showed when Gabriel Santon did the same, and shave every part of my face.

"I can think of a time you wouldn't want me with a blade here." Dariole sounded amused.

"Behold my new-found trust in you, mademoiselle. My petticoats are dry."

She wiped me roughly across the face, and threw the razor into the basin with a clatter. I looked up, seeing the red burn on her cheeks.

“I apologise; I am tactless.” I reached out, grabbing her hand before she could elude me. “Dariole—please. I beg your pardon.”

“Do you?” A smile crept back onto her face, although her cheeks still had two pink spots high up. “You ought to be on your knees for it...”

“Perhaps later,” I said firmly, and received her open grin. “Now, if you please, we’re ready. And—mademoiselle, don’t miss!”

She made a gesture that was old in the alleys of Paris when Louis Capet was a boy, and swaggered off to join the samurai.

Certainly, this is the least likely escape *I* ever made, I reflected, walking out onto the grass at the centre of the English hamlet. Geese and pigs scattered, honking. I shaded my eyes against the sky, brilliant blue now the rain had gone over. *Suor Caterina, look down from heaven, tell me if you were correct in your figuring....*

I began by taking a basket of cabbages that I had had brought to me, and throwing one of the vegetables high into the sky. I saw all men’s heads rise, watching it, and then follow it down.

With a flash as of a mirror in the sun, and a crisp sound, M. Saburo’s curved blade cleaved the cabbage in mid-fall into two parts—

Two more bright flashes of light on metal, and two successive crunches: the points of Dariole’s rapier and dagger hit home, both neatly skewering a half of the vegetable before it hit the ground.

She held up her loaded blades, brandishing them with a grin of sheer triumph. The fifty or so peasants broke out into laughter and applause.

Such was enough to make them watch Dariole and the samurai duel. The peasants formed a circle about them in the grass, drinking, and debating loudly on the virtues of broadswords, rapiers, and this strange foreign blade. As I passed behind the crowd, I heard technical discussions using terms common thirty years ago.

No one paid particular attention to me, it being assumed I arranged some other part of the show. I climbed up the church’s square tower, and shaded my eyes to stare across the Levels. North, east, south, west...in this flat land, a man can see for miles.

No followers, that I could see. No riders.

Are you correct, Suor Caterina? Is this so strange, so unlikely, that they’ve over-shot us on the way to Bristol, or gone astray elsewhere in the marsh? Or is it merely that the huntsmen don’t wish their quarry to view them, before the kill?

From this height, I could see the two tiny figures duel: Dariole springing about as she fought, searching out the oddnesses of fighting curved blade against straight, and Saburo spare of his movements, his effort, his cuts. I went back down. The two of them came to the end of their sparring—Saburo with feet set flat and wide on the turf, body curved, blade held high; Dariole down in a fighting crouch, dagger and rapier warding face and belly.

He cut, she moved; all in a heart-beat; cattan-blade and rapier disengaging as they sprang back to bow

to the applause. The samurai sheathed his swords and stood with his arms folded. Dariole bowed to the villagers with a florid style she could only have learned on stage at The Rose.

She came away, walking up to me. “The King’s going to give his speech from the masque. What are you going to do?”

“I, mademoiselle?”

She began, slowly, to smile at me. “Don’t tell me you haven’t thought, messire!”

There was that in her demeanour that made me think her glad to assume my knees knocked under my silk petticoats. I made her a bow. The applause ended, and I walked past her, into the makeshift arena.

I have never been congratulated on any theatrical talents, outside of those natural to my profession, but a man learns somewhat in the army. Concluding that his Majesty of England would be severely offended not to go last and best in this array of tricks, I took my stance in front of the peasants and began to sing them a drinking song of surpassing filthiness that I learned in the Low Countries.

This place being as far behind the times as I thought, it was new to them, and that was sufficient to gain me approbation.

Looking across their heads, and seeing Dariole sitting up on the ancient wall of the boneyard watching me, moved me to sing again.

I sang a lament.

From taverns and camps, I have learned that a lament nearly always gains applause. This time was no exception. Perhaps, with the drinking-song, my woman’s costume provided a perverse extra fillip; with a lament, it became plaintive or irrelevant. There is an old ballad of my province and childhood, of a woman who ages and dies alone after her ghostly lover leaves her, and if the details were not those of Caterina, still, they could not help but bring her to mind.

I walked back to stand beside James Stuart. “Now, sire.”

He looked at me greenly.

“These are your people, sire.”

“I like not their flattery,” he grumbled. “It smells of their stale breath. Mark you, man, I will soon be done here!”

James Stuart squared his padded shoulders and moved off into the arena. He had the true monarch’s expectation that every man should get out of his way—and because of that, they did. I saw each man lean to his neighbour, and heard muttered congratulations about “the player that plays King James.”

My acquired friend with the penny whistle approximated a stately tune, and the King of England and Scotland moved in slow, formal steps on the damp grass.

Dariole appeared at my side. She gave me a covert look. *Amazement? No—admiration?*

“Mademoiselle—are you mocking me because I sang in women’s clothes?”

She rubbed the heel of her hand unselfconsciously across her face. “I didn’t know you could *sing*. You’re very good.”

I in an instant lost thirty years off my age, and stood awkward as a boy.

“Messire, are you *blushing*?”

There was no answer to that which would not have been a lie, or destroyed my composure, or both. I looked away from her, at James Stuart dancing.

“Your bum-boy and the demon are okay,” Constable Anselm’s voice growled, as he strolled up to stand beside me. “Can’t say I think much of your fat man.”

His accent was thick enough that I hoped James Stuart might be spared this insult by one of his subjects. The King moved himself into the position for his speech, facing not the members of his court, but a dozen families of peasants. Even ten yards away from him, I thought he looked sickly.

—“Thus, grave the Muse of History stood,” James slobbered out, alone in the empty space in front of his people. His Scots accents was thick enough to be equally incomprehensible to them, I realised. *If anybody’s knees are knocking, it is his....*

“Rubbish!” Anselm bellowed. “Get off!”

“In reckoning up the line of Kings’—”

The fat Scotsman caught the catcalls from the crowd.

He limped a pace or two forward, glaring at them in a perfect transport of fury. “*Do you mock me? Your King?*”

“Fat old fart!” a voice yelled from the far side of the green. “Why don’t you break wind? It’ll make as much sense!”

I winced. James Stuart stared in what I saw to be complete and utter disbelief.

“What man said that! We’ll have him in the Tower! We are James, King of the ancient realms of Scotland and England; we will not be flouted like a common ninny!”

Cold sweat crept down my back in the silence.

Dariele whispered, inaudible a yard away. “We’re going to be strung up from a tree....”

There were no trees in this flat land, but I thought these peasants ready to devise some reasonable, rapid substitute. I caught Saburo’s eye, and looked at the hilts of his swords. His lids closed slowly over his black eyes and rose again.

Take it at the charge: seize James Stuart, run—

One man clapped.

It broke out like wild-fire, rippling through the fifty or sixty men present; a dozen cheering and shouting for more.

James Stuart huffed, spluttered, and swung around to face us. “Yon Constable! Anselm, your name is? You see these men here, engaged in *lèse majesté*? We are your King! Arrest them, man, arrest them!”

Anselm lifted up his hands and clapped, nodding as if he received public acknowledgement. He smiled. Without taking his eyes off the fuming fat man, he said, “He’s very good. Got the King off to a T.”

“Yes,” I said. “Certainly he is the closest thing to James the First and Sixth that any man here will ever see.”

Dariole simultaneously spluttered, coughed, and buried herself in her kerchief.

The peasant constable continued, “No *wonder* you ain’t playing him in London! You could try over Bridgwater way.”

“Bridgwater?”

“Bout five mile, that way.” He pointed. Further west, I realised. “You might even get a boat up to Bristol.”

The sun burned hot on my bare shoulders and chest. A wind brought me the smell of the marshes. No scent of horses, no sound of hoof-beats or horns. *Bridgwater?*

I let the Stuart King stutter on for another minute of raw, thick, completely unintelligible, but very popular Scots insult; I then stepped forwards beside him, bowed to the peasants, and got my arm under his.

“We should leave now, sire.”

“Insolence!” James allowed himself to be backed away bodily towards Dariole and the samurai. “Our own *subjects!* They say we are a bad false king!”

Saburo gave a grunt. “No. *Good* false king! Better to be called good, by own subjects. Would be dishonour for them to call you *poor* imitation, ne?”

James spluttered himself into red-and white-splotched breathlessness. Saburo met my gaze. Mordieu! I thought. Does the Nihonese man make a *joke*?

“You said we might attempt Bridgwater,” I said to Anselm. “Are we so close to the coast?”

“Bridgwater’s inland a ways. River-port.” Constable Anselm suddenly chuckled. “You’d make a packet. There’s one or two loyal Stuart men here, but in Bridgwater—when it comes to November, they don’t burn an effigy of Fawkes, they burn one of James Stuart! You might earn some passage money.”

“We shall go,” I said, “and I thank you, monsieur.”

“And I you, Mon-sewer Not-Man-Not-Woman.” He grinned at me. True, we four could not fight fifty men with cudgels; but, also true, Anselm would have been the first victim of our swords, and he plainly knew that.

“I don’t want to see you on my parish again, right?” With his black-toothed grin, Anselm added, “It was a good jig. If anybody asks me, *I* ain’t seen you. But if anybody *do* come asking... I can’t answer for the rest of ’em blabbing.”

With the heat of the early afternoon sun on my left hand, I ushered Saburo and James Stuart on foot away from the tiny hamlet.

If the hamlet were richer, I might have asked Anselm for the loan of horse-flesh, but I’d seen none. *We’re at least travelling in an unexpected direction. But slowly!*

Mlle Dariole fell into step beside me, behind the samurai and the King of England and Scotland. She

slitted her eyes against the sun. We walked between high-waving wild grasses that lined the drainage ditches to either side of the track.

She snapped an ox-eye daisy out of the verge as she walked. “How are we going to do it?”

“Do what, precisely?”

“Get James back on the throne, idiot!”

I glanced ahead. James I judged to be out of earshot, striding along beside Saburo, and—from his visible gestures—haranguing the samurai with exasperation.

Dariole plucked off white daisy petals. “If we *do* get him to London...his allies are probably dead, like Cecil. And you can bet Northumberland’s free by now.”

The shredded flower littered the rutted earth as we walked. *The thought of Northumberland will not bring her pleasant memories.*

“I hadn’t thought so far, mademoiselle, I confess.”

“Why not?”

Her dark eyes lifted, meeting my gaze. To my perplexity, I found myself reluctant to disappoint her.

“Truthfully, mademoiselle?” I shrugged. “Because...Dariole, you must pardon me. Much as James Stuart impresses me outside his court—it is not my concern who is on the throne of England.”

She snorted. “You worked hard enough to get James out of Wookey alive!”

Honesty can be painful. *I know what thought this next matter must bring to the forefront of your mind.*

“My concern was for *your* safety. With that assured...my ties with James Stuart are cut. And you will remember that I have, besides, M. de Sully to consider.”

Dariole gave me an oddly thoughtful look. The faintest cool wind moved the grasses that over-topped the sedge, pressing up against the edge of the track, leaving us less exposed to a casual eye. I looked about me again, in case I might see horsemen, and saw nothing.

“Death of God!” I stumbled as my foot caught a clod of earth, knocking it apart into damp fragments; and trod down the toe of my other boot into my petticoat-hems. Cloth ripped. I exclaimed bitterly, “How do you women manage!”

Dariole snorted. “You’re asking me?”

A grin broke out over her features. I glared at her.

Almost apologetic, she said, “Messire, it’s just—you look...you look...”

Bizarre as any masquer by daylight, I surmised, feeling my cheeks grow warm, as they had not in front of the English peasants, nor when I sought previously to amuse Mlle Dariole.

“Do you *laugh*?” I demanded, for all the world like a duelist in the Palais Royale.

“Messire, would I laugh? *Would I?*”

My embarrassment faded, without warning. I looked down at the young woman. Something moved painfully in my chest.

“Of course.” I smiled. “God sent you as a rod for my pride; what else would you do?”

“It’s a very *splendid* farthingale.” She regarded me, straight-faced. “But I’m not sure it’s your best colour.”

“You imagine that I would take Mlle Dariole’s advice about *skirts*?”

She did not trouble herself to hide her smile. Surveying me from head to toe with a practical air, she remarked, “You could kilt them up. Out of your way.”

“I could?”

“Stop. Don’t move a minute.” Dariole strolled around behind me as I halted. Turning my head, I saw her squatting down in the track, at the rear of my silk and satin skirts and petticoats.

She lifted the hems.

I felt her hands move up my boots towards my arse.

“*Mademoiselle!*”

“Hold still!” Her dagger slashed.

The broken farthingale-frame’s ties came away. Willow-wands and cloth, that had caused me great discomfort in the saddle and after, fell at my feet. I stepped out of them.

“You’ll walk easier.” Dariole, frog-squatting, reached and took handfuls of my skirts’ cloth, and thrust it all through my legs, between my ankles. “Hold this!”

I bent forward to do so. As I straightened again, that pulled the back of my skirts and petticoats up between my legs. Dariole rose and came around to my front, yanked my belt forward, took the cloth from me, and stuffed it down between my belt and body. What seemed to be several acres of cloth tightened between my legs.

I grunted, reaching down surreptitiously to adjust myself. “Is this necessary? Or are you merely entertaining yourself?”

She re-buckled my belt tightly over the skirts to hold them in place, her tone satisfied. “You won’t fall on your arse so easy now.”

“I...suppose you to be correct.” Since the hems were up about my knees, I could not trip over them. With the bulk of my skirts and petticoats fastened so, between my legs, they made merely another pair of vastly baggy breeches. To a casual eye, they might have been Dutch slops, particularly as I wore my boots beneath them.

Re-buckling my sword and dagger gave me confidence that I might now both draw and fight. A momentary chill breeze off the marsh made the exposed skin of my chest prickle with gooseflesh, above the bodice and stomacher. I regretted again that there had not been any man among Henry’s dead troopers large enough of their body to lend me a shirt or doublet.

From the waist up...*I am a centaur. Or Hermaphroditus.*

Saburo looked back, hesitating. I signalled to him to continue walking, guarding the King.

“May we go on? Are you done?” A little nettled, I looked down at the young woman. “Or did you not have sufficient poppets to dress, when you were a girl-child?”

“Aw, messire, you have to have guessed I played with my brothers’ toys....”

We smiled, each at the other.

Walking in the wake of the samurai and James Stuart, the slow pace of foot travel brought us at last under a line of wind-bent oaks and elms. The first cover in an hour.

Among the many things I do not know about mimicking a woman, I realised, is the effect of English July sunlight on my shaven, naked shoulders and chest. I looked down at my florid skin as we came into occasional shade.

For all it is only the English sun, and in no way so strong as it is in France, I have a fine colour ... The red skin was sharply separated from the stark white just under the edge of my stomacher, as if by a line. I stripped off my glove and rested a bare palm gently above it, feeling how hot it radiated.

“See, now.” Dariole grinned. “If you were a respectable woman and not a player, you’d have a pinner to go over that....”

I managed to seem icy. “You could not have told me this before?”

“Oh, like *you* don’t know what women wear!” She poked me with her forefinger, much where I expected, in the centre of the sun-scalded flesh of my chest. Expecting it, I was able to refuse her the satisfaction of a wince.

“It’s true, mademoiselle, I have in my time seduced many country girls....”

And I should be familiar with the white cloth they fold about their shoulders and bosom, and pin at the throat. Except that I had never assumed the pinner to have a practical function beyond hiding their breasts from men’s eyes.

Something in the movement of the air, and the smell of it, made me aware that we must soon come within a few miles of the sea. My back itched. I could not help looking about, behind me and to the side. I remarked no sign of Prince Henry’s men.

“They have to have missed us. They’ll be at Bristol,” Dariole said, un-emotionally; for a moment, I suspected her able to read my mind.

“Henry’s soldiers? I would suppose it a possibility for them to wait for us there. Or to take Cecil’s troops prisoner, if there are more of them in Bristol. Conceivably, both.”

Is Milord Robert Cecil alive? Will I have, still, access to his intelligencers’ reports? Or is Spofforth correct—Spofforth, whom I would bet all my remaining coin is dead himself....

Dariole lifted her head, her gaze meeting mine. “Maybe Robert Fludd is with Henry Stuart’s soldiers right now. Maybe he’s doing mathematics to find out where *we* are. Maybe he did that ten years ago! I *hate* it that whatever we do, he might have thought of it first. I wish we had Suor Caterina alive.”

That, I could not deny. I felt a pang at the loss of Caterina. To wait so long, in darkness and non-existence, and then to have one’s act be cut so short....

Dariole, exasperated, added, “Or I wish we had another one of the Giordanisti!”

“Bruno’s students are gone: mad, or dead,” I said.

“All except Fludd.” Dariole scowled. “I hope he *knows* I’m alive. I hope he sleeps with two loaded pistols beside him. I hope I give him nightmares.”

It was on the verge of my tongue to remark that this was indeed probable, since God He knows she has given *me* nightmares enough.

May I be so flippant with you now? I thought. Bruises fade, cuts heal; to outward appearance, she is the same young woman who sailed into London on the *Willibrod* two months ago. But that is outward.

I’m lost, I thought. I would protect her from every ill, if I could.

And, at the same time, I desire to bury my face in the wind-dried, creased linen of her shirt, where it is visible under her doublet; strip off the garment for the sweet flesh beneath. Except that she freezes, now, when any man’s hand approaches.

Dariole looked up at me. “You know what? It’s selfish, but I want Caterina here. I wish she hadn’t sacrificed herself.”

The word triggered a harshness in me, having had time to contemplate the Italian woman’s actions. “‘Sacrifice’? Mademoiselle, Caterina was a fool!”

At Dariole’s appalled look, I continued rapidly.

“Yes, I owe Caterina my life. Conceivably, we all do. But only consider. ‘Six minds in Europe,’ she told me, that were capable of understanding this Bruno’s Formulae. And she decides to get one of the remaining two splattered up the walls of Wookey caves! Mademoiselle, I doubt any man would count it a fair exchange: one of Europe’s predictive mathematicians dead in exchange for the Duc de Sully’s spy!”

Dariole’s mouth hardened in the stubborn lines I recognised. “Well, we’ve got what we’ve *got*, messire. They’re all gone except Fludd. And finding him—*oh*. James is bait. Fludd still wants him dead.”

I picked grass-stems from the verge as we walked under the spindly trees’ shadow. “I won’t say I had not considered that. But—”

She interrupted, no less precipitately than Prince Henry Stuart, but with more honest passion. “We have to do it! Use James Stuart to get Robert Fludd back out into the open—he’s *got* to want the King dead, still. We get James to London...Fludd is in London, I know.”

Braiding the stems of grasses gave me somewhat to look at that was not her impassioned face. “You seem very certain.”

“Oh, no one’s going to have noticed him. He’ll just be one of those shadowy men around the Prince—the new King. Henry Nine. But I’m going to find him. You and Saburo can do the putting-back-on-the-throne with James.”

The grass-braid twisted, broke. I abandoned it.

“Mademoiselle, I have nothing more to do with James Stuart. Except in so far as, if we’re *not* now captured, and I am able to assist him to his throne, he might prove a very useful ally against the Queen Regent.”

“Against?” Dariole glanced up at me, incredulous. “Marie de Medici and James Stuart? Never! They’re way too alike. Peace at any price, both of ’em! He won’t fight her, and she won’t fight him!”

“Not warfare, mademoiselle. Influence.”

Frustrated, I added, aloud, what—some few weeks ago—I would have been least likely to say to her, of all men on Earth.

“Dariole, all my entanglements with James and with Robert Fludd are serving merely to divert me from my real purpose! This is not why I left Paris. Understand, I do not blame you—”

Her eyes flashed, but she spoke with a dry humour. “That’s good.”

“—and it is *possible* I’ve informed M. de Sully well enough that he can uncover the traitor in his household, but I cannot confirm it. That is not the end of the matter! The Queen Regent will never stand a rival like M. de Sully at court: she’ll try again. If I can’t use James Stuart to help him, then I’m useless in James’s company. I’m useless here!”

“No.” Dariole turned her head to look at me, as she walked, mouth set stubbornly. “You’re not useless. I asked you, messire, would you help me find Robert Fludd—and I realise now, you didn’t answer.”

Out of nowhere, a thought came to me so strongly that I checked as I walked.

I was dimly aware of Mlle Dariole continuing on a few steps further, before she stopped and stared back.

“I...am to thank you, mademoiselle, I think.” Resting my hand down on the Saxony rapier’s hilt, I called the young woman’s words of a few minutes ago into my mind. “Yes. The Giordanisti, gone; dead or mad—as you say: ‘except Fludd.’”

She came back a pace. “There was only him and Caterina. Unless you think she was lying?”

“Lying? I doubt it of her. But it’s possible even she had insufficient knowledge...no man may calculate *every* possibility.” The wind off the Levels brought marsh-smells to me, and dappled shadow shifted on the path. “If, at some time in the last ten years, the House of Austria or the Society of Jesus found and took one of the Giordanisti into their custody...and hid him away....”

“What?” she demanded, frustrated.

She demands my thoughts as if she had a right. As if we are as close as friends....

I looked away from her, up into the shade and brightness of the heavy-leafed trees. If I don’t look into her face, perhaps she will read nothing in mine.

“Mademoiselle. Say there *are* only Robert Fludd and Sister Caterina left. Caterina is now dead. That, as I say, was a foolhardy act—a waste.”

Dariole made a protesting noise; I ignored it.

“If that’s so, then Robert Fludd is now the last of the living students of Giordano Bruno; the last Giordanista. I grant you, other men may read this ‘Regiomontanus’ and the rest, and re-discover what Bruno knew—but, also, they may not. And we *know* one man has this knowledge. Therefore...”

I turned my head, to meet her clear, cold gaze.

“...therefore, mademoiselle, what is he? What is Robert Fludd?”

Dariole said, “The man I’m going to kill.”

“No.”

Raw pain showed on her face, blanking it into something no more expressive than a pale wax death-mask.

“No,” I repeated, hating what I must say, but seeing it far too clearly. “Robert Fludd is a man to be *used*.”

A coldness pierced me, at her stare. And a sensation as of falling—what, in another man, I might have called fear. *I have broken the accord between us. Perhaps permanently.*

I realised that Saburo and the King had walked back to us only as James Stuart’s shadow loomed in my vision.

“Well, Master Rochefort?” he demanded. “There is a path ahead, by which we may see roofs; do we go on?”

Forcing myself to apparent confidence, I gave his Stuart Majesty a bow. “I believe so. Sire, this Bridgwater is a port, according to Monsieur Anselm; one not much less significant than Bristol. If you’ll take my advice, when we arrive, we won’t sail north, to Bristol—but take ship from Bridgwater direct to London.”

Rochefort, Memoirs

31

The *Martha* crewed eighteen men—a mere fifty-ton ship, square-rigged and tiny, with an old-fashioned high stern and forecastle.

Royal beggars can’t be choosers, I reflected, watching Dungeness pass to the north of us, over a whitecapped sea.

One of the seamen on the *Martha* being of truly gigantic proportions, I had bought his best doublet from him (at an inordinate price), and it hung comfortably loose across my shoulders. Another of the sailors being handy with his needle, I had had him make Dame Clio’s voluminous skirts into true Dutch slops, since expensive silk looks very well for a pair of breeches.

“Yon French courtier is a sight too concerned with his clothes,” King James remarked cheerfully to Saburo as I entered the narrow stern cabin, ducking my head to miss both the beams and the swinging lanterns. James Stuart chuckled. “Master de Rochefort, you are none so young, sir, to be thinking of fashion. I think that Master Dariole would scrub up well. A king should have brave young men about him in his court.”

Dariole, who had been peering out of the leaded casement at the sea, made her bow to the King at this jovial compliment, and mumbled something about air and the deck. I stood aside as she passed. She did

not lift her head or meet my eye.

Were it possible, I would have teased her gently; asked if she thought “Monsieur” Dariole would be considered such an ornament at James’s court were he Mille de Montargis de la Roncière (the Scotsman’s admiration seeming not in the slightest aware of her womanly qualities).

But I fear it not possible, given she has not spoken to me since the *Martha* quit Bridgwater.

Crowding into the narrow cabin along with Saburo, I found the grizzled and somewhat dazzled ship’s captain of the *Martha* also keeping company with James Stuart. The King gestured. “This stout subject of ours, Captain Arnott, has assured us we shall be in the estuary of the Thames-river within the day.”

I nodded approval. Arnott—a captain fortunately not local to Bridgwater—remarked, “Even so, your Majesty! The wind and tide themselves conspire to bring your Majesty home safely.”

James flinched. An unlucky choice of words, that *conspire*. He waved his hand dismissively. “You may leave us, for the moment, Captain Arnott. And you, Monsieur Tanaka. De Rochefort, you wished to speak with us?”

“Yes, sire.” Given how time presses.

Allowing the ship’s captain and the samurai to shuffle past me in the narrow way, I entered, and at James’s gesture seated myself on the ledge of the stern window. Sunlight and the hull shifted gently. The last four days, James had kept both Dariole and Saburo close at his side—the former to help in the interpretation of the latter, I thought, while the samurai and the English King spent considerable time in discussion of Nihon and trade.

Well enough, if it allows James Stuart to distract himself from the knowledge that he is not, yet, back on his throne. And that Fludd and Prince Henry will not have been idle.

“Well, man?” the Scotsman demanded. “What would you say to us?”

After this, there is no going back. I may succeed or fail, but the matter is broached.

As mildly as possible, I said, “Your Majesty must be hoping to arrive in London before the usurper Henry is crowned. Establish at Whitehall-palace that your Majesty is indeed not dead.”

“Yon man Fludd,” James growled. “He, we will have hanged outside our window, to wake up and see every morning afterwards for a month.”

And I am choosing this moment to suggest the contrary....

James wiped at his mouth with his sleeve. His oyster-satin looked much the worse for wear, after skirmishes and the march across the Levels—but no other garment could match it for expensiveness, and so the King wore it still. True, it had indeed gone some way to convincing Captain Arnott that James was who he claimed to be.

“Prince Henry,” I felt my way carefully, “has no authority, I think?”

The fat man lifted his head, somewhat white about the eyes at the motion of the boat. Seeming to cast aside his pride, he said, “Don’t rebuke us, Master de Rochefort. We had left the royal seal with Mr Secretary, while we costumed for the masque. If Master Cecil’s dead, then the usurper has it. Likewise if Master Cecil, alive, proves a turncoat and sides with the usurper.”

“Perhaps too many men will be suspicious of what occurred in the banqueting cavern, sire.” I shrugged. “Including Milord Cecil, if he lives. Henri of Navarre, at least, left a visible corpse.”

James looked grey—at the prospect of Cecil being dead, I surmised, for all his words about the man’s potential treachery.

“Sire, if he finds evidence, Cecil will have the Prince impeached as a regicide. And if Cecil *does* live, Doctor Fludd can’t kill him without arousing suspicion.”

I smiled, mordantly, wondering just how angry it would make Mr Secretary Cecil, finding himself precisely in the Duc de Sully’s position.

“If we reach the end of this voyage today or tomorrow, perhaps your Majesty shall see yourself returned to your throne with rejoicing, sire.”

“Perhaps.” James looked sad. “Good men have already died in the hope of it. Yon Philip Spofforth, God rest him. And the poor gallant souls with him.”

James glanced up at me. A man may not always choose his causes. Pure need of Milord Cecil’s information led me originally to support of this man; I have not M. Saburo’s requirement of James Stuart on the English throne for his Nihonese King to deal with. Need of help for M. de Sully leads me to ally myself with James Stuart. But from time to time comes a moment when I consider that I might do so in any case.

“Sire,” I said, “I desire, before we reach London, to open a matter with you.”

“And that is?”

Three days spent searching for the right moment have brought nothing; I am therefore determined to plunge in.

“Doctor Fludd, sire. He being a regicide, a murderer—”

James grunted. “You have proof? Of a murder?”

“I’m in no court of law,” I said mildly, wedging myself into the stern window embrasure—which was, in truth, a little small for a man of my stature—and resting my arms on my thighs. I met James’s gaze. “I speak of what we both know, sire. Fludd’s a conspirator, a murderer, and gives the orders for worse things; albeit he doesn’t carry them out with his own hands. You’ve said hang him. True, he’s deserving of death. However—”

“Kings do not like that word ‘however,’ Master de Rochefort,” James Stuart remarked, equally mildly, but with a gleam in his eye.

He is willing to listen, despite his carping, I thought. The knowledge of Dariole out on the *Martha*’s deck momentarily gave me pause. *I am, however, decided.*

“Doctor Fludd,” I began, “whatever else he is, is also—as far as any man knows—the last living pupil of the Neapolitan heretic Giordano Bruno. The inheritor of his knowledge. And, now, the last practitioner of precognitive mathematics.”

James lifted a blurred gaze to me. I pressed on.

“You say he’s fit for death: I don’t disagree, sire. But I do say he’s fitter for something else, which is—to

be used. His skills, used to our advantage.”

The wooden walls of the cabin creaked as we came about, tacking up the Channel. The smallness of the ship was no reassurance, remembering Monsieur Saburo’s ship-wreck. I attempted to put the swaying lamps out of my mind, and fix my attention on England and Scotland’s still-dishevelled King.

James frowned. “Use yon Fludd? And you’d do this? You’re no Englishman—and while we know there are ancient bonds between France and Scotland, that’s scarce enough to make us think you deserve a voice in this.”

I looked down past my hands at the solid oak of the cabin floor, and the play of shadows moving as the stern came around. “You must know—Milord Cecil will have told your Majesty—that I am the servant of the Duc de Sully. He is my chief concern in this matter, being my patron these fifteen years.”

The fat Scotsman unexpectedly nodded. “Ay. Robbie said you were loyal. It’s a valuable quality in a man.”

The deck began to tilt, slanting the other way as we came about, the bright sun sliding across the curving planks of the hull.

“Doctor Fludd,” James prompted.

“Doctor Fludd is...valuable.” I chose my words carefully. “His ability to use Bruno’s mathematics to predict the future might be invaluable to many men—say, a King and his Minister, for advice known only to them. Were he at any time to lie, it would be quickly apparent. Say we assume, sire, that Fludd’s not killed when we arrive at London, and fails of any escape, and is taken.”

The King nodded. “He’d therefore be under English law.”

Although it was difficult to bow while seated, I made a creditable attempt. “Pardon me, sire; there may be complications. Say, if Fludd flees, and is taken by a Frenchman, outside of England.”

The expression of the Scottish King grew more dour.

“Let me put myself in your hands, sire.” I leaned forward, in emphasis. “I confess to you, sire, these last two months I would cheerfully have been a regicide, could I have found a way to the woman Marie de Medici.”

He flinched, at the calling of a crowned Queen “woman.” “The crown ennobles; makes divine!”

She declared herself Queen Regent illegally; she has not the wit of a hen; for France, she is a disaster. I refrained from saying it aloud.

James Stuart gave me a watery glare. “Even if she is a woman, she is a ruling Prince, and next therefore to God, monsieur!”

I perceive where Henry Stuart gained his ideas of eternal kingship, and not merely from Doctor-Astrologer Fludd. Albeit I think Henry believes in practise what James believes only in theory...I looked suitably chastened.

“Go on, Master Rochefort.” James nodded for me to continue.

I spoke carefully. “The relevance of the Queen Regent is this. Robert Fludd is a man to be used. I’ve searched my mind for a way it may be done. Say, only for argument’s sake, that he fell into my hands. I

can't take him into the Queen Regent's France. She has a Jesuit for a confessor. It is as in any Catholic state in Europe: the Jesuits will merely take Fludd to Rome, as they did with Bruno, and burn him alive. While that would be justice, it robs the world of his skill."

The ship heeled over a little, so that I must brace one foot on the floor to keep myself in the window embrasure. I watched him closely. *Would that I had Mr Secretary Cecil here, to advise me in the best ways to persuade James Stuart.* But, failing that, I have nothing but the truth.

"A thing occurred to me, sire, while we struggled in the Somerset marshes, and I have had time to think on it. You may be aware I bear a considerable grudge against the Queen Regent, she having been always an enemy to my master the Duc. Now, suppose that I—leave aside my personal grievances."

It was pain to phrase it so. *Would that I might plainly tell James that she's a regicide.*

"It seems to me," I said, "vengeance once put aside, that I might best help the Duc de Sully, not by seeking to contest or overthrow the Queen Regent's reign, but by accepting Marie de Medici as Queen, and making use of that."

James's shaggy brows rose. "She *is* your anointed queen, man! It's not for you to think of rebellion or revolt."

I said painfully, "Men see that she has legitimacy as Queen of France. Marie de Medici is dead Henri's widow, dead Henri's Queen, and the living King Louis's mother. No man can argue that."

And with Ravailac dead, it's the word of a spy and murderer alone to prove her an assassin.

The realisation lay cold as stone in my belly.

I think I will never, now, convince any man who does not know me, of the part the Queen played in Henri's death.

I said, "As to whether she's a monarch *sufficient* to follow Henri of Navarre...Sire, I'll say this. She's a woman and a mother as well as a Queen. Therefore, she's a monarch who does not desire war. As I understand it, the troops for Jülich-Cleves are already recalled from the border."

Briefly, I considered what the woman Mlle de la Roncière, with her sword, might say about the woman Marie de Medici desiring or not desiring war. I might have smiled, were it not for the fact that, sitting here with James Stuart, I am betraying Mlle Dariole.

"Your Henri was a warrior." James nodded, slowly. "But, if France is to be for peace, now...we think that may be no bad thing."

I made him another seated bow of acknowledgement. "You, sire, as 'the British Solomon,' will surely appreciate this quality in the Queen Regent."

James nodded, seeming entranced. I'd heard the epithet applied to him on my prior visit with Sully to these shores; now seemed an appropriate moment to utilise it.

I clasped my hands together, leaning forward, gazing at him. "Europe's on the verge of war, sire; you know this. Why else seek to marry your son to a Catholic, and your daughter to a Huguenot? Those who desire peace and balance, like yourself and the Queen Regent, should be aided in it as much as possible. What better help and assistance could there be than Robert Fludd, forecasting the path that other nations will take, and so allowing you to avoid or cut short conflict, or anticipate it where it may not be avoided?"

James leaned back in Captain Arnott's great wooden chair, that was bolted to the deck, stroking his hand over his untrimmed beard. "But yon man Fludd's skills—his calculations—are they not slow, cumbrous?"

"In detail, yes. In general, no. Besides, he may improve his skills, or be brought to teach others." I pressed on to my conclusion. "But, your Majesty, all the while there exists Fludd, the last of those whom Sister Caterina calls—called—Bruno's 'Giordanisti,' it's my belief that France and England should share this resource."

James Stuart's chin lifted off his chest. He blinked at me in arrogant amazement. "Share?"

"Would it not be the choice you yourself would make, as a second Solomon—the object of our desires to be divided in two and shared between each?"

James chuckled, loudly and richly. "We perceive you haven't wasted your time about court, Master de Rochefort. Solomon's choice! Very well, very well...It's true we British may take Doctor Fludd, but then true that you'll know of his existence. What is it you wind your way towards, sir? Be straight with us."

Putting all on the throw at hazard, I said plainly, "A treaty, sire. A secret treaty."

He stared. "Go on."

"No man *knows* truly if all the students that Bruno taught are dead or mad. Suppose, for a moment, that one or two of these Giordanisti still exist, in Madrid, or the Vatican, performing the same service for their masters there as you and Marie de Medici might have from Fludd."

I let him consider it a moment.

"And if it's not so." I shrugged. "It may nonetheless be necessary to *act* as if it were."

James lowered his chin to his chest again, in silence. The palms of my hands grew damp. I kept my expression mild, it being always a mistake in such negotiations to allow one's personal stake to be seen.

Wind and wave brought the *Martha* creaking about on another tack, the sound of distant cries coming down from the rigging outside, and the crack of sail.

James raised his head. His blue-grey eyes appeared less watery, and more keen. "We have attempted peace, always. The desired marriages of our sons and daughter would mean all royal lineages of Europe linked by bonds of blood, and thus a little less ready to go to war...And now, you tell me that we may see into the future that God designs for us, and witness the success or failure of such a match. Avert the failures, beforehand..."

Sweetening the bait, I said briskly, "It would be necessary for Doctor Fludd to be kept in England. Else he'd burn, by the wish of the Church. Your Majesty might order him kept under covert arrest, and may also order such diplomatic visits by the Queen Regent's ambassadors as you mutually arrange. Thus questions might be put to Doctor Fludd, and answers returned. Such a treaty might stipulate that Doctor Fludd divide his attentions equally between England and France, but that's detail."

James Stuart flicked his gaze from the stern casements and the sea to me, his expression astonishingly keen and sharp for such a flabby man. "And you, Master Rochefort? France would not be considered in this matter, were it not for you. What is it that you desire, from this?"

All the while the *Martha* had creaked and wallowed her way out of Bridgwater, and about the coast of

Cornwall, I had kept myself solitary on the high deck, working my way through the implications of such an arrangement. The better part of two days so spent allowed me to hope I had considered most questions.

I leaned back in the stern window embrasure, and pushed the hair back from my face. My newly growing beard and moustaches did no more as yet than abrade my hand. I met James Stuart's gaze. "First, sire—I understand that we count chickens when the eggs are not yet laid, never mind hatched."

James chuckled gruffly, in a release of tension. "Ay. Well, such is often the case, in government. But assume we have our braw hens. What's this arrangement to you, that you should suggest it?"

"My priorities are...different from yours, sire. My business, since I was forced to leave France, has been M. de Sully, and how I might assist in his affairs."

He looked thoughtful. "Go on."

"A treaty between England and France could not be decided nor drawn up in a moment. I hope, only, that your Majesty will consider the wisdom of such a thing, for when you are again in Whitehall-palace."

I took a breath.

"That said, sire...then, this. I desire that any such treaty, when signed, should contain a clause in which all interested parties agree that the estates, offices, fortune, family, and life of the Duc de Sully are to be considered in-vulnerable and inviolate. Protected. And that no man—favourite, prince of the blood, or...other...shall be permitted to involve himself in M. de Sully's political affairs, to M. de Sully's detriment."

I paused, and added:

"And, if this condition is broken, the right to Doctor Fludd's information shall be instantly withdrawn."

Rochefort, Memoirs

32

Chance failed us, the winds falling at sunset, and keeping us becalmed all through the following day and the day after.

Not until the forenoon of the third day did the sails move, bellying out as the sea began to rise. I came out to lean against the rail and watch them. After an hour, and off the coast of Kent, the *Martha* hailed a chance-met brig coming south-east out of the Thames estuary. I heard the Englishman Arnott shout orders; men ran to take in sail and heave-to.

Is this my opportunity?

A man makes his opportunity, I decided, seeing a lowered boat from the *Martha* labouring over the sea to the merchant brig. It returned, with a man better-dressed than the usual run of mariners, who vanished into the master's cabin with Arnott and James Stuart. As I expected, Mlle Dariole, disconsolate at being turned out, came onto the deck.

She stood gazing out over the rail at the waist of the ship; and, as I watched, took off her wool cap and ran her fingers through her short hair.

I walked down the steps from where I had been leaning against the *Martha*'s taffrail, and moved to stand beside her, on her right hand to avoid the scabbard of her rapier.

"I must speak with you, mademoiselle, I think; before we reach London."

Dariole continued to gaze down from the rocking vessel at the green water, bare-headed, one hand stretched out in the attempt to feel sea-spray. She said nothing—which, in all honesty, I expected.

Wood creaked; sailors shouted in the rigging overhead. Dariole looked up, lifting her hand in recognition. The *Martha*'s crew, having begun by thinking Dariole a court flower and the King's bum-boy, had been convinced otherwise when she went so far as to follow one in a chase up the rigging, and whip him down from the main-mast at the rope's end. It had made me smile to see her get a respectful greeting from any of these men twice her age.

"I appreciate that you have nothing to say to me." I turned about, leaning my back on the rail, so I might see her expression.

Her rigid control broke. "I've got a lot of things to say to you, Rochefort, but trust me, you don't want to hear them!"

Clear-skinned, clean-shaven, she still might have been a boy of twenty. That sorted oddly with the dirt-smudged linen doublet and red slops, which gave her even more the appearance of a gutter-bred thug. To know that the slim waist about which the sword-belt is buckled is also that of a young woman...

She turned her head, finally, to look at me. Her eyes blazed. "You think Fludd's in London. You don't say so, but I know you do. His Henry the Ninth, his first of the line of eternal kings, like Caterina said—he'll be here. And *you* think I'm going to leave him alive!"

Frustrated, losing my prepared train of thought, I broke out in a temper. "Mademoiselle, it was *not* he who abused you! Why not desire to kill his servants? You might stand a better chance at finding John or Luke; whichever man it was of them that—"

I could not find words to phrase it without both causing her pain, and making me rigid with anger.

"I wonder you blame Robert Fludd for all! He only stood back. It was his man who made you spoiled—that is, despoiled you."

She stood up from the rail. Her eyes stood out dark in a face gone completely pale. "'Spoiled goods'? Is that it, messire? Is that what I am?"

"Mademoiselle!" I protested.

She turned about and stalked off down the deck. I gazed down at my knuckles, seeing how tight the kidskin gloves pulled across them. The flesh under the gloves will be white.

"Dear God!" I muttered aloud. *Why can I say nothing to her as I mean it!*

I found her sitting on the cover of the hold, towards the *Martha*'s prow, her legs folded up under her; her eyes fixed on the shifting horizon of the Essex coast as we tacked north-west.

She lifted her chin off her hand but didn't speak.

The wind coming fresh blew my hair forward, and ruffled the plumes of my hat—Bridgwater having shops enough to make me look the gentleman again.

I put off my hat and went down on one knee before her, in a courtier's bow.

Before she could react, I took hold of the foot of hers that was nearest me, where she sat, and bent my head down and kissed the leather upper of her boot.

“Messire!”

“There are things which cannot be said—can only be demonstrated.” I remained on one knee, looking up at her. “I do not, and I never will, regard you as spoiled goods. I kiss your hands and feet, and humbly beg you to pardon me that I did not at once say so.”

As if she were in a daze, she moved the arm that she leaned on, and extended it towards me. I took it, and kissed her bare, scarred fingers.

“You hate me, that I desire you not to kill Fludd. But, oh dear God, mademoiselle, I *want* you to! If it were only possible. *I* desire to kill him.”

Her eyes, watching me, were cold and adult.

Her hand closed compulsively over mine.

“Why?”

She implied more than she said; so much became clear to me. My hand may have quivered; or it may have been hers. Kneeling like the gentleman I have not been in two decades, I said, “Why do I say this, instead of rejoicing in your hurt and humiliation? Why, when in Paris I would have killed you? Why have I desired to help you, even if I cannot?”

Her lips pressed together, hard. She nodded. “That'll do.”

Trying for something of the eloquent speeches that had come to me these last few days, when I considered this moment, I ended only with a sigh.

“Think of it as a joke, upon me,” I said. “Monsieur Rochefort, who was your enemy, is—as concerned for your welfare as you are yourself. You have no cause to think anything good of me. I am the man who would have killed you. But if I could help you to your revenge, if it were only possible, then I would. With my sword or my wits, or what of my profession I can use to aid you. Believe me.”

She took her hand back from me, and moved, slowly; sliding her legs around, and slipping down from the hatch-cover to the deck.

She moved again, too quick for my reaction; bending over, and thrusting her free hand into the voluminous material at the front of my slops.

I inelegantly yelped. “Mademoiselle!”

Dariole let go of me, straightening up.

“I would have sworn you couldn't kneel down without getting a stiff privy member. I didn't think you could say what you just said with a straight face. I guess I was wrong on both counts.” She gazed at me

with an expression between confusion and frustration.

Giving way to the impulse that had moved me every day of our voyage on this ship, I stood up and put my hands about her shoulders.

She flinched back on the instant, catching herself against the hold-cover and sprawling back on it. The chape of her scabbard scraped the wood.

I reached a hand to help her.

She scrambled away, up in a crouch, hand by her dagger-hilt. Her eyes narrowed against the sunlight. She snapped, “You can say all that! And *still* ask me not to kill the man who raped me! Why?”

Can I not tell you? So I had often asked myself, these three nights, leaning on the *Martha*’s taffrail and gazing at our wake.

Dariole stood and stepped down off the hatch again to the deck, lifting her chin to glare at me.

“You given up on Sully, have you? Decided you’ll creep up Jamie Stuart’s arse instead? Make yourself *his* pimp, with Fludd?”

There was a time when such foolish remarks would have brought a flush to my cheek. I merely bowed impassively and put on my hat again, boiling inside.

Such a business as this would put her in danger, should she be told of it. James Stuart will wish it kept secret, Marie de Medici the same, and the Medici has made more than one attempt at murder as it stands.

No: if this treaty is to be kept secret at the highest level, kept between the very few most trusted advisors of James Stuart and the Queen Regent....

I gazed down at her fierce face.

Who has the right to know, if not you?

“I’ll tell you, mademoiselle,” I said, and watched her expression change.

A very few words sufficed, as it turned out.

“Sully.” Dariole, when I ended, spoke a wealth of meaning with that one name; and not merely because she said it with no venom or resentment. Her eyes squinted against the sun, looking up at me, until the shadow of a sail fell across her face.

More awkwardly than a man would hope, I said, “You understand why I must do this, now?”

Dariole still kept her hand near her dagger, but only so that she might tuck her thumb under her sword-belt. She leaned herself back against the ship’s rail, reaching up with her other hand to feel the salt-crusting rigging, gazing at the milky haze of the sky.

“I understand why you *think* you have to.” She dropped her gaze to me, suddenly. “I’m not stupid, messire. Sully’s been your patron for—”

What might have been the beginning of a smile touched her lips.

“—*nearly* longer than I’ve been alive.”

The look of disdain I gave her, I hoped might restore our relationship to something of its old footing. She did smile as she pushed herself off the rail and stood looking up into my face.

“I’m *not* stupid. You make out you’re Sully’s dog—but I’ve seen how you fight for him, messire. How you hate the Medici because of what she did. And how this works...I see why you’d want to do this.”

The smile faded slowly from her face. I confess I felt dazed, looking down at her. “Mademoiselle, I did not suppose you to understand—I thought you would...”

“I think you’re wrong.” Her tone remained even. “Don’t make a mistake about that: I think you’re wrong. I need Fludd dead. That doesn’t mean I can’t...I *understand*, you and Sully. I see that.”

The look in her eyes was very close to sympathy. I found my mouth open, and closed it. The emotion that coursed through me, I managed to identify. Shame. “Mademoiselle, I apologise—I had thought you would...act rather differently.”

Her shoulder lifted. “We still have a problem, messire.”

A voice bellowed from the stern.

“Hai! Rosh’-fu’!”

I turned to see Tanaka Saburo out on deck, outside the cabin. He strode towards us, across the ship’s mid-parts, and bowed to me and to Mlle Dariole.

“King got news of Lon-donnu!”

London, I made out, still thrown into confusion. Dariole shot me a look of what I would have sworn to be rueful amusement.

“The King-Emperor has spoke with the vessel-master.” Saburo nodded at our port side. I saw the small boat being rowed back towards the merchant brig.

Saburo walked forward, between Dariole and myself, his hands clasped on the cloth belt that wrapped him several times around, his bare feet flat and sure on the shifting deck.

“I tell him, if it was in my country, his enemies would wipe out his clan, down to the last child at mother’s tit. King-Emperor has wife and other son, and daughters. Good thing is, Furada has no sons, he can’t take the throne for his clan.”

Solving M. Saburo’s mind is a problem for philosophers! I thought. “I don’t believe Fludd has a clan, as such. Northumberland has a brood, like all these English earls, but I suppose him Fludd’s fool, rather than the other way about.”

“Maybe.” Saburo seemed dismissive. “Furada think so too, maybe.”

I considered that, and the power of some noblemen, even out of favour and in prison. I should not necessarily underestimate this Northumberland....

The shifting wind put a faint spray into my face. The merchant ship tacked away. At the same time that I watched it, I was conscious of Dariole, not a yard from me: her warmth, the scent of her unperfumed body—as un-perfumed as a man, but delicate, and with a power to rouse me stiff as the ship’s mast if I considered it closely.

The deck tilted and a man stumbled across the ship’s waist and plummeted past me; slamming into the

rail all but hard enough to fly over it.

Startled, I recognised the bulk of his Majesty James Stuart. Grabbing him about the chest, I arrested his progress.

“Rochefort, man!” he protested, his agitation such that I could hardly understand his speech.

“Sire?”

James Stuart jammed his ungainly body between me and the ship’s rail. He stuttered unintelligible thick Scots. M. Saburo shrugged as I caught his eye, showing me how adept he was becoming with European gestures, but otherwise being of no assistance.

The water became choppier as we sailed towards the land. I stood ready to grasp the belt James wore, or his doublet collar, in case he should plummet overboard. “Sire?” I repeated.

Shadows of the sails passed over us, and the sun came over our other hand as we tacked in towards the estuary of the Thames-river.

The Scotsman spoke fiercely. “They tell us, *all* ships are leaving London!”

He prodded my chest with his thick forefinger, at which I winced, being still not recovered from the sun’s scorching.

“And they themselves the last to go, now the wind allows it! There’s not a man in the City with whom they may do business—all warehouses closed, all shops shut up, and the citizenry fled to the country!”

James snatched in a breath. I caught at his sleeve as the ship heeled, preferring *lèse majesté* to a drowned Stuart King. Better if *I* had interrogated the merchant ship’s captain—but I do not have the authority of a king of England.

“*Why* do they do this?” I demanded.

“Plague.” James Stuart spoke the word shortly. “Yon man tells us, since the twelfth of this month, the pestilence has broken out, hotter than in years! The Lord Mayor has gone. The burgesses. Even the physicians won’t stay to collect their fees! There’ll be barely a man left to witness our son’s false coronation but the poor of the suburbs and out-parishes!”

I squinted against cold spray. “Henry’s not yet crowned?”

James waved a dismissive, dirt-ingrained hand, as if I were a pupil concerned over a trivial question. “We are God’s anointed King. If our son chooses to flout that today or tomorrow, what is that to us?” He overrode me as I would have spoken: “Did you not hear? Plague! The whole city’s hot with it! Our worthy citizens are gone!”

A glance showed me Saburo impassive—it being unclear how much he understands of James’s broad Scots—and Mlle Dariole turned in my direction, her eyes slitted against the sun, her expression therefore unreadable.

Confusedly seeking diplomacy, I murmured, “Sire, the fewer crowds, the less likelihood of contagion—”

“Do you think I am afraid?” The royal plural slipped in his evident rage. “I, who was Moray’s *hostage* when he was Regent of Scotland?”

“Sire—”

“I was nothing but a football when I was a boy—the prize for any of the Lairds could grab me! I am used to *danger*.” James’s voice came thick with outrage. “Do you hear me? See you, they slew a man at my mother’s feet when I was seven months in her womb, and her skirts greasy with his blood where he clutched at her to save him. My father, my father was blown sky-high by a powder conspiracy in Kirk O’Fields, and my mother blamed for it. My mother was slain, executed by the great whore Elizabeth—”

“An unfortunate family, sire,” I observed.

Stated with all the urbanity I had at my command, now I’d collected myself, it had the gratifying effect of stopping James Stuart in his tracks. Mlle Dariole stifled a noise.

I added, “If not dread of the plague—sire, *what* is it that your Majesty wishes to tell us?”

A grey line broke the surface of the ocean. The ungainly middle-aged man pointed his finger at the wide, winding Thames estuary. “There lies our rebellious son. I’m told, now, he’s spread lies that we are dead—that in the caves in Somerset, the waters rose, and our body was drowned and swept away.” He shivered, cold eyes meeting mine. “Our son knows, witches once tried to drown us, when I and my Anne were aboard ship for England. This lie is the more hurtful, therefore.”

True, I thought I saw more hurt in him than fear. Gently, I said, “He must say something of your death, sire, or else how can he justify men crowning him King?”

James nodded. He assumed something of a pedagogic air, which I knew to be of some security to him.

“Aye. This Robert Fludd who ensnares him is another Doctor Dee, in command of witchcraft, and plague, too. He desires our son crowned, so he can lead the wicked boy his own way. But, *think*, man! We are James, King of England and Scotland—but who is to witness it? Who is to *see* that we’re yet living? All men of note, all nobles, knights, baronets, burgesses—all of them, gone. Who may we summon, to say we’re returned alive to London?”

I saw Saburo scowl, and Dariole open her mouth to interrupt King James. I lightly trod over her foot with mine, and she shot me a glare; something that I found curiously reassuring.

The King said, “The citizens have locked themselves in their houses, if they’re too poor to run. We cannot go to the country. Yon man from the ship told me that knights of the shires, with purses full of silver, are being beaten away from town gates with staves and pikes, if they come from London—and are left to starve in ditches.”

His wide, padded shoulders slumped. In the silence, the sails snapped in the wind. The ungainly man glared at me—for reason only, I think, that I was present, and not because he sought an answer from me.

“No man can observe us. No man will be here to witness our return! Our son will have himself crowned, flee abroad from the London plague, and pause only to have us quietly murdered as he goes! Captain Arnott must bring us about. If we land in London, I am a dead man.”

“Sire.” Reflexively, I made him a bow, thinking furiously as I spoke. “Don’t order the ship away from London. Keep us on course. I believe I have an answer—not without danger, but with a chance of success.”

Saburo grunted. “There is revolt. Rebellion. How else can not be danger, if so?”

James glared at me. “*Well*, de Rochefort? In what danger do you propose to put your King?”

I refrained from pointing out that he was not my King. Although, if he is to be my ally, with Marie de Medici, Death of the good God! then for a while he *is* my King, one supposes.

The thought of kings put me in mind of Caterina; her admonitions on that subject—and, by a natural progression, brought me to what she might consider the correct form of words for my solution to this problem.

“The common man,” I said. “You need to be recognised *outside* the court, sire. So no man may secretly do you harm. . . . You can’t call out the city’s Mayor; I would suppose Paul’s Cross closed, and all public meetings forbidden, as is common at time of plague outbreak?”

He nodded impatiently. “So the ship’s master says.”

“You need to get men out of their houses to see your return. But if the sickness is hot enough, they’ll even stay away from churches, at the end.”

I held up my hand, forestalling his interruption. Thinking of London, plague or no, put me in mind of the remainder of Fludd’s plan, and Aemilia Lanier; from this to a conclusion was the thought of a moment.

“I can tell you, sire, where you *will* find men gathered together in large numbers. There are only two such places. One is your Westminster Abbey, where Prince Henry will be crowned—and there, sire, yes: you stand a fair chance of being quietly murdered. The other. . . .that, alone, will be open. . . .the other is The Rose Theatre.”

Dariole’s hand slammed down on the sun-dried wood of the ship’s rail, her eyes flashing darkly. “Yes!”

James Stuart stared at me. “In *Southwark*?”

Despite the thought of the death that is invisible, I made myself shrug. “Sire, it’s true there’s danger of plague. Your people commonly face that every day of their lives. Your Majesty, what other choice is open to you? The Rose, by Robert Fludd’s command, will not be closed as other theatres are—The Rose will be open and playing *The Viper and Her Brood*. That’s intended to calm the citizenry and reconcile them to King Henry the Ninth. Go there. Show yourself! Sire, the audience may be poor men, but there’ll be thousands of them—and they’ll know King James Stuart, alive and well.”

Dariole hit one fist into the other. “*Yes!* Your Majesty, you can stand up on stage and you’ve got everybody there, and they’ll tell everybody else—Alleyne told me, Robert Fludd calls it ‘the theatre of the world’! You can show them you’re alive. You can denounce Prince Henry!”

“Prince Henry’s evil counsellors,” I corrected, before James Stuart vented the temper I saw on his face. “God He knows, the Houses of Valois and Bearn have had enough to do in forgiving their errant sons; this last I am at least practised in. Denounce the Prince’s evil counsellors, who have led an innocent boy astray by informing him his father is dead. . . .”

“And the King goes to Whitehall and they fall into each other’s arms and there you are!” Dariole said enthusiastically.

I reached to put a hand on her shoulder, restraining her excitement—and she was in a second rigid from head to heels, at the hint of physical coercion.

James Stuart gave me a single, slight inclination of the head, looking at me keenly.

“That latter part of ourself and our son will not be so simple. But for the first part. . . .very well, Master Rochefort. Yes. The Rose Theatre. In this, we will entrust ourselves to you.”

Part 4

The Viper and Her Brood

(fragments, by AEmilia Lanier[?], c. 1610[?])

Translator's Note

Although the manager Philip Henslowe's diary does note performances of a play titled The Viper and Her Brood, it is unlikely that what we have here are survivals of that version of the play. Certainly in 1610 the Lord Chamberlain would not have authorised the content shown here for public performance.

If this rough draft is one of the "parts of plays" that AEmilia Lanier is recorded as having to hand by Valentin Raoul Rochefort, then it seems the very antithesis of her later devout poetry in "Salve Deus Rex Judaeorum." Although one should bear in mind the supposed influence of Dr Robert Fludd.

I can find no historical reference to a "Vittoria," but one "Manfreda Visconti" was rumoured to be the basis of the "Female Pope" Tarot card, and as the Guglielmites' Papess, was burnt at the stake in 1300.

[LORD HIPPOLYTO , the malcontent, enters with a LORD new to the court, before the processional entrance of the DUCHESS of Milan, VITTORIA VISCONTI .]

HIPPOLYTO

Our Duchess?

They say she did engender with her brother,

Whence came that brood of vipers 'bout her heels.

Covens of hags and witches might prove kinder!

LORD

Why, what's thy grief? How have they injured thee?

HIPPOLYTO

In me, sir, you behold a ruined man,

Who once had lands and honour and a name,

And now have but my sword. Hippolyto
Is my unhappy self. Here comes the court.

[Enter DUCHESS VITTORIA , DAUGHTERS , and COURTIERS , in procession over the stage.]

HIPPOLYTO

I'll name 'em over to you;

Mark well the vipers, ere you set your foot

Within the reach of their empoisoned fangs!

First is Vittoria, noble Prince, and whore,

The Duchess of our state—O mark her well!

You shall not see a fouler sight than this

White viper who entwines us in her coils.

Like to the bright corruption on a corpse,

Or mist that hides the treacherous stinking marsh,

Her fairest face hides but a rotten heart.

[...]

(Here this page ends; the remaining pages do not appear to follow directly on, but pick up the play's action at a later scene.)

[The DUCHESS VITTORIA determines to act a pretence of her own death, with a sleeping potion, to uncover treachery in the court of Milan.]

[...]

[HIPPOLYTO the malcontent arrives outside a secret Cavern, which shall be represented by the stage's curtained alcove used for the Mouth of Hades in the play of *Dr Faustus*. He is accompanied by a band of four MURDERERS .]

HIPPOLYTO

I've killed the man who would have met her here.

Our treacherous Duchess! He would sell her death,

But counterfeit, so she should only sleep.

Antonio, hide you here behind this rock,

And Lopez with you. Theodoro, there.

Lastly, my trusted Lieutenant Onorio,

Stand you beside me here, at the cave's mouth;

When word is given, shoot, and be you true!

Your shot must take the man against his heart—

I'll mark it for you, here upon the rock.

I had a vision, bidding me thus strike.

That first man dead, the rest are nothing worth.

Remember, all, that our hands shall be clean—

The Gods of Heaven themselves must hate this Prince,

Thus giving me the dream to strike her guards.

No man of us shall shed the woman's blood,

And yet, I dreamed, Vittoria shall die.

You have instructions, each one knows his man,

And each the blow the vision bid me plan.

[At the back of the stage, the curtains of the Mouth of Hades are drawn aside, so disclosing DUCHESS VITTORIA and her CAPTAIN OF THE GUARD, and three trusted men. HIPPOLYTO and the MURDERERS crouch down in hiding.]

DUCHESS: [After they have waited somewhat.]

I grow suspicious—we are yet alone,

Though here the merchant gave his word to be.

Come, gentlemen, I like me not the place;

'Tis best we leave.

FIRST GUARD

Perhaps some snare

Awaits you, madam, as we leave this cave?

CAPTAIN OF THE GUARD

I and my men will guard you on the way.

DUCHESS VITTORIA

We have no fear of common thieves outside!

CAPTAIN OF THE GUARD

Yet, Madame, let me tell you of my dream!—

Last night I slept, and knew the state in peril;

Vittoria Visconti's name I saw

Engraved on a tomb, and, newly cut,

“By Murder's hand to fall” carved in the rock.

DUCHESS VITTORIA

I pity thee, for such a fearsome dream!

I do decry such visions—yet, I think,

If it should comfort thee to guard thy Prince,

Stand thou before me, when we leave this cave.

Thus to thy strong arm I, Vittoria, trust.

SECOND GUARD

The day moves to his close, the newest moon

Rises above the marshes 'bout Milan.

Yet light there's none, a dreadful darkness falls.

THIRD GUARD

If Murder waits us, must it wait without?
I hear sad groans and murmurs from the depths
Of these ill-omened caverns, as if all
Spirits and demons danced and held their masque,
Waiting to welcome further murdered men.
They say ghosts haunt the place they lost their lives.
If treachery waits, perhaps it waits within?

DUCHESS VITTORIA

Within, without, I care not! Let's be gone.
My enterprise is lost; I must return
And plan again, and see what I will do.

HIPPOLYTO: [Beyond the stage's hell-mouth, which shall represent the Cave.]

I slew the merchant would have sold her death—
Now Death itself comes to her. Hold you hard!
Wait for my word! And no man touch the whore:
Her life is in the hands of Fate and Chance!

[As the party leave the Cavern, LIEUTENANT ONORIO fires off his pistol; the CAPTAIN OF THE GUARD falls mortally wounded.]

FIRST GUARD

Help! Our captain's dead! O help! Revenge!

SECOND GUARD

Who's there? To arms! Who's there?

THIRD GUARD

Where are the torches?

[In the confused melee, each MURDERER quickly kills his GUARD . HIP-POLYTO stands back. The DUCHESS VITTORIA , attempting to flee, stumbles against the dying CAPTAIN OF THE GUARD , who accidentally runs her through with his sword.]

DUCHESS VITTORIA

Ah me! I wounded am, and wounded sore!

Mine eyes begin to fail: O give me light,

Light, light! All Milan, for the light of sun.

My jewels for a star! Or, for the moon,

The thin, inconstant moon, I'll give my Princedom!

Death in this dark is vile! Ah, must I die?

CAPTAIN OF THE GUARD

I cannot see you—Madame, is all well?

My heart's blood springs from out my side; I fall;

Is your enemy I have struck down?

HIPPOLYTO [Aside.]

Thus the fateful stroke I dreamed he made—

His hand alone could shed the Duchess's blood.

So die you, Lady. Heaven hates the bold

Impious woman that will set herself

Against men's council, and the future's weal.

Now die—and pray, pray!, ere your final rest.

Your soul's not shrived in a confessional,

And Judgement is a matter you must fear.

DUCHESS VITTORIA

Who's there? Hippolyto?

HIPPOLYTO

Yes, Lady; I.

DUCHESS VITTORIA

What folly's this? What treachery! I sink,
I fall beneath the weighty load of Death,
That bows my shoulders, sinks me to the earth.
The earth in which I'll rest? Nay, I'll not rest!
But rise to haunt thee, dog thy waking steps,
At meal, at sup, at board, at marriage-bed!
Where thou art, villain, there behold my face,
And hear my voice cry thy betrayal loud,
Publish it to the world—O treachery!

HIPPOLYTO

Thy threats are strengthless; Death's thy master now.
Grow cold, those all-but-alabaster arms.
Grow dim, those eyes that once did light the court
The way to ruin. Now be still, those hands
That beckoned sin; O little hands, lie still.
Be silent, voice, that with ten thousand tongues
Hath charmed me to obey thee all-in-all
To my damnation. O, be still, be still!
Art thou not dead?

DUCHESS

Thou hast thy wish: I die.
[Dies.]

HIPPOLYTO

Here perishes a treacherous, striving Queen.
Too long, too long, has treachery held sway,
And cowardice, and wild perversity.
But Milan yet shall live to see good grace—
This monarch's son, long exiled from her court
Shall now return and take his rightful place.
His youthful power and pride, crusading soul,
His merry heart, and love of Milan's good,
Shall rule a city turned to th' Age of Gold.
And this young Prince, so soon as word can fly
That Heaven's Justice has struck down his sire,
Shall be, by me, now raised to the throne.

LIEUTENANT ONORIO

We now must turn our thoughts to angry Mars,
For war will follow on this red deed's heels.
Men may not know the justice of the Gods.
I fear me ruin waits upon Milan
Unless we publish to the wider world
That there's a true heir, exiled though he be,
And no impostor

(Here the manuscript breaks off.)

Rochefort, Memoirs

I stepped out of the Southwark doorway, grabbed Aemilia Lanier by her upper arm, and spun her out of the street that led towards The Rose, so that her back came up hard against plaster wall and beams.

“*Help—Monsieur!*”

I put my hand over her mouth. “This is Bankside, Madame Lanier. If you cry out that I rob or assault you, all you’ll get is an offer from those who would help me do it!”

Her eyes narrowed, not in fear now. Her breath was hot through the thin leather of my glove, moist against my palm. She wore red velvet: a more expensive farthingale and stomacher than when I last saw her. The rumours I’d bought, drinking in the inns close by the theatres, identified her still as Fludd’s protégé in running The Rose.

I removed my hand so that she might speak.

“Monsieur Rochefort,” she said bitterly. “I *told* Master Fludd you’d escape from Wookey Hole.”

“Are you a fortune-teller too, then?” I emulated a courtier’s politeness, but kept my hand tight about her upper arm. She scowled up at me.

“Why would I need to be? You’re a devious big man, Monsieur Rochefort; you look after your own skin. Of course you’d get free and not be killed.”

Her certainty charmed me, even if I found it ironic in the potential presence of London’s silent, invisible assassin.

“Where’s Fludd?” I demanded.

I have enough experience with the interrogation of men, and women, that when she muttered, “I don’t know; Whitehall, perhaps,” I was all but certain she spoke the truth.

Memories of how I acquired such certainty made me, for the first time in many years, regretful.

I loosed her arm, and stood looking down at her. “Will he come to *The Viper and Her Brood*?”

“Why would he?” She sounded doubly sour. “He’s busy crowning young Henry. My play is like *Richard II*—the deposition of a king played for my lord of Essex and his rebellion, these many years past. Either it’ll succeed, or it won’t. Either way, I dare say Master Fludd allows a woman can succeed at it unsupervised.”

“Crowning Henry when?”

She looked at me curiously. “Today. As Master Fludd predicted.”

I glanced up at the sun. *Too late to prevent it.* Mend it afterwards, perhaps; but not stop it, given there are doubtless Henry’s armed men packed into Westminster Abbey....

The woman stirred uncomfortably in my grip. The linen that peeked from under Aemilia’s bodice was fine, and worked with a black stitch. The imprisoned curve of her breast moved my flesh. Momentarily

angry at such implicit disloyalty—*And yet how can it be, if nothing's said between two people?*—I demanded: “Aemilia, do you have the Italian disease?”

Much taken aback: shock went over her face. She scowled, furiously angry. “I do not! And *here*, we call it ‘the French disease.’ Are you about to tell me that *you* have it, and so I must seek out a quack for treatment?”

The irony made me smile.

“No, you’re safe.” Something about the woman moved me. *I have not treated her well*, I thought.

It is hardly her fault that, at a time when I needed Mlle Dariole and would not admit it, Madame Lanier was not she.

“I apologise for the suggestion,” I said.

Her expression changed from suspicion to a painful honesty. “A woman may not do as she pleases without question.” She sighed. “What is it, now that you’re here in London, monsieur?”

Finding no way to make a more profound apology, I settled for practical assistance.

“First, to warn you. Fludd’s failed,” I said. “Coronation or not, there’ll be no King Henry the Ninth. The First James is alive, and about to take back his throne.”

Her eyes widened. I held her arm, now gently, seeking to reassure her.

“Madame, I would avoid you hanging for your part in the conspiracy, if I may. I’d guess the Star Chamber judges won’t like what they read in *Viper*. I can help you get away with exile, or perhaps with the whole part you played being forgotten, if you assist James Stuart now.”

For all her poise, I saw the fear under the surface. It is justified. Ordinary men and women, caught in the affairs of kings, do not always fare well.

“You wouldn’t hold out the bait if there was nothing for me to do.” Her eyes, seeking mine, were anxious. “What is it?”

I let go of her. I had bruised her collar-bone, I saw; her delicate flesh showed the darkening within moments. I touched her again with the knuckle of my glove.

“I’m sorry; I didn’t intend to hurt you.”

Her eyes were bright with welling tears, in an instant. She gave me a dazzling smile.

“No. I imagine you didn’t. Pardon my vanity, monsieur. I’m used to being the one wooed and sought after. It doesn’t come easy to realise I’m past the age where that will happen.”

I took her hand and bent over it, and put a kiss on her soft fingers. She wore no glove. She smelled of roses. She had a callus on the first joint of the middle finger: that infallible mark of a scribe.

“You will never pass that age,” I said. “In my case, I can only claim traditional precedent—another was there before you.”

“Before?” A spark of amusement showed in her expression. “Oh, monsieur. Not the—woman—you brought with you from France?”

“I didn’t bring her!”

“There is the true exasperation.” Her amusement became a forgiving smile. “I need not worry about revenge, I see. Monsieur...James is alive? Truly?”

“Alive. I have been with him every step of the way since Wookey.”

She looked back over her shoulder, towards the Thames-river. North of the river, where the court would be going now towards Westminster Abbey. I beheld in her face a long farewell.

“What would you have me do?”

“I need your skill in writing, Madame Aemilia. Poetry, if you wish—but closer to a play-speech. They tell me your Great Eliza once addressed her people in Tilbury field, down the river. That is what I need. A speech for a King returning to his subjects.”

The wind cracked the flag overhead. The afternoon had turned a little over-cast; the direct July sun muted.

“A perfect day for outdoor play-going,” Aemilia Lanier remarked.

I glanced down at her, speaking with a little bad temper I could not restrain. “Perfect—leaving aside the pestilence.”

She smiled. “Scandal outweighs plague, monsieur, and rumour’s started.” Her expression became wistful. “Shall we begin? I’ve told Master Alleyne what’s to happen.”

I nodded, having guessed so much from the fair-haired man’s spluttering. He and his fellow Vices-and-Virtues looked torn between vanishing into Southwark’s alleys, and begging their King’s pardon for their unknowing part in the masque—the latter tactic proving the most successful with James.

James stood among them, beside the samurai. Saburo had one hand down on his cattan-blade’s hilt. I couldn’t blame him: who wouldn’t be a royal bodyguard, given the opportunity? Especially if it helps diplomacy and trade. The captain of *hashagar* is not stupid; I found myself cheered at his success.

Edward Alleyne advanced to bow and scrape to his king. I stepped out of the way, and found myself beside a smaller figure leaning up against the playhouse wall, her arms folded, as much a picture of melancholy as any engraving in a book of Characters.

Perhaps not Melancholy? I wondered, catching Mlle Dariole’s gaze in some embarrassment. It would be easier if she berated and chastised me....

“Are you concerned about the outcome of this?” I nodded towards James Stuart. “He’s—a hopeful cause, I think.”

She shrugged. “Now you’ve got that whore Lanier writing his lines?”

“You don’t like Madame Lanier?”

The young woman shrugged again. “I don’t like her plays.”

That there was every contrast between them was easy to observe—Arcadie de Montargis de la Roncière not yet seventeen, Aemilia Lanier past five-and-forty; the older woman a sensuous woman, the

younger midway between a woman and a boy.

With all the advantage on Dariole's side, I confess it puzzled me as to why she would dislike the woman so.

"She speaks Latin and *Greek*." The young woman's tone sounded so comically bitter that I must restrain myself with difficulty from smiling.

"I don't even *recognise* Greek," Dariole added.

"Perhaps learning is a characteristic of Englishwomen: Saburo tells me his Lady Arbella has six languages that she can speak—I seem to recall Elizabeth the Queen was the same."

Dariole muttered something, but even with my keen hearing I could not distinguish the sense of it. "I beg your pardon, mademoiselle?"

A sudden great smile broke out on her face, so bright that I both blinked, and found myself smiling through the sheer contagion of it.

"Yes. You do," she remarked cheerfully. "There's always that. . . ."

I could not be angry with her, I discovered. "Am I allowed to know to what it is you refer, mademoiselle, or am I supposed to languish in ignorance?"

"Ignorance, messire." She grinned, in her old fashion. "Why change what you're good at?"

Many words were on my lips. I took a breath—and Aemilia Lanier, walking up, beckoned to me. "Rochefort! The King wants you. You're to help him make ready, he says."

Aemilia turned away; Dariole shifted herself off the wall. Without looking at me, she walked out across the stage, and jumped down into the empty pit. Her figure diminished, making her way towards one of the as yet unopened doors.

I heard, from outside, the noise of a gathering crowd begin to rise loud into the odorous air.

In the small room arranged for James Stuart, I found the King being dressed—not in an actor's costume. In a better doublet and hose than the much-abused oyster-coloured satin.

It's Alleyne's! I recognised, realising where I had seen the forest-green velvet English doublet and trunk hose before. Who would have thought the player-manager and the King are all but exact in height and build?

I pushed all other concerns aside, hustled out the dressers, fell to my knees, and set about tying Monsieur the King's points myself. "There's a crowd three streets back, outside, sire—I think you'll have your audience."

James stroked his newly trimmed beard, striving for an appearance of confidence. It's difficult to hide anything from a body-servant. I saw the subtle quivering of his hand.

"Do you think we're a fool, man?" James Stuart growled. "In the court. . .there, those flatterers and sucking parasites would applaud if we but broke wind in their faces! These are a different cattle."

From outside came the sound of raised voices: the play-house doors being swung open, and the crowd

flooding in.

“Don’t *you* smile, Frenchman. We have a mind to put you on stage as our introduction, as Mistress Clio!”

There was no vinegar in his jest. I finished tying his points, and bowed my head to him. “It’s true, any man would seem a very Richard Burbage, following me!”

James barked a laugh.

“Here is where you take your kingdom back, sire.” I belted on a sword and dagger for him—a borrowed English broadsword—overcoming his awkwardness at this uncourtly wear for a king; and rose to my feet. “And begin your justice on Northumberland and Robert Fludd.”

“Ay,” James Stuart commented dryly. “If I’m not booed off a common stage by subjects who waft their stinking breath at me. It’s possible God may protect His King from the plague by His divine power and mercy—but He’s never yet quietened these English into showing sufficient respect for their monarch.”

“Pardon me, sire, it’s not respect you require, now, but awe—and interest.” *As in any other performance*, some part of my mind cynically reflected. I moved to the alcove at the centre-back of the stage, and pulled the curtain aside an inch, glancing out at the rank upon rank of filled galleries, and the men crammed shoulder to shoulder in the pit.

The King stood up from his joint-stool, and gave Edward Alleyne a civil nod. “We’re sorry to prevent a performance you’ve rehearsed. Perhaps you may show us *The Viper and Her Brood* in court, when we are on our throne again.”

Alleyne bowed, and I heard the players behind him chatter with sudden enthusiasm. I bit my lip, having caught some of Lanier’s early rehearsals. Not for me to anticipate James’s reaction to a play about a great Queen....

“Now,” James Stuart said, “we shall take our place on this stage. Master Rochefort, you and Master Saburo shall accompany us. Stand away!”

The King of England and Scotland’s knees may well shake, I thought, following him out onto the square platform of the stage, the astrological constellations a painted rainbow above our heads. Another audience like the Somerset Levels, jeering him off the stage, must be in his mind as an expectation, even with the arrogance of a king to counteract it.

I wished momentarily for Henri Quatre’s presence. It is a jest he would have enjoyed, and thrown himself into.

And M. de Sully would stand at the sidelines, scowling in bemusement. Both at the loss of King Henri’s dignity, and why the King himself would seem to feel no discomposure at the lack of it.... Humour is not my master the Duke’s chief characteristic where it impinges on his worth and dignity.

I took a place silently behind the King, and to his left. M. Saburo stood my mirror image on his right, his arms folded across his chest, and a frown on his face.

Voices hushed.

Word has gone about the streets, I have made certain, but this... is still a shock.

A great cliff-wall of white faces looked down from the galleries, and men’s faces turned up from the pit,

down at the level of my feet. Two, perhaps two and a half thousand men; and more cramming in the still open theatre doors. By far the majority stared at the King.

Enough men's eyes fixed on me that my knees became useless.

This is not twenty men in barracks, or fifty peasants in a hamlet, or even five hundred men at the court in Fontainebleau or St Germain.

The full attention of a king's court is something I have withstood in my time, and with panache; but there at least most men are on a level, barring only the King. Not even in church are men arranged as they are in an English theatre, so that a man feels himself the single and uninterrupted focus of all men's eyes.

Theatre of the World, Fludd calls it. Our actions the visible target of all the world's attention.

I found myself frozen, standing before one of the painted pillars that supports the stage-heavens. I could not walk away over the floorboards. The square platform of the stage seemed to stretch out into a great expanse, with only me on it. Is this how Temperance and Prudence and those other young men felt, playing the King's Ghost, and the Young Madwoman, here? Dear God, but I should have paid more respect to their performance had I known!

Coming back to myself a heart-beat or so after, I caught James's backward glance, and nodded confidently. If I feel so, how must he feel? We should have Mademoiselle Dariole up here, I thought. The blurred faces before me refused to resolve into individuals. Her confidence would not be shaken by this.

She will mock me unmercifully!

The thought had the odd effect of diminishing my fright at where I stood. I looked out at the face-lined gulf.

The only face not turned to the stage showed itself instantly apparent to me.

A young man with all the panache of a duellist—Dariole. She stood at the main doors, her face turning from side to side, seeking any man in the crowd that she might recognise.

Seeking Fludd. John. *Luke*.

“Sovereign peoples of England!” James Stuart growled out. “For ‘sovereign’ I may truly call you—”

Some men jeered. His accent was not particularly intelligible. And there are always those of the mob who would prefer brawls and musketry and climbing on furniture.

I groaned internally. *Has he learned nothing from Somerset!*

Saburo moved.

Before any man might prevent him, his curved cattan-blade flashed out, sliding up into the air—and curved down again, to rest the chisel-point on the wooden stage. Both his hands clasped on the curved hilt. “Hear great daimyo! Be silent! *Now!*”

The shock of his deep voice gained a silence in which you might have heard the rats in the thatch move.

James Stuart nodded. “We thank our faithful servant.”

He walked forward to the edge of the stage, with that lumbering, half-limping gait which was as individual to him as his face and shape.

James bellowed, “Will you stand here like dead *dogs*, while a black magician rips the heart out of England?”

Silence became complete attention.

I saw men arrested in mid-speech to their neighbour. James Stuart folded his arms, staring out at them.

“Ay, you will have heard we are dead. You will have heard our son is to be crowned King in Westminster. This is *witchcraft!*”

He roared it with complete conviction.

“Some of you have thought such a thing not to exist, but here is the proof of it. John Dee’s heir is amongst you. There is a lord of England who should be great in his virtue as he is great in his status—but he is vile! And you will have heard his name, each and every one of you: Henry Percy, Earl of Northumberland, traitor, and servant of the Devil!”

A rumbling murmur went through the theatre. Agreement, I realised. *Yes: they’ve heard of the Wizard Earl.*

I shot a glance at James Stuart, standing with Aemilia’s speech crumpled in his dirty fist, ready for prompt; wiping his wet mouth with his sleeve.

And no man knows of Robert Fludd, and so it will stay . Yes, that is shrewd.

James shouted hoarsely. “This Wizard Earl is a fell beast who has attempted the life of your King, deceived your King’s son, and desires the rule of England for his own black purposes! We must put an end to him!”

Did Aemilia Lanier write this?

Yes, conceivably, I thought—But James has paid attention to more than the Muses of Parnassus since his journey outside London. Witchcraft, black-magician Earls, usurping Princes that are only ill-counselled, a throne to be re-taken.... Between the two of them, I’ll hazard they have their audience!

James Stuart’s voice echoed in the amphitheatre. “This vile man Henry Percy abuses the name of God in his occupation! His power comes not from God, but from the Devil, and the very proof of it is this—that he has taken advantage of the simplicity of our son the Prince, whom you love. This man holds him under foul spells and conjurations, so that he knows not his own father’s face, and believes us dead!”

Close at hand, I could see sweat on James’s forehead. His watery glance caught mine. *Shrewd, to take advantage of those who love a brave young prince.*

“It is this Henry Percy, Earl of Northumberland, like Doctor Dee of Elizabeth’s reign, whose subtlety and deceit is inflicted on my poor boy. This Earl most saucily abuses Henry, your Prince; he it is who has brought about this principal folly of declaring us dead in the west of this land. Northumberland it is upon whom we shall exercise the high justice, and burn him for his treason!”

Under the noise of men cheering their King, I heard a *ch’k* of the tongue from Saburo. I followed his gaze.

Dariele no longer stood by the open theatre door.

Would she go to Whitehall? She said that she understood.... And said also that I am wrong.

Does she take this to be her only chance to have revenge on Robert Fludd, before we capture him?

I could not move off stage without leaving James unguarded—enough men put their elbows on the edge of the stage, or beat their fists against it, that only the presence of Saburo and myself kept them from climbing up on it.

James Stuart strode with his limping gait up to Saburo, resting his hand on the samurai's shoulder. He walked the samurai forward, to the very edge of the stage, leaning on the Nihonese man's shoulder. Gazing out into the vast space of the theatre, he shouted, "Will you suffer this to happen? Will you suffer a vile male witch to rule your land? The Prince is deceived. His father is not dead. Here I stand. *Am I not your King?*"

A roar went up all around, sudden and deafening.

I stepped back, involuntarily, bringing my back up against another of the painted stage pillars. Sound hit like a blow. Only in war have I heard men's voices with such impact—and here, the higher voices of women screamed out their approbation also, in counterpoint.

In a blur, I saw the men and women of Southwark, mouths opening and shutting, fists raised, hats thrown up into the air.

James Stuart stood with his head up, one arm extended, laughing with Tanaka Saburo, reveling in the storm of approbation breaking over his head.

"James! King Jamie! Jamie our bonny King!"

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Urgent as it might be to put James back on his throne, there will be no treaty, no saving of M. de Sully's career and life, if there is no Hermetic mathematician to bargain with. . . .

By the time I arrived, a mob had ransacked Robert Fludd's Southwark house.

The English Trained Bands massed in the streets as I shoved my way through, men running up with ancient breastplates from medieval wars, and mail jacks kept in the local armouries; more pikes present than muskets.

At Tooley Street, the great garden gates stood off their hinges. The sundial was over-turned. Wreckage hung out of every window, and books flapped open pages on the paths below them, broken-backed as shot birds.

The smell of the camomile lawn met my nostrils, trodden down as the grass was by the people of Southwark, delighted to do such destruction.

At the behest of what authority?

Half the books had gone—torn apart, page from page and cover from cover, handed from man to man in

the crowd.

If there is but a corpse, here?

“Messire.”

Dariole’s voice.

It came from the destroyed lower floor of the house. I peered in, and entered, careful of broken floorboards under-foot. “He is here?”

“No.”

By her face, I could see at whose orders the crowd had stormed this house. I said, “This is your work.”

“I went to the taverns. I told them he was a servant of the Earl of Northumberland. And Hariot, Hues, and Warner, but I don’t know where they live.” Dariole added, “People wanted to see proof of a black magician’s arts.”

I squatted down by the fireplace. Gently, I teased out of the long-cold ashes a paper burned brown at the edges, and black in the centre. It had been written on, with Fludd’s peculiar mathematical signs. I could not read it, and it fell apart in my hands.

“I guess he knew this would happen.” Dariole gave a nod in the direction of the books strewn over the garden. “There’s nothing scribbled inside those. Anything with his writing on, like you got there? That was burned *long* before we got here.”

I did not truly know whether I felt furious, or merely taken aback. Standing, I said, “You did this, *why?*”

She had her fingers gripping her dagger hilt permanently, as if she did not trust the rioting men even now the crowd had passed on. I reached over and gently moved her hand.

She stepped back.

“I thought...” She tilted her head to one side, glancing up at me. “Thought I’d make sure Fludd had nothing to come back to. If that would make me feel.... But I don’t think he was ever coming back here, anyway. Everything important’s gone.”

Sunlight through the broken lattices of the window let me see her face, smut-stained with the remnants of ash.

“I thought I could hurt him *somehow*.”

“Mademoiselle—”

“And, you know what?” Dariole wiped her wrist across her mouth. “This is just...petty. Pointless. It’s *him* I need to....”

She kicked a way past me, between broken fire-screens and joint-stools, heading for the outdoors.

My boots crunched over glass as I followed her.

Without looking back, she said, “And *you* don’t talk to me about revenge. You spent long enough trying to kill *me*, Rochefort, remember?”

“I am no example for you.”

She shrugged. Outside, now, in the garden, the sun’s brilliance showed me that some man, more literate than his fellows, had daubed CONJUROR on the empty plinth of the sundial; I did not pause to enquire with what substance. One is always at a risk, rousing a mob, as many factions in Paris have found to their cost.

Dariole trod over the collected wisdom of Paracelsus, Bruno, and Dee, pages sticking to the bottoms of her boots. She scraped them free on the gravel path. I kicked shattered fragments of the oak gates aside. After a moment, she joined me in the Southwark street.

“There’s no comparison,” I said quietly, “with what he did to you. Made-moiselle, you know, if I could both hand him over to you *and* keep him for the Queen Regent, I would!”

Her lips moved; and if it was small and uncertain and regretful, it was at least a smile.

“You don’t know, messire. What it’s like.” She glanced up at me. “We should go. They need you for the march on Whitehall-palace. Find out how many supporters Prince Henry has when his father’s riding down the street. I’m just sorry for the old man—he’s still going to have that little snot as a son.”

How am I to find Fludd, and do all I have set my hand to, here!

Walking back into the heaving crowds, I found the air full of men bellowing; women shouting in shriller tones. Children ran around under-foot as more of the Trained Bands—“Untrained Bands” would have been more accurate—sembled in the streets. As we came back towards The Rose, I spoke what I thought aloud: “Every shop-keeper who has ever trained with a pike is out today, thinking he has a real war on his hands.”

“Catso!” Dariole gave a sudden wry grin. “I hope not! Look over there....”

One band, assembled around a standard, carried neither a pike nor a musket-piece between them. What they held in their hands, I saw, were Welsh longbows.

“Body of God!”

“You got it,” Dariole said, as suddenly grim again. “If these people die—that’s because of Fludd, too.”

If the mob find him first—he may die before ever I see him!

Song broke out as we came back to The Rose. Alleyne stood up on a projection of the doorway, leading James’s most vociferous supporters in a rousing chorus, the words of which I could not distinguish, but trusted they must be good for morale. Saburo’s linen allowed me to pick him out of the crowd—he stood with some man’s grey-stone horse, brought out of who knows what stable in Bankside; James Stuart being hoisted by half a dozen pairs of hands up into the saddle.

I took the bridle from the samurai, removing my hat and bowing briefly to his Majesty. “Over London-bridge, sire, and then to Whitehall?”

It was a rhetorical question. A moment later, I thought, Why have I not learned better than to give such opportunities to men in power!

“Not to Whitehall!” James Stuart said firmly, and thickly. He pointed a blunt finger at me. “Have you not heard the messengers?”

“What messengers, sire?”

He snapped his plump fingers. “Bring him out!”

Alleyne, muscular under his fat, jumped down and brought forward, by the ruff and collar of his doublet, a skinny page. The young man was of an age to have hands, feet, and nose too big for his body, and he turned alternately red and white at the mistreatment the player-manager was giving him.

“Cowards!” The boy half-wept with anger.

I put out my hand and turned his chin toward me, so I might see him clearly. His face showed full of rage. The livery colours he wore were those of Robert Cecil, Earl of Salisbury.

“What message is it you spread?” I demanded.

“You won’t deceive us! The lords at Whitehall are turning out every armed man they have!”

James Stuart remarked, from the grey’s saddle, “It’s apparent that Robert Cecil lives, Master Rochefort. Mr Secretary has put out a proclamation, to be read in every parish in London.”

I had withdrawn my attention: the page twisted his chin free of my grip. In a voice that cracked, but carried, he yelled, “Lord Cecil desires all men to beware of you conspirators! King James is *dead*, God rest him. And this man is only a play-house impostor!”

Dariole, beside me, muttered not quite loud enough for James to hear up in his saddle. “Now is that Milord Secretary *believing* his old King is dead—or covering his arse with the new one?”

Or is it Fludd?

“Your Majesty cannot let this deter you,” I urged James, gripping the horse’s bridle. “We have your Majesty’s gallant subjects here—” *Even if their weapons wouldn’t frighten a cat!* “—and I am assured that troops in Whitehall will never fire on their King.”

“Ay, but who’s King here?” James demanded. “An impostor, Master Rochefort. They call us a mere player! Damned Robert Cecil or our wicked son—their troops will shoot the ‘impostor,’ and then we are buried in a pauper’s grave as a pretender!”

The royal *we* might well include the unroyal *us*, I considered. Given one man willing to obey orders and use his musket-piece against his King....

Over the trumpets which a number of the Trained Bands appeared to have brought to their muster, I said, “Your Majesty is very wise.”

“Ay. We know. But what now, Master Rochefort?”

Saburo gave a preliminary grunt, and offered, “Take a castle in different part of country, gather army, come back and fight a battle. Take the capital.”

I looked for Dariole. She stared off at the armed men gathering. I saw her visibly realise that she was being looked at by all three of us: spy, samurai, and King.

“And your recommendation, mademoiselle?” I prompted. “You are still, as Caterina said, the unpredictable factor amongst us.”

Her lips pressed together for a moment. “You tell me, messire. If you were Henry, in Whitehall, would *you* kill the King?”

I found myself flushing scarlet. James gave me a look that let me know Cecil had spoken of my position in rumour, with regard to the late King of France.

“As to that—I must admit it possible. And not merely by the Prince’s hand.”

James Stuart nodded. “Cecil. Yon Northumberland. How many of his men do you suppose he has about him? And our Prince of Wales. He’s canny,” James sighed, “our elder boy. Harry’s canny. Takes after his grandfather a wee bit much for my liking, though. We think, if he has Cecil in support of him, we will not reach the steps of the palace alive. What day is it, monsieur?”

A moment’s thought produced the answer. “July the twentieth, sire.”

“The proclamation said he’d be anointed today.” The King glanced about, lines of weariness in his face. “And by this time next month, these men will be marching out to war with Spain, on behalf of a Protestant Crusade.”

Dariole pointed at the men armed with longbows. “Not like that, they won’t!”

“You did not yet give us your opinion on what you would do,” I reminded her. “Remember what Suor Caterina said. What is least likely, here?”

Reluctantly, Dariole said, “Anything but Whitehall, I suppose. Your Majesty, when there was a king murdered in Paris—I left. I don’t *know* what the people did who stayed. Messire Rochefort, what about your Duke; what did he do?”

It came together in my head, all of a piece.

“The Bastille,” I said.

Dariole nodded; the samurai and the King seemed confused. I looked up at James, in the saddle, silhouetted against the summer sky.

“As a matter of some urgency, your men in these Bands here need to be better armed, sire. What Monsieur the Duc de Sully did on the death of the King was to retreat to the Bastille. We need a place which is impregnable, and, more importantly, gives us access to weapons. Sire, is there anywhere in London which is both castle and armoury?”

Saburo grunted, loud and satisfied. James glanced at him, then at me. “Is it the Tower that you mean? Ay. Ay...but suppose they have no mind to let me in?”

Dariole shrugged as the King looked down at her. “There might not be many men there. The Earl, Northumberland, he’ll be out of the place. So will all your prisoners, your Majesty. There might not be much of a guard.”

In which case, they may have emptied the armouries of weapons...but those are still impregnable walls.

“Master de Rochefort?”

I looked around, smiling grimly. Perhaps four thousand men in the streets. The same again in women and hangers-on. If I had a company of musketeers, I could guarantee to break us at the first volley.

But it is this or Whitehall—and I judge Prince Henry keen enough for his father to stay dead that he

would have no hesitation in murdering him as a pretender.

It appears it will not be as easy to capture Robert Fludd as a man might hope.

“Your Majesty,” I said, “let us take the Tower.”

They say when the Earl of Essex made his rebellion against the late Queen, he marched through London calling on the citizens to rouse out and support him. When the doors were bolted as he passed by, his support began to melt; by evening he was reduced to six men.

James Stuart rode past on his white horse and windows flew open, then doors; the occupants of every parish came out cheering.

They will have known him from his triumphal processions through their streets for this and that, I realised. They know their King by his face.

Crossing London-bridge, I estimated us at eight or ten thousand strong. I walked at James’s bridle—since it was important that he be the one seen—with Saburo and Dariole, and turned us west onto Tower-hill, and the hulking castle beyond the stinking muddy moat.

Warders peered over the crenellations as the mob came around the edge of the Tower. I caught Dariole’s eye. *If they send word for help to Whitehall. If Cecil or Henry send out musketeers to clear the streets with a few volleys....*

Outside the Middle Tower gate, at the place where the moat runs into the Thames-river, James reined in. I dropped his bridle and stepped back.

A well-dressed, elderly man in black, whom I assumed to be Sir William Waad, stepped out from among the yeomen warders, took off his hat, and fell to his knees in the hoof-churned mud.

“Take these, sire, and pardon us!” The man held up iron keys. His lusty voice must be carrying to more than the front of the crowd; they became quiet to hear him. “We believed your Majesty dead, and we see you are alive, and we thank God for it! Sire, come in and take your own again.”

“Rise, our Lord Lieutenant of the Tower.” James spoke strongly, success bringing out the best in him. He signalled the man to rise, took the somewhat grubby hand offered to him, and almost as an afterthought added, “Take into the Tower and properly arm these Trained Bands, who are our defence against the danger that threatens from treachery.”

“Yes, your Majesty!”

The shadow of the gateway felt welcome, walking under it. The hooves of James’s stone horse echoed back from the masonry of the arch, then clopped on the bridge across the moat, and the sun was bright again. Men’s voices echoed off the stone behind us.

Once past the Byward Tower and inside the walls, James Stuart allowed himself to be helped down from his mount. He rested his hand on the shoulder of M. Saburo, although whether in friendship or for support, I couldn’t guess.

“Set the guns up on the walls, Lieutenant,” he ordered, as near to crisp as I had ever heard him come. “Cover the road from Westminster and Whitehall, and beware of approach by river.”

“Everything shall be done as your Majesty commands.” William Waad, a greying man, plumped down on his knees again; I couldn’t blame him for harvesting his corn when it was ripe. *Many men will wish they’d been where he is, if King James lives.*

The sky was a hard blue above us. Gulls cried, over the river. The shadow of the millennially old stone was chill, and welcome in this heat. I could feel the strength in these walls. As many of the men filing in in their Bands could, doubtless.

“You may bring us to suitable quarters for our person,” James advised the Lieutenant of the Tower. “Have you those vile men Raleigh and Northumberland still here?”

“No, sire, the King—the Prince, I mean—sent an order for their release. It had the royal seal, your Majesty; I thought...”

“Yes, yes; never mind that now.” James waved the man’s protestations away, at which Waad (white now, at having seen himself likely to plummet from hero to traitor) gave a sigh of relief.

Saburo took a breath, expanding his shoulders, and by that means seemed to gain himself a space in the crowd. He dropped down on his knees, bent his head to the earth at James Stuart’s foot, and sat back on his heels.

“Should not come to shooting, here. *Not good. Iago-sama*, I am Ambassador from Nihon, I am not a threat to those men and the Prince. I will be your messenger, King-Emperor, if you allow. Your ambassador. I did service between my lord Kabayakawa Hideaki and the Shogun Tokugawa Ieyas’, the same.”

Ingrained habit meant that, difficult as Nihonese names are to me, I marked that one as not the same that he had mentioned before as his patron. I noted it for a later question.

The keen intelligence that one was occasionally allowed to glimpse looked out of James’s eyes. “Ay. There is a good idea. Come with us; we will give you words to say to our rebel son and the Earl.”

James swept off. I had not expected acknowledgement; my public part in the day being done. To my amusement, I saw Mlle Dariole appear to fume, as the great crowd of people moved away from us, past the Bell Tower, held to the King as securely as if by ropes. Which was understandable, they having decided to sink or swim by him.

“The gratitude of princes,” I observed.

Dariole glared. “Is it better than the gratitude of dukes?”

“You have a way of taking your anger out on the man nearest to you, mademoiselle, that is not at all endearing!”

I found myself with my right hand flexing, in case I should be in a duel within ten rapid heart-beats.

She put her hands behind her back, looked down at the scuffed toes of her riding boots, and then back up at me. “I’m sorry, messire.”

I should not let her know my every defence at once collapses—she being a woman much given to finding weakness and exploiting it for pain. All the same, I could not help it: I smiled down at her.

“I’m directed to search the quarters in the Martin Tower in which the Sieur Northumberland made his home before today—since Monsieur the King is stubborn enough to hold there must be witchcraft left

behind.”

She gave me a cynical look. “Or something that’ll tell you where Robert Fludd is.”

“I suspect him where I cannot, yet, hope to reach him—at Westminster, with ‘King’ Harry’s musketeers and pikemen. If I were in his physician’s robes, that’s where I should be,” I said frankly, “with my only ally. But will you come with me now, and assist?”

I found myself watching Dariole against the background of the sunlit crowds. Her eyes glanced about constantly. Perhaps she will find John, I thought. Or Luke. *To kill a man who’s harmed her would greatly aid her, at the moment.*

“He knows,” she said.

Lost in my imagination of her revenge, I gave her a startled look.

“Fludd. I think he still knows. I *know* Caterina said, but...I don’t think we’re outside his conjurations yet.”

That is a doubt I do not wish to dwell on. I prompted her with straight-faced irony, “You think we’re not yet random, irrational enough?”

Her brow went up. “I didn’t say *that*, messire...”

I could not help but laugh. *Might we mend our differences?*

“I’ll...show you something, messire.” She fell in beside me as I walked north.

I did not need to push my way against the flow of the crowd. They parted before us, and closed up behind; anxious to fill up all the space inside the walls and cheer their returning King.

The plain, ancient walls of the Martin Tower took the sun’s light, something glinting high up. Dariole glanced up at the ramparts, and rapidly away. “That’s where I was walking. When I met Lady Arbella.”

“Mademoiselle—”

She increased her pace toward the stark, round-arched door at the foot of the tower. I followed her in, climbing the stairs. Sun dazzled as I stepped out from the darkness of the stone steps, onto the rampart behind her.

Shielding my eyes, I said, “Mademoiselle, is it that you are pleased to imagine Robert Fludd all-foreseeing because...then he will not be captured? And neither of us shall have him?”

Dariole stood, her head tilted back, hand shadowing her face, gazing up at the wall of the tower above our heads. I could not decipher her expression. She said, “Can you see?”

Squinting, I made out at what she pointed. A sundial-face, set flat into the masonry; the gnomon giving the time as three o’clock.

Cast into the bronze around the square dial, I saw on one side an hourglass with wings, and on the other, rearing up its sting, a scorpion.

There was no Latin inscription but I thought it must imply *tempus fugit*.

Dariole lowered her hand, looking at me. “He told me Thomas Hariot made it for him. The Earl told me.

This is where he had me escorted, when I walked.”

I glanced to either side. Between the crenellations and down to the stinking moat, or off the walk and down to the cobbled surface of the yard below: either fall could kill a man.

“It would be a short step, for a woman in despair. Yet...you did not take it.”

She walked back towards the door.

We searched among the few remaining chattels of the Earl of Northumberland without result. Mlle Dariole parted my company when M. Saburo made his first return, to debate with the King how his son took the news of his father’s return.

I went briefly outside the Tower, to Knight-Rider Street, to see if Fludd had left clews in that household, but, as I surmised, he had not.

Plague indeed empties the streets, I thought.

Evening light gleamed, the reflections of houses rocked in the river. I rode back towards the Middle Tower gate along Thames-side, the warm Summer air touching my face, where I began to be able now to cultivate a small point of beard and moustaches. The stenches of Eastcheap rose up around me.

It’s more than early to think it, but—let me contemplate what success would bring. When we do find Robert Fludd, if we do. Well, and then?

Then, I thought, Mademoiselle Dariole and I will quarrel.

The ambling hack’s pace slowed as I ceased to concentrate on him. I gazed at the river, the wind stirring my hair, so that I must put one heavy coil of it out of my face.

And, if I can devise no way to avoid it, I will come to the point with Mlle Dariole and M. de Sully where I must choose between the two.

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Once inside the Tower, I threw my reins to a waiting servant, and crossed the grass within the extensive walls. I put the ill mood from me.

Besides, I reflected, there’s every chance I may look forward to being killed in the fighting about Whitehall-palace! If, indeed, this attempt to restore James doesn’t begin that great revolt and civil war that Caterina spoke of. And there are all my problems solved, in perpetuity!

By this bright hour of six post-meridian of an English Summer day, tents had gone up on the grass, within and without the Tower, and now smoke rose from camp-fires, and men’s voices were loud and cheerful. I caught a nod or two, here and there, Ned Alleyne and the players evidently having put my name about.

It made me smile, albeit somewhat grimly. Truly, what with “King James’s Demon” from Nihon, and now “the King’s Monsieur-Frenchman,” I wonder if James Stuart’s reputation will survive, never mind his

life...

“Don’t tell me where you’re going to *be*, will you?” a voice complained. I turned to find Mlle Dariole walking up to me through the crowds.

“Nothing?”

“Nothing,” she grunted. “When Northumberland and Raleigh went, they took everything.”

Her gaze went past me, down toward the Byward Tower. I heard shouts from the gate-house.

“Hey! Saburo’s back. Again!”

I knew there was no point in attempting to question him on his way through the crowds. I turned about and made my way to James’s quarters in the White Tower.

Dariole caught me up as I stepped out of the spiral staircase, and fell in at my side as I walked to make my bow to James. “He’s not there! Saburo says they don’t have him! Messire, there isn’t a hope of finding where Fludd is, if he isn’t with Prince Henry!”

“They may well be lying.” I stepped back out of the way as a dozen of one of the Trained Bands (on enthusiastic, if not completely efficient, guard duty) ushered Saburo through to the King.

“Yeah, they *may* be.”

Beyond the great arrow-slot windows of the tower to the east, the river and the Pool of London gleamed below us, bare now of the ships about which M. Saburo had waxed enthusiastic, on one of his occasions in the afternoon while he waited to carry James’s next message upriver to Whitehall. So tall is the White Tower that, from the windows on the western side, a man’s gaze might pass above thousands of peaked house-roofs; nothing as tall until the blocky height of St Paul’s.

Downriver, the water curved east, cut by London-bridge. Somewhere in the dusty gold haze upriver, to the west, must be the spires of Whitehall-palace and Westminster Abbey.

“I still say Fludd *knows*.” Dariole lowered her voice as she stepped out of the crowd of courtiers, joining me in the window embrasures. With her sword on and her velvet bonnet off, she had even more the look of an adolescent boy. “For all you know, we’re still doing exactly what he wants us to.”

A little sardonically, I ventured, “Returning King James to his throne?”

“Maybe this is the way James has to die. The masque at Wookey just had to happen to *get* us here. You remember he said you’d strike the blow. Maybe that’s why he agreed to Henry trying to kill his old Dad in the masque. Because he knew it wouldn’t hurt—that it’d still be you doing it, later.”

“Or he may have lied,” I contradicted. “Merely because a man can foresee the future, that doesn’t make him honest in all he says! Or, your choices may already have taken us out of the road of his prophecy. Or—A man could go mad trying to out-think this!”

Dariole grunted.

“And you,” I said, “have been too much in communion with that samurai!”

As James Stuart ordered the room cleared, M. Saburo’s short figure became visible through the courtiers. The King’s brief signal to the guards that we should be allowed to remain, I took as an order to come forward.

Huge and dark as the interior of this medieval fortress was, it required the tapers lit despite the light still outside. Light clustered about the Stuart King. They had found, from somewhere, an ancient chair I thought might have been new about the reign of Francis I, to serve him as a throne.

The samurai fell on his knees on the ancient oak boards, the sound echoing from the medieval masonry walls.

“I am unworthy, great King-Emperor!” Saburo bowed his head to the floor. “Very regrettable: I have failed. I cannot get Seso-sama to agree to come within the Tower walls. Will only agree to King Henry’s room, in house by the Middle Temple.”

James raised his shaggy brows. “He’ll allow a royal bodyguard, now?”

“Yes, King-Emperor. But, he says, must be samurai. Not trust countrymen.”

The Stuart King nodded slowly. I could perceive it: a compromise that neither drags Cecil into the Tower, nor James into Whitehall-palace; both sides to bring their own limited number of armed men, and the aim to be talk rather than war....

“Monsieur Saburo has succeeded greatly for your Majesty,” I said, bowing to the King. “I see only the problem of those men. Would that we did have more men like M. Saburo—and more cattan-blades.”

Saburo blinked in the candle-light. “Sword is the soul of the samurai. You others, take teppo!”

Mademoiselle Dariole snickered; a sound to which I would have objected, had not the King made a similar one.

And James knows the Nihonese word for “guns”: now there is a matter for thought . And a shame I could not overhear any of their trade discussions....

Dariole made a French page’s insolent bow. The smile that spread over her face made me apprehensive even before she spoke. “I know how it can be done. We go, disguised! So we can scout the ground with Cecil, see if he’s loyal or not.”

And find Fludd?

I blinked. “You...continue to deserve your reputation for unlikely suggestions.”

James Stuart harrumphed over his fat fingers. “If Master Secretary Cecil truly believes us dead, then he will in any case *seem* disloyal, Henry being his only King.”

James got up, shifting himself from his chair, and beckoning Mlle Dariole to him. He began to limp up and down the boards, his fat arm about her shoulders, whispering in her ear.

James’s wee favourite Robert Carr is like to poison Mlle Dariole if we ever restore these English to normality! I stifled a snort. My humour faded, seeing from the set of her shoulders that she found his embrace uncomfortable—a fact of which he appeared entirely unaware.

Briefly, I considered informing James Stuart that his latest boy-favourite had that within his breeches which would not, if common rumour was correct, please the King in the slightest. A consideration of Dariole’s immediate reaction was enough to make me reject the idea. She would still act so as to put me on my belly to her, in front of the First and Sixth James.

Besides, there’s no harm in him, I reflected. And she will welcome no interruption from me; not with

Fludd still a point of contention between us.

The Stuart King stopped abruptly, and lifted his hand from Dariole's shoulder. "How could it be done, so we are not exposed and murdered? We would risk much in entering the city. How shall we be unobserved?"

"As Messire Saburo's guards. Your Majesty, you'd have all of us with you."

She is not...she *is* suggesting that James Stuart disguise himself in the same dress as M. Saburo. Dear God.

"You," I remarked, "have been watching too many plays!"

"Perhaps plays bring us good fortune?" James Stuart gave it the tone of a question, but I knew it very well for a friendly rebuke.

Bowing allowed me to hide my face from him long enough to expunge the emotion I felt. *He's gone mad!* Stage a play of the disguised duke, that goes to oversee his erring counsellor? It seems to me that, between his performance in Somerset, and his acting at The Rose, James Stuart is a sight too favourably inclined towards any suggestion that includes play-acting. Does he not realise the swords and pistols will be real?

Well, but so's the loss of his throne, without *some* action on his part.

It made me smile, that he should be so daring—and then be sober, thinking how he found his courage in the rebellion of his son.

Dariole made a bow to the King that was a mere flick of her head. The candle-light shone gold from the curl-ends of her hair. Her expression showed at one and the same time cool and excited.

"You *need* to observe Milord Cecil, your Majesty. And how else can we get you in the same room with him, to judge him?"

I noted that James Stuart gave no order to the Lieutenant of the Tower to perform some sensible action, such as throwing young Dariole head-first into the moat.

James observed, "It will take more than Master Alleyne's doublet to disguise us."

"Messire Saburo's got a lot of samurai clothing." In an explanatory aside that seemed to encompass all the foreign man's eccentricities, Dariole added, "He likes to wash it. Every *day*...If you'd wear that, your Majesty, everybody would look at the costume, not the man. All of us could go as attendants on the Ambassador, sire."

I saw a gleam in James's eye that I would rather not have seen.

"You're canny with that cattan-blade of yours, Master Ambassador?"

"Hai."

If I read M. Saburo's monosyllable aright, it translated as *Only because you are a king, and my King needs you, do you live after offering such an insult!* James Stuart merely beamed at him—and at me.

"Monsieur de Rochefort, don't look so long-faced! Mark this well—we have our life, still, by reason of Signora Caterina, and by reason of the choices of Master Dariole. You and he and M. Saburo have swords skilled enough to defend our person. Let us venture on this chase. We will take pleasure in seeing

with our own eyes if Master Secretar' condemns himself out of his own mouth. 'King' Henry's room, forsooth! Master Saburo—show us these garments of yours."

Saburo as messenger going back and forth again to Whitehall-palace took up most of the long, light evening. *We will do nothing until morning, it seems.*

There had been occasions to visit the yeomen warders' barracks, and to meet with the Trained Bands; I was, by the time I finished for the evening, more than ready to sit out in the open, by one of their fires, to get their temper, and check rumour as a spy must. I drank more than was prudent.

"It all depends on Cecil...."

Dariele dropped down onto the earth beside me, not too close to the fire.

The fire itself was more for cooking than warmth; she gave the cooking woman a look that gained her a griddle-cake and her ear pinched. Chewing, she added, "I think, if anyone knows where Fludd is, that man does."

When did it become natural to her to do this?

At some time in the last few weeks, I realised, the grass seeming to slowly spin under me. It has begun to seem natural to her to seek me out. And merely to sit and talk, not to attempt to kill me.

"If we can see Cecil, we'll see Henry—and then, I think we're home and dry," she added energetically.

I shifted my rapier scabbard to a more comfortable position. "When one says *that*, matters are invariably about to go catastrophically wrong."

She curled her lip at me. It became a delightful smile, that showed the merest hint of her white teeth. The just-visible gap back in her jaw made me ache for her pitifulness.

And it may be we will both die before any of this matter of kings and mathematicians is resolved....

Moved by impatience, desire, and stupidity—and with my tongue loosened by the drink I had, perhaps for this purpose, over-indulged in—I leaned over on the grass and spoke quietly.

"Mademoiselle...I desire to lie with you tonight. Will you consent to share a bed with me?"

An instant of stillness froze her body—instantaneously gone; but I am a duelist, used to having men's reactions by their bodies speak clearly to me.

"Dariele...." I put my head in my hands. "Dear God! Before you say anything—I'm sorry!"

Her shoulder, where it touched mine, had tensed as if her body was about to move. I felt it fractionally relax.

Lifting my head again to look at her, I said, "Forgive me. I know I shouldn't ask. There are so many reasons.... Forgive me. I was overcome, I am drunk—"

She gave me a look that stopped me speaking.

"Aside from anything else," Dariele said, her tone clipped, "I am *not* a substitute for your Aemilia Lanier,

now she's run off somewhere!"

Blinking, owl-like, I demanded, "What?"

"Yes, she puts plays on, yes, she's beautiful—I *suppose*." Dariole glared fiercely at me. "Yes, she's experienced and intelligent and speaks six languages and walks on water, for all *I* know. *And* she fucks you like a Dutch courtesan. Well, go find yourself an English whore instead! *I'm* not in the queue here!"

I gawped, both stunned and lost for words. Were I less off my guard and drunk, I would have realised how quickly gossip must travel within a players' company, and how comradely she was with them. *That still does not help me to a realisation of Dariole's resentment.*

My mind descended into panic.

I don't want her to think I am enamoured of Lanier!

Better that she thinks it. If she believes I have another woman....

But how may I let her think I've offered her such an insult as to be my choice only because Lanier is missing?

If I don't speak, she'll assume....

Dariole sat beside me, head down, staring at the grass that men's boots had already begun to wear away. Over the camouflaging noise of loud conversations around us, she said, "Why did you say you were sorry? What are you sorry for?"

Without premeditation, I spoke the truth. "For being so stupid as to ask you to lie with me when you were raped not long ago, and raped *here*."

Her head came up. The pupils of her eyes were dilated enough that all appeared black to me. I ached.

She said, "You don't want me, messire."

Reaching out, I grabbed her hand.

The one time she should not have let me have her hand, and she did.

I pushed it into my crotch. Through silk and linen, my male member stood up hard against my belly.

"What's *that*?" I said roughly. "Except desire—"

She shrank away.

It was nothing like any movement I had seen her make before. Her whole body tensed and pulled back from mine, her fingers splayed out rigid.

"Oh God!" I let go of her hand.

In remorse, and in full view of any man who might watch us under the darkening sky, I scrambled around onto my hands and knees, and sat back. "I'm sorry! Dariole—forgive me—"

The earth did not turn; the grass did not shift under my knees; I was not so drunk. Had I been, my rebellious pride would not have been standing up as it did. I felt a disorientation, nonetheless, reached out, and found myself grabbing at her boot-tops, where she sat with her knees up and her arms clasped

about her shins.

I let go as if they were forge-hot metal. “I don’t mean to beg in play, either!”

It took more courage than I had imagined to look at her.

Her face in the darkening evening showed white and unresponsive. I did not look around me.

“I know you must want nothing now to do with any man. Dariole—I am sorry!”

She put her hand out and touched my temple, one of her fingers sliding down my hair.

Mlle Dariole is well-known to me: how she carries, bears, and cultivates grudges for injury. And for such an injury as this!

I did not know, before, what your forgiveness for it would be like.

Unbearable.

The pads of her fingers moved to my cheek. She rubbed them under my eyes. “You’re wet, messire.”

What brought me to outright despair was not that I all but wept, so much as the smile in her voice—tremulous, a little shaky; but for all that, there. For that, I might well feel one hot tear ooze out from under my eyelid.

“I am any kind of fool,” I said harshly. “I should have had the sense to beg pardon of you long before now. Then perhaps I would not treat you so badly. Ah, mademoiselle! How is it that you can forgive me?”

“Because you asked me to.”

The shock of it reverberated through me.

She stopped, evidently considering it.

“You do not hate me,” I said foolishly.

The smallest curve appeared at the corner of her mouth. Her fingers moved to my hair, and she wrapped them in a long curl; tugged.

“Sometimes, messire, you’re very slow....”

“Don’t.” I sat back, away from her, shaking the fog out of my head. “There is this place between us; there is Fludd. Because I am too callow to understand you...I am not safe for you! Haven’t I just proved that? Dariole, I want what a boy half my age wants: I want *you*. I am not safe in your presence.”

The too easy acceptance went out of her expression. I could have done more weeping than one tear, but how would I look then? *And she has besides had too much of a drunken man’s slobberings for one night.*

“I should have more sense than to get drunk, mademoiselle.” I made an effort to sound suitably contrite.

“I apologise. Forget you’ve heard anything tonight. I am old enough to see such a situation does not arise again.”

“God *damn* you, Rochefort!” Dariole stood, a look on her face that I couldn’t interpret. “Who gave you

the right to decide—”

She swung about and strode off. To all appearances, fury choked her.

Caught between shock, arousal, and a massive desire to get drunk, it was not until she was completely lost among the tents and crowds that I thought *I should have stopped her going*.

A quarter-hour by the Tower’s clocks: and I walked down to that part of the fortress where there is a river-gate they call Traitor’s Gate. The wind came cold off the water, cooling my cheeks. The lapping of the water echoed under the masonry arch. The peak of Summer, still: the last light not gone by nine, and a man not cold enough even for a cloak. Of those men of the Trained Bands that slept tonight, most would sleep in the open air.

Why do I desire her—and desire to protect her?

Something crystallises and a man cannot go back. What was only a possibility, unlikely as the stars interfering in human Fate, becomes a fact. And all is changed.

I looked down at my just visible reflection in the black water. Valentin Raoul Rochefort. Who was Valentin Raoul St Cyprian Anne-Marie de Cossé Brissac. And who is a fool.

Is it that I am arrogant enough to think I can take advantage of a young woman’s obvious crush, to fornicate with her?

You should be a friend, an uncle, a father, I thought. Much as M. Saburo is to her. A mentor, a teacher. What in God’s name must she think of you? And when you go so far as to force her to *touch* ...

I swung around and leaned my back against the chill stones of the wall. A colder sickness invaded my belly. It would not take much to make me puke.

Two yeomen warders passed on their guard, acknowledging me with respect. I bowed silently and moved off, walking between vast high stone walls and towers that have doubtless, in their sixteen centuries, seen more embarrassing incidents than a drunken middle-aged man forcing a young woman’s hand onto his prick.

Although I cannot, for the moment, imagine what.

“I’ll go to her and apologise.” I spoke to the night air; abruptly laughed. “Man to man...”

The cold air rendered me sober enough that I had no excuse. *I know what I will do, if I am in her presence*. I will fall at her feet, and grovel. Or else I will kiss her; try to prove to her that one man is not like another; that the one who abused her is an animal, and I am a man...

And she will have nothing but fear of me. I see it in her face.

I considered how gladly I would have had M. Dariole afraid of me in Paris, three months past, and laughed loud enough that the ravens startled in their roosts.

“I will write to her,” I told them.

I had little enough sleep that night, spending my time in my quarters, endlessly scribbling on sheets of paper, and then burning each one in the hearth.

I have not been known as a man at a loss for words, when they are needed. The education of a gentleman beat into me the rudiments of letters, oratory, spiritual confession.

About two of the clock, I found myself writing sonnets in strict measure—a disreputable spy and dishonoured gentleman thinking he can write Petrarch to a sixteen-year-old girl!—and had the bare amount of sense necessary to conclude that I was not in my right mind. I burned my poetry. It was very bad.

I can put nothing to paper, I thought, gazing out of the black window. Yet I want to have explained myself to her before we meet again, likely in public. So far, I am no further forward in any effort than “Mademoiselle, I apologise.” After that, my letters descend into convoluted gibberish.

An hour before dawn, I fell asleep with my head on my desk. Neither the clocks, nor the boy I had paid to bring me shaving water, woke me.

I stirred at last with a pulled muscle in my neck, and the sun putting the shadows of the lattice windows over the papers in front of me.

There were no linen samurai garments laid out on my bed; I stayed in my own clothes, disreputable as they now appeared. With no more ceremony than dousing my head in a bucket of water, I struggled rapidly into cloak and hat, half-ran to the stables as I buckled on my rapier, and—a hundred yards beyond the Tower gate, unshaven, and with my eyes speared by the brilliance of the dawn sun—caught up with the escort of the Nihonese Ambassador.

Rochefort, Memoirs

36

The stables had given me a bay with more desire to roll on the grass of Tower-hill than anything else; I brought him up into the Nihonese Ambassador’s train and edged my way through to the centre of the mass as we entered the city.

Men crowded the open streets behind us, and a number followed for a dozen yards—men from the Guilds, men merely curious; a few of Henry’s supporters making noises of discontent at the samurai, “King James’s Demon.” I noted several other Ambassadors as we rode up the highway, and my heart contracted as I vainly looked for the Ambassador of France.

Dariole gave me a glare. She wore samurai head-gear—which turned out to be a cloth covering, part of which wrapped across the bottom of the face, with all covered to cheekbones, and from brows up. It would be a clever man who could recognise her in that and samurai linen robes.

Saburo rode at the head of our small train, with yeomen warders loaned to his Majesty by Sir William Waad. Behind Saburo rode a man in the samurai’s own outlandish dress, of very much the same conformation as him: heavy in the body, broad across the shoulders.

A man would not know the King in what M. Saburo called kimono and hakama, and with his face covered; so much appeared certain. I could not help but smile.

Dariole turned in the saddle. “Heavy night, messire?”

Her tone held icy formality and sarcasm. She had her hand down on her hanger as she rode, where she wore her rapier over the samurai clothing.

I groaned under my breath. With the bay about to take advantage, I recovered my grip on the reins. Apprehension grew within me, that was nothing to do with the likelihood of a duel.

If she were another kind of woman, I thought—if she were a woman in the court, in skirts—I would understand what my sin is.

If she were another woman, my unpardonable sin would be that I did not come to her bed last night.

Watching the anger on her face, I wondered, *Is it indeed so?* Despite this matter of Fludd that lies between us? And if it is, does she know herself well enough to understand that?

“You would have been afraid of a man’s touch,” I said, in French, as quietly as I might. “Rightly so, at present; all I could have done was frighten you.”

She rubbed her hand against the muffler of linen that covered the lower half of her face, as if it were uncomfortable. Her eyes were perfectly cold. “I’m not afraid of you. Under any circumstances.”

I clenched my fist. *Oh, that was well said, Rochefort...*

We passed into the shadow of St Paul’s and slowed as we came to Fleet Street, it being busier.

Still in French, and too quietly for any other man to hear, I said, “Here, where I may do nothing else, may I ask you to forgive me?”

The look she gave me was open, self-possessed, and rather older than one might expect from a woman of her years. I found myself reminded that most women of her years have not spent a year or two in Paris, living by the sword, and killing or injuring her fellow man.

“Messire, we may not be at home in Paris, but there’s still a gutter here, and you can end up in it!”

I winced, but did not let it show. *Yes, I am correct; yes, there is no apology I may make.*

Ahead, the yeomen warders slowed. I realised we had come far enough towards Middle Temple to be at our destination—Prince Henry’s room, as it had been known before his accession; set aside for meetings of the council of the Duchy of Cornwall. The arrival cut off any possibility of converse with Mlle Dariole: I regretted that, with a sick ache that was part heart-ache, part hangover.

The house stood on the south side of Fleet Street, the Prince’s room at the front, in the jettied first storey. I thought it a poor place from the outside: merely oak beams and plaster and a little carving. We dismounted and were escorted in, by men in Henry’s livery. Upstairs, they ushered us into a broad light room panelled in oak, the jewel of which was a great white ornamented plaster ceiling, the initials P and H and the Prince of Wales’ three feathers bold in the centre of the complex patterns. It was of a quality that a man might almost have thought commissioned by a Frenchman.

A long table stood down the centre of the room, uncomfortably reminiscent of the one used for cover in Wookey caves. As we entered, a small, hunched black figure rose to his feet.

Two of Cecil’s men accompanied us into the room. They spared no real attention for the two extra ronin—they are used to M. Saburo, I realised. And I am a useful distraction: the notorious duellist Rochefort...

I moved to the King's side, with Mlle Dariole behind him. Painful as the admission may be, of the four of us, she is capable of defending herself far better than he.

I had expected a cry of "Arrest the pretender!" the moment we entered the building. None came. *And still none comes*, I thought. Although there may still be one before we leave. But for the moment, Mademoiselle Dariole's play-borrowing works. Dear God.

Finding myself beginning to sweat, I smiled sardonically, wishing myself also safe from being seen, beneath Nihonese head-gear.

The diminutive Robert Cecil received Saburo's bow. There was no sign of the Prince—or King—yet; that did not surprise me. Henry leaves Cecil to sound us out, first.

And where is Doctor Robert Fludd?

Cecil seated himself as the samurai did. As I moved forward and took my place behind Saburo's chair, beside the King, there was a great deal of ruffling between myself and Cecil's gentlemen, of the kind that goes unnoticed by any man who has not been bodyguard or gentleman-in-waiting to some powerful man. M. Saburo grunted to himself—in a European, I thought, it would have been laughter.

"If I may open proceedings unusually," Robert Cecil remarked, a little dry. "Why is the Ambassador from the Japans accompanied by Monsieur de Rochefort?"

He looked no different from when I had seen him on Henry's ceremonial barge: thin, hunched, eyes preternaturally bright, all his posture speaking power and confidence. I bowed, as a French gentleman should, speedily collecting my thoughts.

"Milord, because I have been in the King's company from the masque at Wookey to this day: I can witness that he is indeed no impostor." I looked at him steadily. "That it is indeed James Stuart, First of England and Sixth of Scotland, who has taken up his stand in the armoury of the Tower. And," I added, "it is the father who will give joy to his son, when the Prince beholds him alive again."

Cecil placed the tips of his pale fingers together. "Or—forgive me, Master Rochefort—it is an actor who resembles the late King, by whom rebellion can be fomented against King Henry."

"The King will prove himself, Seso-sama," Saburo interjected politely. "When he consider it right."

I gave a shrug, holding Cecil's gaze. "Once you lay eyes on him, milord, the matter is done. Prince Henry's regrettable error can be rectified. And the less judicious counsellors to the young Prince, such as Master Fludd, can be relieved of their posts and held to account."

Cecil frowned, very slightly, the long features moving into something lugubrious. "You are too much involved in this, Master Rochefort. Pardon my unusual frankness, but there are undoubtedly Catholics in France who would welcome confusion about the succession to the English throne, especially with the Huguenots in disarray as they now are."

Something has happened, I thought, coldness tightening in my belly. What? To the Duke my master?

"Here you are, in conjunction with another dead monarch," Cecil remarked, his voice clipped. He fixed dark eyes on me. "I warn you, Master Rochefort: if I find the slightest evidence that you were connected with the accident that took the late King James from us, I will have your entrails out of your body, and your head on London-bridge, whether the court at St Ger-main likes it or no!"

Suppressed anger burned in his voice. That and the whiter patches on his cheeks would have put me in

fear, if I had been the man he thought me.

Things being as they were, I felt warmly pleased. I did not catch James's eye, fearing he might betray the masquerade too soon.

"*Are you Catholic?*" Cecil demanded.

"I am with your late Queen on this," I said. "As to not making windows into men's souls. A man's religion is his own business, if indeed he has any religion. After the late wars in France, and my time in the Low Countries, I do not in the least care how a man prays to his God—or *if* he does. Milord, I am no hired Catholic assassin. I am here only as witness to the identity of the living James Stuart."

Cecil's expression, which had begun to relax, tightened almost imperceptibly. "If I were you, Master Rochefort, I should take care to depart from these shores while it is possible. King Henry is not liable to be merciful to men who play with his late father's name and honour. Master Ambassador Saburo, I beg your pardon: this is not business with which I should interrupt your mission."

Saburo grunted. "I'm only a humble captain of ashigaru, Lord Seso. Forgive an old soldier bluntness. We've no need to talk of will King Henry forgive this or that. Is no King Henry. Is King James, alive; I give word as a samurai."

Cecil bowed his head, acknowledging the samurai. "While it's true there were irregularities about the late King's death—"

"You see." Saburo planted his broad finger in the air, pointing at Cecil. "You're magistrate. Judge. Investigate crime."

The tiny man's brows rose. More unguarded than I had yet seen him, he remarked, "Were I of the present King Henry's party, or likewise were my lord Justice Coke, such a thing might be done. I am not. As matters stand, there is—forgive me, Master Ambassador—King Harry, Ninth of that name, King of England and Scotland, to whom we here owe our loyalty."

"Not of the King's party?" I got the question in bare moments before James Stuart spoke, catching him out of the corner of my eye opening his mouth. "Are you not Henry's counsellor, Milord Secretary?"

"The young King has, as is natural, preferred the young men of his own party." Cecil spoke deliberately to Saburo, as if the Nihonese man had asked the question. "It is possible we should debate various matters with the King of Japan. There may well be war with Spain before next spring. However, this is not to the point. I have been informed that this impostor-James came to the Tower of London out of a Southwark play-house."

A number of things came together in my mind, and sufficiently added themselves to her absence from the Tower. "Mistress Lanier told you that, milord."

Still playing Fludd's game for him, it seems.

Cecil looked up at me. I guessed him shaken by the events of the last week. He gave himself away as feeling irritated at having to speak with the Duc de Sully's spy again.

"I cannot understand you, Master Rochefort. The Lanier woman's evidence confirms all you have told me about a conspiracy to kill King James. She claims Master Fludd to be the chief mover."

Ah, does she, indeed? Attempting to ride two horses together: that is rarely wise.

“Have you arrested him?” I put in.

“Doctor Fludd is not in London, it appears.”

Does he *know* this? Or . . .

I did not look at Dariole. I knew what she thought. *Even Milord Cecil is not infallible.*

Mr Secretary Cecil sat back in his chair, his white face paler in the bright room. Ill-tempered, he snapped, “You appear with this nonsensical player-king—”

Saburo lifted his head and fixed his gaze on Cecil. “Send your men out. Will discuss matters of confidence.”

“And your men, will they also withdraw?”

“They don’t speak English,” Saburo said—even-toned, I noted, as he lied himself black in the face. “Send away men, Seso-sama.”

Cecil hesitated a long moment. He lifted a hand, finally, signalling his two men to leave. Both burly men glanced at each other. The Secretary snapped, “Go!”

A longer moment of hesitation passed, on their parts; both then crossed the room and left. The carved oak door banged shut behind them.

Those are Henry’s men, I thought. Cecil isn’t trusted. Now there is a matter of interest.

Cecil spoke before Saburo could.

“Hear me, Master Ambassador. The evidence of a foreigner from the Japans, a French spy, and a woman playwright, will not suffice to prove conspiracy by an honest English Prince.”

In the sunlit room, with the noise of the distant crowd coming in through the glass windows, and the smell of fresh paint apparent from somewhere in the house, I set myself at attention, and looked down at the small, hunched man in his funereal black.

“It might serve to convict Master Fludd,” I said. “And that, besides ridding your lordship of a dangerous traitor, would have the advantage of putting you into the new King Henry’s good graces.”

Cecil looked flinty at me. “I am not of the war party. The Prince’s fledgling court was always composed of men opposed to myself and the late King. He has my lord of Northumberland and Sir Walter released from the Tower: *there* is his government.”

Saburo rested his hands on his belly. “He free condemned men, now he Emperor-King?”

“He is King: he has the royal seal.”

I felt James’s shoulder quiver against my arm. Setting myself to dumb insolence, I remarked, “Milord, you will of course have given the Prince his father’s seal as soon as the false news of James’s death was put about. I understand. Men love the rising sun.”

Cecil’s face became a frozen mask.

Saburo said, “If *I* were counsellor to bad prince, I should revolt and put *other* prince on the throne. James have other sons, yes? Younger sons? Might be guided by a wise counsellor?”

The temptation to put ten-year-old Prince Charles into his brother's place must have gone through Robert Cecil's mind, I thought. Even if only in those hours before dawn finally lightens the horizon.

I assumed an air of contempt. "You *know* the Prince attempted a murder of his father. Milord, you were at Wookey. You saw him stab the King!"

Cecil said, "I will not hear this."

He did not appear to give it special emphasis, but it was audible in every corner of the room. His eyes were dark-ringed, I saw, even more than before. Sleeplessness? Worry? Grief? Planning rebellion?

Whose side is Mr Secretary on?

"You *saw*," I repeated, "that the Prince is a young man who has no hesitation in killing with his own hands. That he is an attempted parricide. And that, if not for what we concocted between us at Wookey, he would most certainly *be* a parricide. Is this a fit prince for you to serve?"

I spoke with a degree of moral outrage, hoping Mr Secretary involved enough in his own affairs not to mention the sons of Catherine de Medici, those Valois kings whom a man must have served simply because they *were* legitimate kings.

"I will not listen to you, monsieur." Robert Cecil looked wearily up at me. I knew him for ill or desperate: he would never let so much of his mind be visible otherwise.

I ticked options on the gloved fingers of my right hand. "With Henry gone, you might be Regent for Charles. The situation here in England, now, is as it is in France, with Marie de Medici and King Louis. Charles is only a year older than Louis. But with Henry as King, you will be out of office as soon as your usefulness here in these talks is done. Henry will put his own men in your place: you will no longer govern England as you did under King James."

Cecil flushed, pale spots of heat appearing high up on his cheeks. "The late King and I worked together! We worked to make this kingdom prosperous, peaceful—no war with Spain, with France, with the Dutch; peace for all men! Worked as two oxen in harness, Monsieur Rochefort; as your King Henri and your Sully did. And what was James Stuart's reward? To be called coward! Even by your Sully!"

Robert Cecil took a breath, in the echoing silence. His small hands made fists where they rested on the beeswax-polished surface of the table.

"I will not betray James's memory," he said stiffly. "Henry is a legitimate son of James and Anne. Believe me, if I could put a counsellor at his side who would counsel him against this 'Protestant Crusade,' I would! If I hold some remnant of influence, it may be that in the future. . . . And I might at least have brought down this Robert Fludd, had you not set about ruining your honesty as witnesses to his treachery by bringing some player-impostor into London with you! It is an insult to King James's memory; it hurts my efforts to remove this parasite from his son; you are a fool, Rochefort!"

I bowed. Robert Cecil's chair scraped back on the bare boards. He slammed his hands down on the table, his eyes black and wrecked in a face paler than usual with visible fury. "I will have you hanged, drawn and quartered, spy! *You might have saved him*. For what other reason were you at his side, in the masque? To keep the King alive! Not to run and save your own skin! If I'd not been fool enough to put my trust in you, James might be alive today!"

Equally loudly, I snarled, "Men may say I have given you a chance, milord, and you fail to exploit it! Any other man might have been Regent for the young Prince Charles by now—widowed Queen Anne is no

Marie de Medici! You are enough of a politician to put yourself in the Queen Regent's position, here!"

"I will not hear this!"

"Because I speak your secret thought?"

His eyes blazed at me, across the width of the table. For a moment, despite his stature, I wished I had not been forced to leave my weapons in the anteroom.

Slowly, Robert Cecil seated himself.

He spoke out of a brittle calm. "You over-estimate me, Monsieur Rochefort. I am not as clever as a Frenchman. I cannot manage such treachery."

He leaned forward; there might have been no other but he and I in the room.

"Is that what this impostor is—a matter for blackmail? You think I feather my nest with King Henry, and thus I'll be rid of you and your player-king both with purses of gold? Is that it?"

I gave him an insouciant shrug. "And if it is?"

The small man gave me a look of such contempt that, even knowing it undeserved, I coloured to my ears.

Cecil said, "James Stuart and I worked on his Great Contract with Parliament, which legislation I believe we would have passed this autumn. That, alone, was a delicate and difficult matter, worth more than your understanding can comprehend. I do not foresee what will happen now between Henry and the Commons, but I fear for this country. And you, *you* have thrown us into this, because you thought to become rich by betraying the man I set you to guard with your life!"

Neither Saburo nor Dariole stirred; I believe they barely breathed. I felt James Stuart shift from foot to foot beside me. *Only a little more, sire....*

"You're a fool," Cecil said bitterly.

He stood, and limped around the length of the table, until he stood before me, looking up. There was no consciousness in his eyes of the difference in our stature.

"You're a spy, and assassin, and traitor. A fool," Cecil repeated, his voice suddenly weary. "But at least you'll be executed for it. God He knows, I wish I had struck you through with a sword when first I saw you. *I am a fool.*" He absently muttered, as he turned away, "A fool. And likewise King James, for dying thus. A fool."

He spoke absently, as if he spoke his thought aloud; I thought he did not know he had said it. Illness, sleeplessness, and bitter worry all left tracks in his lined face and stooped, hunched spine. I began to turn, to open my mouth to say *Your Majesty, please, now is the time.*

Before I could speak, James Stuart stepped out from behind Saburo's chair, tugging irritably at the cloth around his face.

Robert Cecil glanced back in irritation. "Master Saburo, your man—"

James wrenched the last of his linen head-gear away, tutted, and dropped it on the floor. He put his fingers through his ruffled beard, and stepped forward to face Robert Cecil.

Cecil stared, speechless.

For a long moment they stared at each other: the middle-aged Scotsman in outlandish Nihonese kosode and hakama, his counsellor in sober black doublet and trunk-hose.

If I had gone so far as to imagine this—if I'd thought we should come so far without arrest—I took it for granted that Cecil, if he were loyal, would be all stiff formality; would sink to his knee, perhaps, in obeisance to James.

The little man burst into tears, stepped forward, and threw his arms about the broad body of his King.

This King James, careful of his dignity, scrupulous about the respect paid to kings who are gods on Earth—this James Stuart looked down, and put his arms clumsily about Cecil's twisted shoulders.

Cecil wept fit to wrench a grown man's heart out of his body.

"Robbie," James said gently, "Robbie, stop your greetin'."

Rochefort, Memoirs

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The guards in Henry's new livery, summoned in, looked the one at the other, and then trepidatiously back at Mr Secretary Cecil and James Stuart. James gave a deep chuckle.

Robert Cecil, somewhat recovered, snapped his fingers at the guards. "Send to the council, Northumberland, and Raleigh! Bid them come to the Tower. And bring the Prince with you. Take care in how you warn him—his father the King is alive and returned to us, and Prince Henry must come to him now, so that they may both ride in triumph to Whitehall."

Both of the guards knelt, instantly. King James benevolently waved to them to rise. "Hasten and bring him. We are as glad to see our son as he will be to greet us!"

Saburo's eye caught mine across the room. I fancied the samurai's appreciation vastly advanced, given the amusement I glimpsed.

By the time we reached the street outside, noise rose, and rumour evidently spread. Men ran up, crowding close around the King's horse. I saw that part of James's desire to retreat to the Tower—as well as the political necessity of having the Prince jump to his command—was to get out of this overwhelming mass of his own subjects.

Cecil rode at the King's side. I thought: James will send him back from the Tower to make arrests, as soon as they have the royal seal from Henry. My lord of Northumberland for the Tower and the block, at a guess. *But Fludd—where is Fludd!*

Ahead, I saw Dariole's back stiff as she rode her loaned mount, and felt a constriction in my chest.

I tapped spurs to the bay's flank, and came up with her as she reached to take off her linen cap and muffler, and shake out her short hair with her hand. To see a young man with rapier and dagger and in the

strange garments of the samurai was a bemusing sight.

She snapped, “*Nothing* moves you, does it?”

I wondered, startled, what expression she had caught on my face. Before I could speak, she went on:

“I might have known you’d be cynical! But then, *you* wouldn’t know loyalty if it bit your arse, Messire Rochefort, would you?”

The hurt was unexpectedly great. I made her a small bow from my saddle, not inclined to contention. “Doubtless you’re correct, mademoiselle.”

“No,” She glared, correcting herself. “You know the *use* of loyalty. Ravaillac could tell us that, couldn’t he? If he was alive to do it.”

That not only bit deep, it was unwise (albeit she spoke in French) to have it said where any man might over-hear.

I perceive now that she will quarrel until she has the relief of a duel.

I am a grown man. Even if she were a man, she would still be a boy. It is up to me not to be goaded.

And I must search out Robert Fludd.

As the plague-thinned streets became all but impassable with those not wealthy enough to flee the pestilence, I let myself drop back from riding beside Mlle Dariole.

I kept a similar distance from her over the next few days—which, since they encompassed the joyous return of King James to his capital (and the rapid removal of portraits of King Henry IX hung from a number of citizens’ windows), as well as the court’s removal for fear of plague downriver to Greenwich, did not prove difficult to do.

Greenwich itself I found very familiar: that collection of palace rooms and administrative offices that straggles down the Thames-river, east of Black-heath, and the magnificent red-brick frontage that seems to spring directly from the water’s edge. I’d spent much time at Greenwich-palace in ’03, M. de Sully having one audience there with King James. To be here now, and to spend most of my time working for James Stuart and Mr Secretary Cecil, I found ironic.

It at least kept my mind occupied.

London—and, one supposes, England—beheld its dead monarch return, and, after one of those unspoken public decisions which a man may never predict, put up its pikes and muskets and settled down into peace again, with no sign remaining that there might have chanced a civil revolt or war. Northumberland and Raleigh’s presence back in the Tower may have had somewhat to do with that.

James and Cecil permitted me the practise of my profession—investigating every ship, post-horse inn, or toll-gate on the routes that might have been taken by a fleeing Doctor Robert Fludd. To no result. I knew Cecil’s network of intelligencers scoured London and the suburbs. Frustration gave me the impetus to wear out mounts searching from Richmond to Tilbury, Barnet to the borders of Kent; riding from first light until sunset for the next six days. No man I spoke to had seen him.

On my departure from Greenwich the next morning, the samurai, panting, caught up with me as I crossed

a courtyard towards the stables.

“We have him!” Saburo said. “Furada!”

Conceivably I misunderstand him, I thought, stumbling to a halt. Staring at the samurai, I demanded, “Fludd? You have *Robert Fludd*?”

“Hai.” Saburo grunted and jerked his head in a single short bow. “Rosh’fu’, Dari-oru-sama will hear of it soon. We should get there first, or he die.”

Resting my hand down on the wire-bound grip of the Saxony rapier, I felt my fingers seemingly numb. “Where? Is he alive? What’s happened?”

“He’s alive. You’ll see, Rosh’-fu’-san; you come!”

The dry mud outside Greenwich-palace’s stables kicked up in yellow sprays from the bay’s hooves; I spurred my mount after Saburo, west, out of Greenwich to the heath. I swore, constantly, under my breath; a torrent of French that I hoped the samurai was not near enough to me to comprehend.

Coming to houses again, off the heathland, I recognised the street of the Bedlam beggar and the Abraham Men.

Saburo’s style on horseback, awkward as it was, nonetheless kept him ahead of me. Catching him up—and thinking him no bad rider, in fact, now I saw him not to be wearing spurs—I seized his rein, pulling us up in a skirl of dust.

“Where are we going!”

Saburo pointed further west. He might mean Long-Southwark; London-bridge. But, before that. . .

“His *house*?”

The samurai nodded. “Hai, Rosh’-fu’. Prince Henri-sama, he sent messenger to Seso-sama that Furada will be there today.”

Astonishment made me stare at him. “The *Prince* betrayed Fludd to *Cecil*?”

On reflection, I found myself uncertain which startled me more: that Henry might desire to betray his fellow-conspirator, or that he might be able to do it.

Saburo wheeled his stone horse about, moving into a walk in the Southwark street. “It’s as the yamabushi said. Kata-rii-na.”

I rode boot by boot with him. The Italian woman’s name, I could just make out. At the rest of it, I shook my head.

“She is priest, mountain-warrior—yamabushi. Kata-rii-na, priest of the caves. *She* say, we arrive at time when Fludd cannot catch up his foretelling.” Saburo mimicked the notation of columns of figures on a page. “Not enough time for him to count.”

How long did it take Monsieur Fludd to mathematically calculate all these things? How long would it take him to calculate them *again*, now that Time has run so far astray from his predictions?

He will never find out.

“If you’re right, Monsieur Saburo, and they have him—all his counting is done!”

Armed men in Cecil’s livery became visible before we reached the house by Battle-bridge. As I dismounted, I saw more of them down on the riverfront, occupying the yard and warehouses. The great oak gates to the gardens stood open. The long grass had been trodden down—more men come to loot the place in the last day or so, I would suppose—but the sundial had been set back on its plinth.

Dariole’s chestnut mount was not there; the guards, though grim-faced, did not appear to have fought recently.

“She’s not here yet.”

“Hai.” Saburo grunted. He moved to rumble questions at Cecil’s musket-men.

I dismounted, and led my horse into the brick-walled garden, finding the sundial convenient to hitch him. The line of the sun’s shadow let me know it was not quite twelve midday. *Me umbra regit vos lumen.*

I shook my head. No, we are both of us ruled by the shadow, Fludd and I. Look what we do.

The samurai came through with two of the officers. I led the way into the ransacked house by the scullery door. The rooms beyond smelled of ashes and urine.

Six more musket-men occupied the upstairs room in which they held Robert Fludd. I could not for a moment spot him. The soldiers rose to their feet—raggedly; if I were their officer, I would have disciplined them—and I saw a man seated on a joint-stool by the unlit hearth.

“Did you expect to get away unrecognised?” I said.

Robert Fludd looked up. His bare head was now something between blond and white, shaven close, and I saw he had taken a razor to his beard. He did not look so different clean-shaven as a man might expect.

I leaned up against the fireplace, whose plastering was of a style popular in England a hundred years past. “Is that your disguise?”

He said nothing. He wore a countryman’s coat, not a doublet, tied with points at four or five places down the front rather than buttoned, and his breeches were shapeless russet cloth; his shoes wooden clogs. Had it succeeded as a disguise, he would have seemed any farm-labourer come in from Kent or Surrey, and heading back there. Now, I thought he looked merely uncomfortable.

“Where is the King?” Fludd said thinly.

“Deciding to put you in the Tower, I imagine.”

“No.” Fludd scowled, impatiently. “The *King*. Where is Henry?”

I raised a brow at that. A trooper laughed.

“Ain’t no bloody King Henry,” one of the other soldiers said.

Another man muttered, “I say there will be, in a few years, after his old Dad forgives him.”

The laughter in the room had a sound of cynicism, but was not entirely unkind. I thought, I wonder if

James knows his people understand that Henry is, no matter what, his eldest son?

It is an enviable loyalty.

What James may say to Doctor Fludd is neither here nor there, I thought. It's the interrogation by Sir Robert Cecil that I doubt Fludd should be envied. And then the use we will put him to.

It would be pleasant to inform Fludd just who had betrayed him. I denied myself that. Moving to the window that overlooked the street, I gazed down. A handful of Southwark's inhabitants gathered under the over-hang of the buildings opposite. I saw no sign of Dariole.

Good—it is not a confrontation I desire.

Noise took my attention. I opened the window further, and leaned out, to see a coach with Cecil's arms clattering and rumbling down the street.

"Why are you here?" Robert Fludd's voice demanded, behind me.

"You mean to say that you don't already *know*?"

I turned about. He sat, white from brow to chin.

That much satisfaction I might allow myself.

With another glance out at the road, I said musingly, "I came to save a life—but I believe, if this is my Lord Salisbury, that I am not required."

The Doctor-Astrologer's face fell into lines of confusion. Petty though it may be, I savoured how Robert Fludd looked, at a loss.

"No all-foretold duel now, Monsieur Doctor?" I enquired. "No predicted assassination?"

Fludd gave me a look so full of misery that a kinder-hearted man might have felt he had done ill.

I am not that man.

"Does one come to rely on mathematical predictions?" I theorised. "Is it strange, not to know the future?"

Fludd's hands, in his lap, clenched into fists. "I want to see the King!"

The stubbornness in his voice will fade, I made my guess, as he comes to believe what is plain to any man: that he has failed in his conspiracy.

Let him have sight of the living James Stuart. That will bring him up short against the real world.

With a shout from the coachman, Cecil's coach drew up outside. Out-riders began to dismount.

"She not come," Saburo said, walking up beside me.

"No. We should witness him taken into custody." I looked down at Saburo. "It... would be a kindness, I think, if she heard it from one of us, rather than from a stranger. We should search her out."

The samurai nodded. "I hope, Rosh'-fu', it's you who find her."

Bitter humour moved me to remark, "Strangely, monsieur, I was just thinking the same of you."

It's one thing to accept you will not kill the man who abused you when he is nowhere to be found. Quite another when you may see him any day of the week, when you know where he is, and how close you are.

Robert Fludd vanished as the soldiers crowded around, binding his hands; officers shouting orders. The Secretary of State entered the room, a small, still centre of the confusion. Hoping to make my way out unnoticed, I went towards the door.

A glance and a signal from his black-gloved hand robbed me of the chance.

"Go ahead of me." I put my hand on Saburo's shoulder. "Be kind as you give her this news."

I made my way through Fludd's ruined house to Robert Cecil's side. "Milord?"

He gave me an amiable nod, steering me aside into a corner of the panelled room, where we could not easily be over-heard. "Master Rochefort, this is convenient—I need you now at Greenwich-palace. With this turn of events, I must let you know: King James accepts your treaty in principle. We should begin to work out who shall come from France to draw up the details, who sign the treaty, and where a conference might best be held. Come with me now to the King."

Torn, I thought: I desire to search out Mlle Dariole, and inform her what has happened. But I need to put my hand to the work of the treaty.

How much time may I have before matters in France become crucial?

I will regret it, perhaps; but Saburo must find her.

I bowed to Cecil, following him out to his coach.

The next ten hours, I spent in company with James, Cecil, and one or two of their most trusted advisors and messengers. Men with whose type I am familiar, from employing them myself: anonymous men in ruffs and beards, dressed no better than a moderately well-off English gentleman might, who will pass unnoticed on a ship to Calais or Le Havre, and the road to Rouen and Paris.

As evening darkened, about nine of the clock, I sought Mlle Dariole both at the Tower, and at Dead Man's Place (where our lodgings were, unsurprisingly, still free to be hired). Not finding her, and it being late to cross the heath to Greenwich, I slept there the night. The following day—and the next—I so far gave way to cowardice as not to seek her out. And all the nights long I heard the bear-hounds whine and groan.

Ten days after, a trusted negotiator arrived from France.

There had been talk between Cecil and myself as to who might be sent to London; the agents' messages proving ambiguous.

"Chancellor Villeroi," I guessed. "Or perhaps President of the Council Jeannin. In all honesty, monsieur, I pray she sends anybody but Concino Concini!"

At the mention of the Medici's Florentine favourite, Robert Cecil approached the nearest I had ever seen the small, dry man come to sneering.

The existence of Doctor Fludd being a matter of some secrecy, James Stuart did not put him in the

Tower. While the King occupied Greenwich, he left Fludd in the house at Southwark, as soon as the doors might be repaired, and the windows set up with bars, to make it a creditable prison. What the citizens of Southwark gossiped of, no man would listen to; they being (in the opinion of those men who counted) nothing but a suburb of whores and ruffians.

Sir Robert Cecil, not a man to waste effort, decreed that this house, also, should be the place of the conference with the French negotiator, Doctor Fludd being thus on hand for interrogation if necessary.

Before leaving Greenwich for Southwark, I did make it my business to speak with M. Saburo, as to the matter of Mlle Dariole, and whether he had been able to reach her in time to give her a friend's knowledge of Fludd's capture. He nodded, with a grunt less permeable to translation than usual.

"Where is she now?" I asked.

He shrugged. "You want, I'll come to Southwark, keep her from the house."

"Conceivably, that's wise." It put him at hand, also, should the French negotiator desire another witness's account of what transpired in Somerset.

I did not see, nor speak to, Mlle Dariole; it could not but be painful to both of us.

The better part of the morning passed in waiting. I took the opportunity to instruct M. Saburo in the principles of a game at hazard, having dice about me, and we gambled for theoretical amounts—by the time the guards called my name, I think I had won the better part of the rice harvest of two provinces. Saburo gave an amused grunt, and I left him fingering the spotted bones.

Chance, I reflected, as I followed the guard up the dark stairway to the first floor rooms of Fludd's house.

Had Robert Fludd known, the first time he brought me here, that one day I should help to stand in judgement over him in this same place....

Evidently he considered it too unlikely to bother to calculate. That, too, is a reflection on a man's powers of judgement.

The man in King James's livery took me past the most heavily barred room, where Robert Fludd was kept. Two musket-men nonetheless stood outside his door. Ushered through into the front room, I made my bow to James Stuart, and to Mr Secretary—discommoded a little by the sun from the leaded windows shining into my eyes. Not until I straightened up did I see Marie de Medici's trusted negotiator from France.

The Queen Regent Marie de Medici sat at the King's right hand, in a carved chair as splendid as that occupied by James.

I stared.

She wore no jewels, and was in plain clothing—one supposes, for disguise only as some great lady—but the skirts and petticoats and stomacher were made so well, with such fine stitching, that self-evidently such garments could not be worn by anyone except the nobility. Or royalty.

Marie de Medici put back the edge of the pearl-pink satin hood that framed her face.

"Monsieur Rochefort," she remarked. Her summer-blue eyes lifted, looking at me. They, with her golden hair and her plump face, gave her an appearance both cherubic and less than intelligent.

As if I am ever likely to be fooled by that!

At my side, there is steel polished to a high finish, the edge so sharp it will cut a man's hair if you but drop it across the blade. And still she holds me as if at the point of a deadlier blade.

Cecil stroked at his small pointed beard, glancing up from the papers on the table in front of him. "Monsieur de Rochefort will inform you of Doctor Fludd's activities, your Majesty. You will find he confirms what else has been said here."

The Queen Regent inclined her head with every appearance of graciousness. Her gaze held mine.

You are not *de* Rochefort, I remember her saying, in that filthy tavern where Maignan was murdered at her order. She did not pick Cecil up on his usage. She merely watched me as if she would have smiled, were it not a smile to give too much away to an onlooker.

"Of course, your Majesties; Mr Secretary," I consented smoothly.

What is the use of outright accusation?

I thought, furiously, while I put my hands behind my back and stood, at ease, recounting what had passed between Robert Fludd and myself these last three months. *Can* I accuse her and be heard? Ravaiillac's dead. Dying without a word of "Monsieur Belliard," who helped him to Henri IV's death. There is only I, one man's word. The word of a spy.

And, much as I may have gained reputation at the Stuart court, the last thing Mr Secretary or James desires to hear is that a fellow monarch is an outright assassin of her husband.

Sully.

I watched Marie de Medici's soft face as I moved to the events of Somerset, briefly recounting how Doctor Fludd had been out-manoeuvred only by the presence of another of Giordano Bruno's students. *Do you still have your hand about the neck of M. le Duc?* Cecil's reports show him yet on the Council of Ministers, but...

Concluding, I found myself unsure whether or not Marie de Medici believed Suor Caterina dead. But she did believe herself offered a chance at M. le physician Fludd's knowledge: so much I saw in her expression.

"We are grateful to our friend..." Here, she smiled at me with gracious condescension—not naming me, either with the *de* or without. "For serving us so well. France and England shall enter on a new era of peace, with the assistance of this *philosophe* M. de Fludd."

Or, if they enter a war, be sure to win it. I am not in the least ignorant that Robert Fludd might prove a two-edged sword. I risk all on my assessment of their characters: that these two, womanish man, and womanish woman, truly do not desire their countries embroiled in war. James must remember Scotland; the Medici the late wars in France....

It occurred to me, as I stood at the foot of the long table, gazing up at James Stuart at the head of it, and Marie de Medici at his right hand, that it might have been better for all concerned had I brought Mlle Dariole to this house a fortnight past, and let her and her sword rid the world of Robert Fludd. But still, a man cannot be sure there are no others of Fludd's and Caterina's like yet alive. And there is M. le Duc....

Marie de Medici indicated the papers before Mr Secretary Cecil with a shapely finger. "We have still

some details to discuss. Messires, may we speak with our subject Rochefort? A private room, perhaps...?"

The softness of her tone might deceive some; I doubted that included the King and Cecil. James Stuart, reacting with appropriate flowery compliment, nonetheless agreed.

Marie de Medici rose to her feet and paced delicately into a small chamber off this main room—one that, I saw as we entered, must have been Fludd's study. The desk, somewhat scarred by fire, stood under a wall from which the panelling had been ripped off.

The Queen Regent seated herself on a joint-stool, leaving me standing. I clasped my hands behind my back and gazed down at her. Behind us, the door stood open; the King of England and Scotland vacating the room, jovially calling Mr Secretary to follow him for refreshments. An open door may sometimes be the only assurance of a lack of eavesdroppers.

I stood looking down at her, from my greater height; keeping my expression without emotion.

Maignan's throat has been opened because of you, I reflected; and in Normandy, twelve men died—no better in their souls than they should be, perhaps, but living men nonetheless, and deserving at least of a little pity in their deaths. So much is common to my profession. But M. de Sully....

"Do you think you've checkmated me?" she said, still in her soft voice.

"Monsieur the Duc de Sully is a minister whom any monarch of Europe might envy." I held her gaze. "You were wise, your Majesty, to keep him in your employment."

Her pink lips pursed for a moment.

"The late King, your husband, knew M. de Sully to be direct, abrasive, and honest to a fault," I added. "He knew how to make use of his talents, and bear with his lack of court manners. Your Majesty, a wise monarch would continue to use his judgement to her advantage."

The odours of Southwark leaked into this little room, and the sounds of the clock striking from the parish church. I saw anxiousness in her eyes, and surmised it to do with Summer heat, and the fear of pestilence. The court would have left Paris by now, for cooler places.

Her voice changed from softness as she spoke. "Is this your picture of Monsieur de Sully? It's not close to the life."

"Your Majesty—"

"This probity? This honesty? When only now, he has come begging and crawling to Monsieur Concini, to save his position at court?"

My hands dropped to my sides. I tried not to display the shock that went through me.

"Begging?" I found myself too incredulous to give her a queen's respect. "To *Concini*? To that Florentine son of a bitch? For what—*No!* M. de Sully would not ever do that!"

She lifted her eyebrows, giving the appearance of shock at my lack of respect. It would have been more convincing had she managed to hold back her smile. "But yes, monsieur. It is a week or two now, that this came to pass—M. de Sully begging for Monsieur Concini's friendship and favour. So quickly your master abandons my husband after his death...."

I glanced away in the hope she would not read my face. Beyond the casement, the dusty air of Summer settled over Southwark's tiled roofs and brick chimneys, and the square towers of churches.

"I cannot call a Queen a liar." I looked back at her. *We are private, and she desires already to murder me.* "But I will call *you* one. M. de Sully would never go to your fat little Italian adventurer, unless it was to spit in his face!"

Marie de Medici smiled. She touched a finger to her full lower lip, thoughtfully, glancing up at me. "We see M. de Sully's black dog still bites. Muzzle yourself, monsieur, and listen to me. I grant you, it was at the insistence of his family and household. We have had experience of that ourselves, when it is feared someone may be cut off from all political influence."

Her voice held all the joy she took in taunting me. She is a woman, frail, in need of protection, and here she has M. Rochefort before her, and he may not use the violence his greater strength and stature gives him.

She enjoys this, I reflected, and schooled myself to endure.

If I can do nothing else, I can say to her face what, to a man, would be cause of swords drawn. "This is both foolish and untrue. You lie."

I am reduced to a woman's weapons—words.

She played with her fingers' ends. "We're told the Duc had word of some conspiracy between Villeroi, Epermon, Concini, the Papal Nuncio Ubaldini; to run our government between them.... The usual plots: an alliance to be made with the Pope and Spain, a bride out of the house of Austria for my son Louis, the Grand Design of my husband quite abandoned...."

"All the less reason for M. de Sully to go to Concini!"

The Queen Regent smoothed down her skirts, the smile still on her lips. "It seems M. de Sully's family believed nothing of this conspiracy. He spoke of the matter to his wife, his son, his friends." She looked up at me from under golden lashes. "They could only think it all a lie. And decide that their husband, father, friend, *cospetto!* should seek to ally himself with Monsieur Concini—Monsieur Concini being my closest friend and favourite."

She shook her head, with a smile.

"Sully was at last persuaded. 'I will do it, since you force me to it,' he told his family, and friends, 'but this concession will procure you no advantage, and will bring great trouble, loss, and even disgrace on me, and I am going to give you a specimen of it this moment'...."

Her voice, soft in the empty rooms of Robert Fludd's house, brought M. de Sully's true voice to me with such clarity that I must cough and clear my throat before I could speak.

"This he said at his home? Madame, were I still at the Arsenal, you would have found the details of that conversation less easy to come by!"

She fluttered her fingers, and gazed up into my eyes. "You have not been so successful in ridding yourself of my agents as you might wish, Messire Rochefort."

The threat was plain and unadorned. Failure tasted bitter in my mouth.

She continued, "I was informed of it before an hour passed—that Monseigneur the Duc was sending

word by one Arnaud, to Monsieur Concini. His message was that he, Sully, owed Concini no resentment for holding the same place with myself as he had held with my late husband...and he offered Monsieur Concini his friendship." She paused. "I'm told, also, it was some while before M. Arnaud returned to the Duc—and that he was reluctant to repeat the reply."

"So I imagine," I said, as dryly as I might. "Well, Madame, you will tell me, I think. What did the Florentine have the insolence to say?"

"M. Arnaud gave M. Concini's answer very precisely," the Queen said. "That Monsieur the Duc de Sully need not think to rule France in my day as he had in my husband's. And that neither he—Concini—nor his allies, needed the friendship of any man, since it was not in any man's power to deprive him of my love and favour."

Her eyes flashed up to mine. "Nor is it."

If any man truly said that, I would not care to be in the same room with my master the Duke when it was repeated. I wondered how Arnaud fared. M. de Sully's temper is even, but all the worse for that when finally it gives way.

I drew myself up, so that I might look down at her, and feel less like a school-boy before his dominie. "Madame, to the point. What you tell me is—if this is in any way the truth—that you need have no fear of M. de Sully: he is a man whose influence is broken. *Therefore*, you need not hesitate to sign the treaty with his Majesty King James, since it matters not to you whether the Duc de Sully is left alive or dead."

That M. de Sully might indeed be so close to being out of office, and thus unprotected, I did not for the moment contemplate. Time enough to think of that later.

I concentrated on keeping my gaze steadily on the Medici, to see if she would respond with any unwise words to her authority being thus challenged.

"I wonder." She sounded thoughtful. "How long King James's gratitude will last. How certain he is that such a clause must be included in this treaty, if I say that I desire to sign only if it's removed? I wonder, Monsieur Rochefort. Because I weary of M. de Sully, his harangues, his grip on money that should be mine, and his forever-lasting long face for Henri's death! And I tell you now that, given all men have traitorous inclinations, I have every intention of discovering his. And, on my return to France, having him most speedily hanged."

At the end of a day spent in less than public negotiation—Mr Secretary's one secretary dazed as he took down what notes Cecil told him were permitted—the meeting broke up in deadlock and royal bonhomie. James Stuart invited Marie de Medici to the Queen's house at Greenwich, and to talk again tomorrow; he and she and a company of musket-men rode over Black-heath, and I dropped back until I rode knee by knee with M. Saburo.

"There was a question of mine you did not answer," I said.

"Hai."

"Which would be, one supposes, because you have been asked not to? Has Dariole told you where she may be found?"

The broad man gave a shrug, nodding ahead at Greenwich-palace, nestled down among green trees with the water beyond it. "There, some room. It's a big palace, Rosh'-fu'-san."

“And she won’t see me if she doesn’t desire to?”

“She wants Furada dead.”

And on that intractable rock, the ship continues to strike . I wondered, as we approached the red-brick gate towers of the palace entrance, how much it might be worth bribing servants to give me Dariole’s location. Although finding her now would not be so difficult. But as to how a man might break through that cold and righteous anger....

James Stuart’s outriders milled about, ahead.

Approaching the palace gate, I saw more mounts crowding the road and the grass. They did not seem constrained to move off by the guards or musket-men; I heard voices raised in temper.

Spurring my bay impatiently ahead of James, Cecil, and the cloaked Queen, I ventured to see what a Frenchman might do in the way of clearing space for an English King. A deep voice has the benefit that it will carry. “Make way! Make way for his Majesty!”

Men on foot crowded the gate, I saw, now I came to the front of our milling crowd. Courtiers, gentlemen, servants. The mass opened enough for me to see men standing in the gateway, guards facing them—evidently the newcomers had been demanding entrance.

I swung down from the bay, to remonstrate, and became conscious of the jagged noise coming from the English crowd. For a moment, I had no idea why.

A stone or clot of earth soared over the hats and ruffs of the crowd, plummeting to earth at the feet of the half-dozen or so newcomers. Abruptly, I looked at their clothing with the eyes of an Englishman rather than a Frenchman.

Jesuit priests.

I glanced back at the Medici, where she sat her gelding, lace-trimmed hood drawn up over her gold hair, and the King and Secretary of State beside her. If she has been stupid enough to bring her private priests and confessors....

A glint as she looked at me made every instinct picked up in fifteen years of life as Sully’s agent shriek: *I am in personal danger.*

Before I could make myself scarce in the crowds, Cecil dismounted from his horse with the aid of his guard and walked up. One of the men behind the group in cassocks I recognised to be the Spanish Ambassador. *Evidently we are supposed to think that it is by he that they enter this country, which otherwise is forbidden to them.* The older-looking of the Jesuits pointed his finger at me.

“That is he!” The priest’s dark gaze picked me out. “That is Messire Valentin Rochefort, who suborned the killing of Henri of France!”

As smoothly as if he had prepared for the moment—for all I know, he might have—Robert Cecil said, “How can you be sure this is your man? This is not an accusation to make lightly! How improbable is it that you will find the assassin of the French King in England?”

That last was a warning over the priest’s head at the Spanish Ambassador. It said, very clearly, *I know you’ve come here to make trouble: forget it!*

For once, you have the wrong target, I thought, keeping my back to the Queen Regent. The Spanish

Ambassador may be an immediate cause of these priests, but I'd hazard everything I own it's at Marie de Medici's bidding. Why?

Spite. Yes. But—I am the last defence between her and Sully.

A little hoarsely, I appealed to Cecil. "Milord, you know I didn't do this."

"I know it very well. *Very* well, Monsieur de Rochefort." Cecil's glance flicked back past me for a bare second, towards James Stuart, as if to remind himself that the man was alive and well, and there in all his fat, awkward bodily presence. "This is some trumped-up matter out of Spain."

The Jesuit stiffened his spine. The little group of his companions—two more priests, the Spanish Ambassador, their servants—drew together, as if at the hostility of the crowd flocking from the palace courtyard to the gate.

"Even if it were," the priest said harshly, "that man Rochefort is still a murderer. We have brought the proof of it."

He beckoned, without looking behind him. The younger of the Jesuits priests turned, and pulled a man forward.

I stared; I think that my mouth dropped open.

Gabriel Santon met my gaze.

The elder Jesuit said, "This man was that Valentin Rochefort's servant, until a month or two ago. He has proof that Valentin Rochefort is a murderer."

Gabriel was thinner in the face than when I had last seen him, but he did not limp, not stand awkwardly, and his hands and eyes were whole.

For all the sun of the last months, his skin was white. Prison pallor.

"Gabriel," I said.

He glared; fear, anger, and contempt all in the one glance. In French, he said to the Jesuit, "Yes, Father, this is the man." And in a soldier's accented English, said to Cecil, "Milord, this is him."

The Father sounded smug. "His servant knows him."

Robert Cecil did not respond to Santon in the least. Addressing the priest, he inquired, I think rhetorically, "Why should I heed the words of servants?"

Gabriel Santon looked to the priest as if for approval, and then pointed at me.

"Strip off his doublet," he said roughly, in French, which I saw the crowd did not understand. "Cut his shirt open, on his shoulder."

"Gabriel!" I could do nothing but stand in place.

I don't know why I should feel such surprise at betrayal—except that I have noticed men always are, when it comes to those closest to them. And why should I be different?

In this case it is not even a betrayal. *I* cast him off, *I* beat him, *I* am responsible for his time in the Chatelet. Not by intention—I intended only his freedom from blame—but no matter: it was still *I* that did

those things.

Gabriel Santon moved forward. "Let me, sieurs."

His voice, hoarse as it was, brought back to me everything that seemed my real life—life as it had been three months ago: Paris, duelling, Monsieur le Duc; and Gabriel looking after my food, my clothes, my bodily wants. Gabriel Santon, who now stared at me with cold hatred. And called me neither *sieur* nor *Raoul*, as he has done since the United Provinces.

I stood unresisting as he walked up to me and pulled loose the points that bound sleeve to doublet. I looked over his head at Cecil.

"Will he find ought, monsieur?" Cecil asked.

Behind him, the King frowned. I dared not look at Marie de Medici—I dared not look for Mlle Dariole.

"Yes," I admitted.

Gabriel's lumpy face had no marks on it, the signs of my beating long healed. He would resent his time in the Chatelet more than those injuries, I guessed. He breathed hard, taking the shoulder and arm of my shirt in each of his fists.

"This was not necessary," I said, looking down at him.

For answer, he ripped the cloth. The sound of it tearing was loud in the silence immediately about us. Robert Cecil and the Jesuit priest together looked where I had expected they would, being men of experience as they were.

The brand was old, the scar white against white skin, but still plain enough to be seen.

Unnecessarily, the triumphant Jesuit said, "He need not be tried. He has been branded with the fleur-de-lis for a capital crime; now he has been taken up for a second offence. Put the rope around his neck. He can be hanged, legally, within the hour."

Gabriel Santon's expression held nothing but vicious satisfaction. I wondered what it had been like, these months in the Chatelet.

I did not dare look among the Englishmen still running up from inside Greenwich-palace, for fear I should see Mademoiselle de Montargis de la Roncière—a young daughter of the nobility, who has not known herself in concert with a convicted murderer. I merely waited for Cecil and the King.

James Stuart spurred his horse forward, his face darkening. "'Criminal' is he? That is French law, not the law of England!"

The Jesuits made to protest, in concert.

Cecil's voice cut across them.

"Whatever he is, sirs—murderer or criminal or branded man—as his Majesty says, our English law is competent to deal with such. Sergeant-at-arms! Arrest this man!"

Rochefort, Memoirs

I sat down in the straw flooring the Tower's dungeon and laughed, long and cynically. And when I was done, I laughed again, the absurdity of it making me splutter and wipe my mouth.

Old sins come home to roost. Well and again: twenty years is long enough for any man's sins!

"The Queen Regent," I said aloud, and that stopped me.

Doubtless this is Marie de Medici's hand at work. Seeking a sacked servant who will betray what a man can hide from every man *but* his body-servant. Who else but she is so close to the Society of Jesus, with Father Suffren her confessor? And who else still desires M. Rochefort quickly dead and no questions asked? She uses more subtle means than assassins, now.

I am taken out of the game.

It is no game—less so than even I have thought, if M. de Sully has lowered himself to negotiate with Concini.

No man came in answer to my calling.

This cell must be higher above ground than the dungeons, the walls not being dank or dark. Light came in from a high window, where bars showed set into flint masonry a good arm-span thick. Bars, likewise, had been set into the door, in a small iron hatchway; light from the cresset in the stairwell outside shone behind them, wavering in the draught.

A man may be bewildered by the speed of his downfall. I had had better sense than to try bribing the yeoman warders, since I cherished the small unspoken hope that I might have better help than that—that, after the sun set, I might perhaps find some anonymous hand thrusting the key under the door. And since the Tower stands so close to the ships at St Katharine's Stairs....

Perhaps, I thought. If they do not put me to the question, some time during today.

I do not think I have the fortitude of Monsieur Ravailiac.

That quiet man, whom I had assumed would break in the first minutes of questioning, and thus save himself an infinite amount of pain.

It might be both just and ironic if I were tortured, I thought. And if it unmanned me, where it did not him.

That cynical voice in my mind, long present, now tended to assume the tones of Mlle Dariole. I could hear vividly what she would say—*You would not be the half so sanguine about it, if you thought it would happen!*

The English yeoman who had shut the door of my cell had spoken back through the bars to me. "Do you know how we kill your sort, here?"

He was a broad, scarred man, much my own age, smiling with all the vindictiveness of a man convinced himself a custodian of morality.

"We drag you through the streets tied to a hurdle, so the crowd can have a go at you. They like that.

Then, what's left, we haul it up on a table, and we pull out your guts and your heart. Oh—between the two, we hang you up, and cut you down again, but that just chokes you. You'll be wide awake for pulling out your entrails. I've seen men live like that above a quarter of an hour."

"We pull a man apart between four horses," I said coolly. "It makes the better entertainment."

His footsteps departed down the spiral stairs, together with a grunt that might have been revulsion.

Forgive me, Messire Ravailac.

The hours of the evening passed, marked by the sound of clocks striking. I could hear them faint on the wind from the east, that blew stronger than before. The Jesuit fathers must have come in by some other vessel at the same time as Marie de Medici, the wind standing good for arrivals from the continent.

No man spoke to me; no gaoler rattled the door. It became apparent that no message or messenger had been sent from Greenwich.

The torch-flame in the cresset died, the hours of the night inched past. I did not sleep. I did not think. I sat with my back to the wall, until light again crept across the floor, turning the browns and blacks of wet straw to gold.

Rats tumbled in the sun-warmed straw, made bold by my stillness. I observed for some time a large, white-bellied rodent—presumably a father—seeming to instruct three young rat-pups in stealing food-scrap from the last prisoner's abandoned bowl. Their bright, black eyes did not fill me with revulsion. That they could look back at me and yet not flee argued some tenuous contract of trust between us.

How tenuous is trust? And how stands the gratitude of princes?

The rats' grey-furred bodies removed so fast that it seemed each vanished into the air.

I stood up as the door creaked.

Doubtless I have Saburo working on the outside for me; perhaps even Milord Secretary—

No torch-light shone in through the grill from the dark stairs. The door opened, and a thin figure rounded it, closing it behind her. The lock clicked.

The morning sun fell on Mlle Dariole.

I should not have done it: I sprang up and strode across the cell, and threw my arms around her.

She walked between my arms as I did so: put her own arms around my back, as far as she might reach, and pressed her body against mine from knee to breast. I was instantly as hard and upright as a boy.

"Pardon me, mademoiselle." I reached between us to shift myself in my breeches; then put both my hands on her shoulders. I kissed the crown of her head, that came up to my collar-bone; let go of her, grabbed her to me again, and pushed her thin body up against mine, resting my lips down against her hair.

She held me hard enough that it would have stopped a smaller man breathing.

I let go of her with one arm, tipped up her chin, and forced my mouth down on hers. Urgency constrained me, and the hot and sweet smell and taste of her. I felt her belly and breasts through her doublet and hose, and her fingers pushing through my hair. I pushed my tongue into her mouth.

She froze, every inch of her body.

Her hands came up and pushed me in the chest, hard enough—unprepared as I was—to send me back half a step. I stared, mouth open, cold in every place where her warm body had been touching me.

“Oh, dear God!” I turned and hit my fist into the masonry of the wall. *A cell, a cell in London’s Tower; and here she has been forced, perhaps this very cell—!*

My knuckles hurt and bled. She caught at me, as I sank down. She could not support my greater weight; we ended with her bent over, and myself kneeling on the straw at her feet.

I pulled her down to face me, staring at this young woman, this boy, crouching in front of me.

“I will not do that again,” I said. “Not ever.”

She was not beautiful when she cried. Her eyelids swelled, and her nose reddened. “Not even if I ask you, messire?”

That brought a laugh that was a sob, and the beginnings of a curse; all mixed together.

I took her hands, very lightly. “Dariole—was it Cecil or the King got you in here?”

She sniffed the atmosphere of the cell with a wounded air, looking up at me from under tear-clumped lashes. “You don’t think I managed it on my own?”

“I know the yeomen warders. You would not be allowed, without leave of some authority. But, if you wish, I will put my head at your boots and beg pardon of you, for guessing that.”

The smile that I had been trying to call out of her curved up one corner of her mouth. She sat herself down in the straw and stretched her legs out to me.

“They need cleaning.” She wiggled the toe of one boot. “You could lick them clean, while you’re at my feet.”

“I perceive that you, also, need cleaning, mademoiselle—or at least, that the seat of your breeches needs dusting.”

She put her fingers over her mouth, muffling a giggle.

“I’ve got a message,” she said, before I could speak. Heart-breakingly, she closed her eyes like a child reciting, to call it to her mind.

She opened them again, dark and swimming with water. “Sir Robert Cecil says, he doesn’t for one minute believe you guilty of any ill in England, and he is besides grateful to you, as is his Majesty.”

She dropped out of what was evidently a memorisation of Cecil’s formal speech.

“He says he’ll keep you here until he’s dealt with the Jesuits and the Queen. He says this is safer for you.”

“I surmised that he might think so,” I said, trying to ignore the cold sweat of relief between my shoulder-blades. Her gaze was too warm; I knew it. I could not find the resolution in myself to send her away now that her message was told.

We have matters of Robert Fludd to discuss . But—I cannot, in any case, dismiss her from here. Not

now.

I leaned back against the cold stone wall. Mlle Dariole clambered her way crab-wise across the straw, dropping down to sit beside me, hip against hip.

I could not help it: I lifted my arm and beckoned her under it.

She sat hard up against my ribs, my arm about her shoulder, all her warm solidity tucked against the side of me. I recovered myself enough to say, "I should not do this, mademoiselle."

"Why not? Because of that?" She nodded in the direction of my lap.

It was of no use to attempt to hide the evidence of my desire, tenting the cloth as it was. I said, "That, and many other reasons."

A shudder went through her, barely perceptible, except to a man who held her as closely to his side as I did. It occurred to me that, where I found straw and the stone wall behind me comforting, she might have quite different associations.

In part to distract her, I said, "I will need you to return to Mr Secretary Cecil. Warn him. This, I think, is only the Medici's careful desire to have me dead—but I do not rule out, still, that it may be something of Robert Fludd's devising. It is unlikely, but James Stuart may still be in danger of being killed."

She shrugged, under my arm, and looked up. "Saburo-san told him that, already. So did I. His Majesty's more worried about the plague.... And Master Cecil's convinced he's got enough guards round the King to stop an army, even if Fludd wasn't locked up."

Frustrated, I shook my head. I realised that I was squeezing her forearm, where I held her. I forced myself to stop. Her heart beat against my side.

"Messire, why did they brand you?"

I looked down into her face. "I warned you that I was not a good man."

"I don't need telling that." Laughter receded from her voice like the tide. "I know what you are. I have to be careful not to feel proud—like having a savage dog that's at everybody's throat but yours?" She shook her head, not looking up at me. "That doesn't mean you're not a killer."

I felt breathless. "I am glad that you do not—romanticise—me. Made-moiselle, that I love you should be no concern of yours. That is my business."

We looked at each other. She said nothing.

That is the first time I have said it, even to myself.

With difficulty, I said, "For you... there will be a boy, soon, who will be eighteen or twenty; close to you in your age. He will be of a good family, of honourable reputation. He will love you, Dariole. As he should."

I broke off, meeting her gaze. With an effort, I forced myself to honesty.

"If we were married, mademoiselle, you would meet this young man just the same. The difference is that you would take him as your lover, instead of as your husband. I think it would be best—I would prefer—that you wait and marry him, rather than cuckold me. Even if you were so foolish as to accept me."

Her body tensed. She looked away.

Her hand moved, and I caught it before she could put it in my lap.

“No! Dariole, I want nothing more than to take you here, now, in this straw. And because we are...where we are, you want to prove that you *can*. That they did not destroy you. Perhaps you even have some affection for me. But, Dariole, listen!” I held her fast in my arm. “Give yourself time to heal. Meet your boy, your gentleman!” I took a breath. “He won’t be driven mad, as you do me!”

She said coolly, “He won’t marry me, either.”

Her cold, clear voice was a shock. I loosed my arm from her shoulders. She leaned forward, resting her arms on her knees, rubbing her wrist where I had grabbed her.

Without turning to look at me, she said, “This hypothetical nobleman’s son, this paragon...he won’t marry me. To begin with, I’m not a virgin.”

“You need not tell him,” I said foolishly.

“Why would I marry him if I couldn’t?” She moved, knelt facing me, her eyes dark with anger. “And where’s the man who’d marry me after he knows I’m no virgin? You want to talk about dreams? You’re dreaming, messire! Thinking I can take off my breeches and be some young nobleman’s bride, and be taken home to his family!”

“I—that is—” I realised that I stuttered, and stopped.

“I can *kill* men,” she said. “Don’t you know that, messire? It doesn’t give me cold sweats, or bad dreams; not so much. I’m a man in that. Is that what this boy is going to look for in a bride?”

I ached to pull down her breeches and sheath myself in her flesh; to give her pleasure enough to make her weep and smile together. Any boy should be *proud* to wed you!

I got out words.

“I had thought that, when we finally parted...I had assumed you would meet a young man to marry you, take care of you...”

She gave me a look.

I am not stupid when it comes to the signals that a woman sends to a man. There have been the wives of complaisant courtiers, of absentee noblemen and soldiers; there have been courtesans. I am not a monk. She glared at me, so evidently not wanting to hear about this hypothetical nobleman’s son.

There is one way only to redeem myself in her eyes: that is to push her down where she is and make love to her on this cold cell floor. But this is not the right place. And, in all honesty, I am not the right man.

“In the future, you would be sorry to have indulged in a—momentary attraction, mademoiselle.”

Wiping a hand across my face, I recovered something of my composure. She looked at me, wordless.

“You will marry,” I said, “and if not to a young man who can love you as you deserve, then at least to one who will love you as much as he can. Made-moiselle, believe me—”

“*He won’t marry me!*” she interrupted.

“Dariole—”

“You won’t, either.” Effortlessly, she stood. She looked down at me, a strange expression on her face. “He won’t. You won’t. You *can’t*. I’m already married. Why do you think I ran away from home at fourteen?”

“Tell me it all!” I demanded.

She put her hands behind her back, more of a boy than ever, and shook her head. They had made her leave her weapons in the guardroom; I should otherwise have made shift to have her at sword’s point, given the recalcitrant mule’s look on her face.

I got to my feet, which at least enabled me to over-top her, and approach a feeling of moral superiority.

“Mademoiselle—at the moment I face the Queen Regent of France, the Society of Jesus, and Robert Fludd who may *still* foresee my every future action: how can I be sure? Given that, do you think I will be outfaced by *you*?”

I expected tears, or anger, at being bullied.

She put her hands over her mouth and spluttered in what appeared to be profound amusement.

“Mademoiselle!”

She sobered. “I’ll tell you. If you tell me why you’ve got that.”

“That,” by her indication, was the ancient white scar on my shoulder, now covered by my sleeve again.

“That is not something for you, mademoiselle.”

I thought she might butt heads with me. Almost certainly, she will seek to strike a bargain: her secret for mine.

Married! I thought. When I was fighting her, when I thought her a young man, she was...married.

It was not clear to me why I felt the fact so disturbing; I nonetheless did.

“It’s my cousin, Philippe.” Dariole spoke openly, and glanced around, choosing herself a sun-warmed part of the straw, and proceeded to sit down.

Cricking her neck back to look up at me, she added, “Not my favourite cousin, Sebastien—he’s older, and I like *him* almost as much as I like my brothers. Philippe’s always been a liar.”

“That is no recommendation in a husband, mademoiselle.”

Dariole’s laugh was everything I had hoped.

Quietly, I knelt down by her, so she should at least not have to stare up so far at me. She lifted her hand and smoothed an amount of hair back out of my eyes, as if she had no idea how my flesh leapt at her touch.

“Sebastien’s like you, he likes young men—although he does prefer them to have cocks,” she added. “Philippe...used to cry a lot. We used to fight when we were little, and he bawled like a bull-calf. I think

my aunt wanted me as his husband, and him as my wife! I could have grown up to be matriarch of that family....”

“Married at fourteen?” I queried. Not *so* unusual.

“Mama’s dead, and Papa listens to my aunt.” She lifted her shoulder. “Philippe never did anything to me. Not even a consummation. I ran away before he woke up. I found out later, my brothers discovered where I went, and protected me. So I came to Paris. My brothers don’t have any influence there.”

Brutally, I said, “I thought perhaps you had been raped before, by a father, or an uncle, or a priest, or one of these brothers you mention. That you should run off from the protection of your home and father, merely because you *wished* to....”

All the laughter left her face. “Are you going to tell me it’s my fault? That I got raped *because* I...”

“No,” I said soberly. “I made you a hostage, for Fludd to use. Rape was not your fault. But you must surely have expected it, at some point?”

She sat still, utterly still, while a man might count to ten—

Dariole put her hands over her face and howled with laughter.

“Dariole....” At a loss, I protested, “I have no idea—”

“No—I don’t—suppose you do!”

She flopped on her back on the straw, arms flung wide, the sun patching her with gold. Her eyes gazed up at me, too much filled with affection. “I don’t know anyone else who would say things the way you do, messire!”

Bemused, I said nothing. Since she seemed to have put aside her pain, however briefly, I did not wish further to remind her of it.

“*That*,” she said, pointing at my shoulder. “I want to know, messire. Was it Sully who had you branded?”

“Sully? No, although he comes into the story. Mademoiselle, if you insist, I will tell you part of it. But not all. Only all that I *can* tell you.”

She rolled over onto her side in the straw, supporting her head on her hand and gazing at me. Her doublet and trunk-hose I saw now to be brown silk, covered over with a darker brown embroidery, and her ruff had Brussels lace on it. James Stuart must already be offering garments to his new favourite. *And of course she will let him dress her.*

Only so long as she doesn’t let him *undress* her....

The sun on her dazzled me. She did not in the least seem to mind that she had straw on her doublet and in her bright hair.

I stood, beginning to pace the cell. “I will tell you, at least, how M. de Sully comes into this matter of my brand. And if the story is neither edifying nor entertaining—you have only yourself to blame, for asking, made-moiselle.”

“Once upon a time,” I began, “there was a boy, much as I have been speaking of: rich, spoilt, well-dressed. In age, eighteen or nineteen, say. And the son of a rich and noble father. Or, at any rate, a father well enough aware of his advantages in life that, when he was in command of Paris, he sold the city to King Henri of Navarre, back in ’94. This later resulted in him becoming a Marshal of France.

“That event came about some years after he had driven the young man out of his life, as being no son of his. The young man—myself—at eighteen or nineteen had been convicted of murdering another young man, and so branded.

“So, this young man of whom I speak, older and in his middle twenties, around this time came home from the wars in the Low Countries, and, as many homeless soldiers did, he turned to banditry to survive.

“Banditry is all the worse parts of war: no roof, no shelter against the weather, every man’s hand against you to hang you, and a life where you make your living by killing other, innocent, men. I was not yet old enough to know that the last was the worst part of what I did. I was blind to all except the comradeship of my band of men, and of the revenge I was having on my fellow-countrymen because I was no longer the son of a noble.

“Not long afterwards, I and most of my men were taken in an ambush. We were imprisoned, to be sent to the provincial capital and tried, and thereafter hanged. I, now a not-so-young man, was examined (since I had been shot in the breast), and the maid who was daughter to the prison governor liked the look of me, I being handsome, although not as handsome as I had been before suffering harsh life out of doors in the Low Countries.

“The maid took the shirt off the unconscious young man, and found him a branded criminal. If this were a romance, her love for the young criminal would have moved her to conceal the fact, and my love for her (assuming I woke to see and love her) would have redeemed me from my life of crime.

“This being no romance, the daughter of the prison governor went immediately to her father with the story, and her father decided that they might usefully spare the provincial capital the cost of a trial, and that I should be hanged immediately.

“I woke to this news as they dragged me out of my cell—a cell very like this one, mademoiselle—and put me before the gallows in the prison yard.

“I might have died, legally executed there and then, but for the fact that this chanced to be just before dinner. The governor decided that he (and his wife, and his daughters, of which he had several besides the one who tended me) might as well wait until after they had dined to have the entertainment of seeing the young man hang.

“Don’t mistake me, mademoiselle. If the murder for which I had originally been branded was a foolish young man’s act, the life I had lived after the war was evil. I had killed more than one innocent man who desired only to defend his property and goods. I was not a young man who particularly deserved to live.

“It was ironic, therefore, that a great nobleman should be passing on his way to St Germain, and broke his journey to dine with the prison governor. He saw the young man in the yard. The nobleman turned to the prison governor, and begged a favour of him—as if a man as powerful as he had ever any need to beg! He asked to see the young criminal privately for a while.

“I was returned to my cell. After what seemed a long time, the great nobleman came in, and sent away the guards, and spoke to me, stating that he thought he recognised the elder son of the Marshal de Brissac.

“Eventually I admitted that this was so. The nobleman asked if it were true that I had been a bandit; I admitted this, also. I admitted, freely, my poverty, and my life after my father disowned me.

“Then I threw myself on my belly, and clasped the great man’s shoes, and wept to have my life spared.

“If you think this was endearing, mademoiselle, re-consider the matter. I was a pitiful, revolting thing. You would have turned your head away in embarrassment.

I had, besides, no justice on my side. I was a murderer, more than once over.

“‘I see,’ the noble gentleman said, ‘that you are a man used to killing, and not particular in how you do it.’

“At this, I protested, although it was by then the truth.

“‘I have need of such a man,’ the great nobleman said. ‘You appear very different to when you were de Brissac’s son; it is likely no other man now will recognise you, which is to the good. I have need of a man who will aid me by not being too particular in what he does to achieve the necessities of France. And for guarantee of loyalty,’ he said, indicating the fleur-de-lis burned into my shoulder, ‘I have that. Since I can, at any time I wish, have you instantly hanged, with no questions asked.’

“At this, I embraced the great man’s knees, and blubbered my thanks; and that great gentleman—who was not fond of undignified displays of emotion—told me to clean myself up and be ready to be about the Duc’s business....”

“You tell it very well.” There was a half-smile on Mlle Dariole’s face as she looked up at me. “Is it true?”

“Every word,” I said. “Except that I must take the prison governor’s daughter on trust; I never saw her. Maignan told me of her, later in our acquaintance. He may have exaggerated.”

Now Dariole did smile.

“Did you *really* beg Sully? Did you grovel like that?”

“Oh, yes. I implored him very painfully....” I stooped, and seated myself beside her in the straw. “The embarrassing thing, mademoiselle, is that I believe I had no need.”

“No *need*?”

“He wanted a private murderer, to be sent against the King’s enemies. I believe he had taken the decision that I should live before he entered the cell.”

She snuffled a laugh into her fingers, and looked up at me with warm eyes. “I’d like to have seen it.”

“Yes, I dare say *you* would!”

“Messire Rochefort at his master’s feet....” She made pretence of examining me very closely. “Are you blushing again?”

“Not in the least!”

She sat back; I had difficulty in not reaching out and locking her in my arms.

“Did you think he *would* execute you? After that, I mean.”

I shrugged. “I was a disgraced gentleman, by law forbidden to wear the sword I carried; I was branded: I could be legally executed without necessity of a trial. It was not a matter often mentioned between us, unless he lost his temper, which he did but rarely.”

Dariole nodded to herself, as if that confirmed something she thought, but she did not say what it was. After a moment, she said, a little surprisingly to me, “You can always tell a story against yourself, messire....”

“All men of my age have their war-stories, mademoiselle. Mine are less glorious than you would perhaps hope.”

I found myself watching her face for boredom, impatience, lack of understanding; all those reactions with which the young greet the recitations of the old. Nothing showed in her face but physical tiredness and subversive mockery.

“Sully’s black dog,” she said, with only a glimmer of malice in it. “Oh, just *think*, messire, you had the lily-flower on you and I never knew! What I could have done to you...!”

The opening cell door interrupted her laughter.

I scrambled to my feet, straw dropping from me. Mlle Dariole only knelt up, a hand automatically and uselessly empty at her hip.

“Milord the Earl of Salisbury wishes your presence,” the gaoler announced. He dropped the halberd he held into guard position. “*Not* you. Him. Master Dariole.”

Rochefort, Memoirs

39

I could not keep still: I walked the length of the cell and back, pacing impatiently. The last expression of her face stayed with me. A twist of the mouth, that spoke volumes of perplexity:

‘I’ll be back as soon as it’s safe.’

“Which would appear not to be soon....” I stopped pacing to listen to the clocks from the river-side and Southwark striking the hour.

Mid-day.

A silent warder thrust in meat and drink. I ate, barely noticing that I did so.

Medici? Fludd? *Who?*

Is Sully dead?

A patch of sunlight at last began to creep down the eastern wall of my cell. Three hours by the clock, coming to late afternoon. I stood lost so deep in thought that the noise of the cell door opening made no

impact on my attention.

A small, slight figure stood in the doorway. For a second I thought it Dariole returned.

I realised it too short and misshapen to be her.

“Messire Rochefort.” Robert Cecil signalled for the warder to close the door. I heard the lock not catch. If I had been even a quarter-hour the more impatient, I think I should have gone out of the cell in a rush, and if that meant bowling over the English Secretary of State in the process...

“What is happening, messire?” I demanded.

The small man squinted up at the barred window, and then of a sudden looked down at me. Something in his manner I found troubling.

“I have broken bad news to men,” I said steadily. “What is it you have to tell me?”

Cecil clasped his hands on the top of his ebony stick. The depth of shadow in this cell hid his expression in part; I guessed that to be why he had come here, instead of having me brought to him. *That, and that we are about to speak of secret matters.*

“One of my agents has been sick abed,” Cecil said quietly. “Quite by chance—and you will know how important we count chance, now—he saw Robert Fludd, free, and at St Katharine’s Stairs. Doctor Fludd was boarding a ship.”

“*Free?*” That Fludd should be gone from the Southwark house stunned me. “A *ship?* How long ago? Where is the ship bound?”

Cecil glanced up, a hint of ruefulness on his long face. “It sailed on the morning tide, Master Rochefort. Chance has not favoured us in how soon it brought my man’s word to me. The ship, however, we know—it was the *Santa Juana*, upon which the Jesuit fathers entered England. I suspect their captain only too happy to be paid and hired to leave.”

“Sailing for Spain or Portugal.” I hazarded; hooking my thumbs into my belt to stop myself reaching for the rapier and dagger that had been taken from me. “Monsieur, we—”

“Portugal. Lisbon.” His dark eyes reflected the light from the western window. He shifted one hand to the small of his back, absently massaging those muscles which, when locked in tension, give a man pain.

There is more to this, and more to his awkwardness than physical distress, I thought.

“How do we know Portugal?” I said quietly. “What else is it that you know, milord?”

“Two men were seen boarding the *Santa Juana*.” Robert Cecil scratched in the straw with the ferrule of his stick, and shot a swift glance at me. “Do you know, monsieur, who was the other?”

I shook my head. “Some man of the Queen Regent’s? Milord, I don’t know.”

He believed me, so much was clear. He continued to fidget with the ebony cane at the straw of the cell. I clenched my fists, behind my back; put every effort I had into waiting. *He is deciding whether or not he will tell me.*

“It was Master Tanaka Saburo,” Cecil said.

I stared.

“With *Fludd*?” I truly thought I had misheard. “*Saburo*, on board a ship with *Robert Fludd*?”

“There is little chance of such a peculiar description being inaccurate, I think.”

“But—” I shook my head.

“A guard on the house was found dead, while I was about my business at Greenwich, and Madame de Medici was visiting her Majesty Queen Anne. No man else at the house noted anything, until they found the dead man, but Doctor Fludd appears to have walked from his prison.”

For a second, I could almost have believed in Fludd’s necromancy.

The samurai, I thought.

Shinobi-no-mono. Saburo called me that, once. “Assassin-in-secret.”

And I was fool enough to let my pride at being called a foul name get in the way of asking him what manner of men, among his people, might have such skills. Samurai themselves, perhaps.

“Is it known *why* Saburo has done this?”

“No man knows. No.” Cecil held up his elegant, long white fingers. “Tanaka Saburo left no message. He spoke to no man. I...am inclined to suspect that Master Saburo in fact spoke to Doctor Fludd on his first ambassadorial visit to Prince Henry, at Whitehall.”

Into the silence, I managed to say, “*This* is why Lisbon. Vessels sail from Portugal to the Japans. Fludd is going—Saburo is *taking*—”

“Taking him, yes, monsieur. Home. I had hoped you had knowledge.” Cecil’s black eyes glinted. “I am willing to put you to the question.”

Absently, I nodded. I suppose that, if anything, convinced him. Such a depth of ignorance is not impossible to counterfeit, but it is difficult. I continued to stare down at the small Englishman.

“M. Saburo spoke to Fludd...” I turned the idea about in my mind, still stunned. “While Saburo was bringing King James back to the throne—*why*? If Fludd had chosen to murder M. Saburo, I could understand it. But speaking to him, negotiating with him...*what*, dear God!”

“To find that out, I would question you, and any other man Master Saburo has been acquainted with.”

Something was in his voice despite the obvious warning. I took a step towards him. In the dim late afternoon light, I must have loomed. The small man did not flinch. It came to me in the quality of his look. A man’s mind flies to a conclusion, when he is closely involved.

I said, “Mademoiselle Dariole. This is why you demanded her attendance on you—to put her to the question—*why*?”

Cecil lifted his chin, looking me in the face. “No, monsieur. The young woman has not been put to the question. I talked with her, this morning, and judged her then innocent of all knowledge of this.”

The undertones in his voice warned me.

And it is of this you will speak, I thought. “Tell me.”

He paused, as if he waited for the respect that is due a Secretary of State, and then quietly spoke. “She

could not help but learn through our speech, as you have, that Doctor Fludd had sailed on the *Santa Juana*. That was this morning. I sent my men to call her again, a short time ago, and...she is gone, Master Rochefort.”

I stared.

“I had a last hope that she might have come here, to you. No man can find her.”

“She’s followed him!”

I spun around, slammed my hand flat against the stonework of the cell, and let the pain searing through me take away the words I would have said.

“She’s followed Fludd. What ship? She *will* be on a ship, milord!”

“If so, she’s behind the *Santa Juana* by one tide. More than one ship will have left, even with trade so reduced. The young ‘man’ is not easily distinguishable; I have no agents who saw her leave. It may take more time to discover the name of her vessel.”

Cecil heaved a sigh that moved his crooked shoulder, and cast a longing glance at the straw, as if he would have sat down to ease his body, were that not incongruent with the dignity of an English lord.

“I fear Doctor Fludd has gone to begin his mathematical calculations over again,” Cecil said softly. “Leave aside that there are state secrets he now might tell. I think Doctor Fludd will hide, these ten or fifteen years, and then all this must be faced again—what time Prince Henry is older, stronger, and more keen of intelligence. And he will have built up a much stronger faction.”

If Fludd makes his re-calculations, England may have nothing to do with the matter . I kept my mouth shut on the thought. I will say nothing to discourage this man from assisting me.

“Monsieur, I will find and take them,” I said quietly. “I know, from travelling with Tanaka Saburo—and Mademoiselle Dariole—what manner of attention it is that they have a way of drawing to them. I’ll re-take Fludd.”

Cecil’s long face warmed, very slightly. “If I consent to this—”

“Give me money, a man or two stout with a sword, information.” I turned about on the straw, a pace or two, and faced him again. “If I catch her at Dover, or the Channel ports, I will not be gone long. If she, and the samurai and Fludd, escape further—it might be a matter of weeks or months. Master Secretary, there is something else I need.”

I had no way to disguise my urgency. He shifted his hands on his ebony stick.

“This would be a great service you do for us, Monsieur de Rochefort. I think I take your meaning.”

Hard on the heels of his thought, I nodded. “Make her sign a preliminary consent. Make her, monsieur! I need you to force Marie de Medici to agree the clause that makes the treaty dependent on Sully’s welfare, and sign it. If she says Fludd is not yet re-captured—tell her, if she has not signed before I leave on the next tide, then I go to put a sword clean through Robert Fludd’s gut, not bring him back. She’ll get no use of him. I’ll kill him happily. Her *only* hope that I won’t do that is that M. de Sully is not hanged, understand me?”

Robert Cecil switched his cane to his left hand, and held out his right. “What debt I owe you, Monsieur de Rochefort, I will attempt to pay with this coin.”

I took his small hand in mine, gripping hard.

“Come.” He turned towards the door. “I will ask this much—is it possible to catch a man who may know every action that you take, before you take it? As we have seen in this his escape?”

“I don’t know, monsieur,” I said grimly, as we left the cell, “but I intend to try. We don’t know whether it’s Fludd’s foretelling which allowed him his escape, or merely an impromptu conspiracy with Tanaka Saburo.”

Fludd. Saburo.

Dariable.

It’s nothing to me now that I have put James on his throne. Except that I have, by it, enough of Cecil’s confidence that I may decide and act.

In the dark of the spiral stone stairwell, I asked more questions.

“I need two things, Mr Secretary. The location of the Spanish Ambassador’s Jesuit priests—and the name of the ship most likely to sail on the morning tide for Lisbon.”

At Greenwich, the gates were locked by reason of darkness, but I prevailed on them to let me in. There was a guard outside the room where the Spanish Ambassador’s Jesuit fathers were reported to be keeping Gabriel Santon.

Walking down the long, chill corridor, I saw that, in fact, the guard now wore Cecil’s livery.

I unhooked the suspensor strap of my Saxony rapier and unbuckled the belt, and bundled both sword and dagger in my hand together as they slipped from my body.

“Hold these.” I nodded to the warder. “Let me in; don’t follow yourself.”

The man looked as though he would have said something, but Cecil’s signed pass, coupled with my expression that I dare say was impatient, led him to clutch my weapons in one hand and turn the door’s key with the other.

I pushed past him into the room, swinging the door back so that it should shut behind me.

The door closed with a bang.

Something hit me, hard, behind the right knee.

My knee buckled and I jerked backwards, over-balancing. I recognised it for a man’s boot.

An arm went around my throat from behind, and a fist drove hard into my back—into my kidneys, with the force of a swung hammer. *Gabriel Santon, still with the tough strength of an infantry sergeant.*

I could not keep in the grunt of pain; it burst out of me. Not loud enough to be heard by the warder—the door didn’t open.

I reached up and grabbed the arm, pulled it away from the choke-hold on my throat, and turned; seizing his other fist before he could punch me in the face. I shoved Gabriel around, slammed him face-first into the wall, and pinned him against the stone with the weight of my body.

“Three things!” I leaned hard against his back as he wrenched every muscle, trying to get free of my grip. I tightened my hold on his wrists, my lips close to his ear as he swore and gasped under his breath.

“One,” I said. “In six hours I shall be leaving here, on a ship bound out of England for Portugal. Two. I shall be pissing brown for a week. Three,” I finished, “I deserved that.”

Gabriel’s body stayed tense for a few seconds. I wondered if he heard.

His muscles relaxed, together; I loosed him and stepped back.

He turned, his expression all suspicion, ill-temper, and surprise.

He had the strength of a younger man still, as I knew from the pain stabbing in my lower back. He glared at me. Finally, he wiped his wrist across his mouth.

“A master don’t apologise to a servant, sieur.”

I held his gaze. “Monsieur Santon, I do. And I ask if you will consent to go with me as my man again.”

He bristled like a boar, suddenly spat on the floor, and snorted at me. “‘Monsieur Santon!’ What, do you think you can *buy* me, boy? Go fuck your lying black arse!”

He seemed as brutal as any man who has served in the army; I, having known him these fifteen years, might see something else under that. *How hard can it be to say the words?* I thought. What is it that makes it so difficult?

Birth, Mademoiselle Dariole would have said; I could all but hear her voice. The pain of her absence scoured me.

And she’s right. Forty years, and in the teeth of all the evidence: I still think I am a different kind of human being to this man.

As awkwardly as may be imagined, and feeling plainly embarrassed, I dropped to my knees on the floor. Not even the court salutation, on one knee, but down on both, in that position that is undeniable submission, or sometimes undeniable remorse.

“I beg your pardon, Gabriel. I should have trusted you enough to tell you what was going on. I apologise.”

His face seemed wiped blank of all expression. He stared down at me. A sudden conviction heated my ears red: *He won’t take this—he’ll laugh at me.*

His features altered; I could not have said precisely how. I went hot and cold. I stayed down, looking up at him.

“Fifteen fucking years.” Gabriel Santon sighed. “Fifteen fucking *years*, and you couldn’t trust me.”

“I’m sorry.” Words have never been so hard to get out. My desire to do it only just overcame my embarrassment, that I thought I would choke on. “If you have no desire to accompany me, I accept that. But, please, forgive me.”

Gabriel stared down; stocky, coarse, and with the pallor of the Chatelet still on him.

He gave a short grunt, and smiled, and looked embarrassed himself. “You’re still the same wet-legged lieutenant I got stuck with in Breda.”

I am afraid that he saw my relief very plain; I was not able to conceal it.

“Get up!” He grinned at me. “Sieur.”

It was embarrassing to get to my feet with him watching me, but the relief of having him there—and, I will privately confess, the relief of having his forgiveness—wiped out my mortification.

I resolved as soon as possible to get us drunk together, that this might never be spoken of again.

“I was attempting to keep you safe.” I brushed dust from my trunk-hose. “I ought of course to have given you a choice about your involvement.”

“You always *did* think you knew best.” His grin made him momentarily look Dariole’s age. “Well...is it six hours to the tide, you said? That’s time for me to shave you. To be frank—*sieur*—you don’t exactly do us any credit at the moment.”

I gave him a very sardonic look, which he countered with one of his own.

“I dare say I don’t,” I admitted. “Well. Shave me. That may give me time enough to at least begin explaining why you’ve been in jail, and I’m going to be yelling every time I take a piss, and we’re about to board a ship for Lisbon...and, if we’re unlucky, a little further.”

Part 5

Excerpt from the Report of the Samurai Tanaka Saburo to Shogun Tokugawa Hidetada, Third Son of Great Tokugawa Ieyasu

Translator’s Note

This report of the samurai Tanaka Saburo is addressed to Tokugawa Hide-tada, Shogun of Japan in 1610. Hidetada was the son of the recently retired Shogun, Tokugawa Ieyasu, who at the time lived at Sanpo.

Again, we have no Japanese original; this is presumably an accurate copy, in Early Modern French. The document has been placed with Rochefort’s Memoirs, at some point, but the handwriting is not his.

*A few lines are too fire-damaged to be read. Where the reconstruction is conjectural, I’ve marked it in **bold type**.*

Greetings, great lord. This code is one that a humble captain of ashigaru knows Lord Hidetada will find familiar. It comes from those past days when I served as confidential messenger between your father Ieyasu and my late lord Kobayakawa Hideaki. No living man now knows it but we three.

Therefore, I dare to write openly, and send you this letter, sama—which I’ll copy at this port, Lon-donnu, and have brought to you by as many ship’s captains as I can discover who’ll take my word for my credit in Nihon.

[...] my lord, it was plain to me from the first that the kami of these western caverns are great—both the one at Wô-ki, and at the greater gorge to the north. If these gaijin were a civilised people, they would put a rope about these two places, and treat them both as shrines.

To a poor samurai, it sometimes seems that, here and there, a man or woman of the gaijin *is* so civilised. The yamabushi Kata-rii-na was plainly the correct priest to guard this shrine of the caves. Yet, when I questioned him, Roshi-fua-san informs me she was not considered a real priest by the men of her own religion. This is strange, her qualities being such that, in our land, she would be greatly honoured.

(Some lines of text missing, leaving one possible reading of a phrase: “By her art of figures, to truly foresee the future.”)

[...] a matter of giri. I don't like to deceive Roshi-fua-san, with the debt I owe him for my life. But, as is my duty, I made enquiries privately of this Kata-rii-na, without his knowledge. So as not to lie dishonourably, I informed the gaijin Roshi-fua and Dari-oru that my questions were asked with regard to the fortunes of your honoured parent Ieyasu, great father of our country.

This is partly true, and is also a matter that can be safely told to them. They have no knowledge of the politics of our home, and are wrapped in their own concerns. Roshi-fua-san in particular has no care for any land except that “Franz” on which my ship struck. The samurai-daughter Dari-oru is a wandering ronin at heart; her life is given to her sword.

For the part of my excuse which is true—my lord Hidetada, you seek to preserve Lord Ieyasu's life, as all sons do in filial piety, and this humble samurai has the great honour to bring you an opportunity.

According to the calculations of the yamabushi Kata-rii-na: in four years time, Lord Hideyori, the heir of Toyotomi Hideyoshi, will revolt against the Tokugawa.

In the two years after that, a siege of the great castle at Osaka will come about. This is not something to be avoided. However, great lord, you must take care that your honoured father is not in the besieging trenches during that Summer campaign. Fate has for him there a teppo bullet, and death. You may help him to evade it, and this will bring about his further long life thereafter.

Because this thing is of importance to all men of Nihon, I have written cipher messages also to Lord Ieyasu himself. If Fate destroys one letter, or two, or ten, I may still hope that one, at least, will arrive safely.

I come now to things I have chosen not to speak of to Lord Ieyasu, nor to any man but yourself, my lord Hidetada. (Your aged father should be able to compose himself spiritually for re-birth, as men do in their last age. I leave it to you, my lord, whether you trouble him with this matter or not.)

I spoke with Kata-rii-na about the later ages of Nihon, and what she has foreseen for us.

She talked not only of your father's lifetime, great Shogun, and your own, and your sons', but of the lifetime of the sons of those sons, and their sons after them. The yamabushi Kata-rii-na has told me of things that will happen through close on four hundred years of our future.

At first I was glad.

She spoke of a number of conquests—that we will return to make war in Korea (where my lord

Kobayakawa Hideaki shone), and this time be victorious. After that, Chin will fall to us, province by province; then Hind. And then our new empire will spread to take in lands the gaijin speak of: "Persia," "Africa."

What Chin will bring us is the knowledge to make ships. Great junks crewed by three thousand men; ships that will make the journey from here to the gaijin lands as simple as riding the great Tokaido Road. Ships will be the cord that binds our empire, and trade the blood that allows it to grow. Everywhere we go, in the centuries to come, we bring first trade, then the Emperor's rule. Small divided lands do not stand against our armies: we have teppo, and we are samurai. The day will come when the sun cannot rise and set without passing continuously over lands ruled by the Emperor of the Sun, and administered by his Shoguns.

You see, great lord, how even a humble captain of ashigaru must be dazzled by this vision of future greatness. The Europeans will be left to welter in their filth; the children of Amateratsu will bring enlightened rule to the world.

I said this, to the yamabushi. She looked very sad.

"True," she said to me, "but not *all* of the truth, signore samurai. The day will come when you and yours will regret all this, bitterly; and pray that it had never happened."

I asked her how this could be. How can a man regret such glory for his nation?

"Yours will not be the only great empire," Kata-rii-na told me. "There will be another power in the Americas. It cannot be avoided. This New World empire, powerful as it is, will in four centuries' time go to war with your people. This empire will be of such strength that it creates a 'fire-rain' weapon, which destroys land in a manner as if the sun had put down Her hand and touched the earth.... On that day of war it will leave all Honshu and Hokkaido, all Kyushu and Shikoku, blackened, burned, *poisoned*. So ends Nihon: every island, every man."

Forgive me, great Hidetada, for my stupidity; I doubtless have not asked her all the questions I should.

I asked if we could not have this same "fire-rain" weapon, ourselves, to destroy this other empire?

She told me such weapons do not arise from us, but from gaijin of the Old World. However, if this knowledge I send you is left to each Emperor and Shogun as a prophecy, then we can gain that knowledge ourselves, and from it build such weapons.

But then, my lord, nothing results, except the "fire-rain" touching the earth of this New World empire at the same time as it destroys us. Both our lands and people die in the same moment.

Our cities, and theirs, will burn until they leave not a shadow on the earth. This is not honour, or glory, or vengeance. Great lord, pardon me. A samurai dies happy if his enemy dies also, but where is the honour in a war that kills the farmers? If the land is all burned away, where is Nihon? Who is left for us to serve?

We samurai may lay down our lives, but this "fire-rain" will take not only we ourselves into death. It will take all: farmers and merchants and eta; leave the world so black with poison behind it that, if children are born afterwards, they are born improperly made.

"How can we avoid this?" I asked the yamabushi Kata-rii-na. "*Can* it be avoided?"

I thought then as you, great lord, will think now: that there must be some other choice. I questioned the yamabushi. I threatened her.

If a gaijin may be a samurai, this Kata-rii-na proved herself one. She displayed no fear of death. She states that the choice lies between two roads alone.

“Between earthly power, leading to destruction of this world,” she said, “when the provocation to such war will spread in panic from one nation to the next, and so in spasm onward to all. . . . Or, you may choose to be a nation that shall be wisely advised by one who can calculate how men’s acts affect the future, and thus avoid the ‘fire-rain.’”

And by this latter road, who knows to what power a Shogun and his country might not rise, without annihilation following?

[. . .] this service to you, lord, allows me to see the hand of Fate in all my life. Had I not come here, had I not spoken to this gaijin priest, I could not warn you of this greatest of dangers. Had I not escaped drowning by the merest chance, no man could tell you what the yamabushi has said. I am humble in the face of such fortune.

I immediately opened negotiations with Kata-rii-na, to see if she would consent to accompany me back to Nihon, to be the Shogun’s seer of the future.

I failed. With sorrow, lord, I must tell you that the yamabushi has chosen to sacrifice her own life to save that of another man.

He was not her own lord. She died the more honourably because of that. Kata-rii-na-sama considered the life of the Anghrazi Emperor-King James to be necessary to future ages. Because of this, she saved him, and saved also the lives of Dari-oru and Roshi-fua, and this humble samurai.

I would have brought her to you, lord, if I could; I beg pardon for my failure.

Before she died, however, she had answered my question, as to what action I, Tanaka Saburo, might take to avert this desolation that lies on our future road.

She told me, “You must take the Anghrazi doctor, Robuta Furada, to the Japans.”

The yamabushi Kata-rii-na had her own interests. A man more wise than I would have seen this at once. It was her desire that I should assist in saving the life of the English Emperor-King James, and for this reason alone she made calculation of Nihon’s future—to gain my help. She would never have accompanied me home. She desired only to be rid of Furada. To have him dead, or gone.

She knew that, without Nihon’s future at stake, I would not interfere on King-Emperor James’s side. Why should I?

But if James did die, I then understood, Robuta Furada would never leave these gaijin lands. With James dead, Furada would stay here to rule through his puppet-Prince, the King-Emperor’s son, and never consent to travel elsewhere.

And, after Kata-rii-na’s death, he is the only man skilled enough in this art to calculate our future.

Therefore, I assisted in the rescue of James after we left Wô-ki. I put myself forward as ambassador between the Emperor-King and his son, when we returned to Lon-donnu city. I made peace.

It did not surprise me when, on my way out of their White Hall palace, going back again to the great fortress, the man Furada privately accosted me.

He drew me aside into a small, dank, and dirty room. You will not know, my lord, how difficult it is to be

close to one of these pallid, dirty men; how they stink in their own country, when there is no civilised example in bathing to show them a better way. Furada breathed over me, while he attempted to negotiate with me, and I bore it.

Robuta Furada did not speak of the Emperor-King James, except to say that he accounted that matter over and done with, although the King was not officially back on his throne.

That was wise. With James so well defended, there could be no other end to this day.

I asked Furada what he wanted.

He offered to give his services entirely to “the King of the Japans.”

Evidently, on this subject, his calculations and those of the yamabushi Kata-rii-na had run in tandem, like yoked oxen.

“I can be of great assistance to your country,” Furada said. “And your country will be a refuge for me. I desire safety. I offer the future. Come, will you strike a bargain? It is true I could travel to the Japans on Dutch or Jesuit ships, but you are a man of this Shogun’s own people, and you may introduce me to his court in the way that a merchant or Christian priest cannot.”

Therefore, honoured lord, I have this day arranged a passage for Furadasan and this humble samurai on a gaijin vessel bound for Portingale, knowing that from their great port, Lisbon, we can find a ship that will take us closer to Nihon. I do not know how long we will take in voyaging home, or if this message will travel faster. I trust in Fate to bring it to you when it is needed.

Again, I deceive a gaijin and my friend; this time Dari-oru-sama, who has a debt of vengeance against this man Furada.

Her cause is just and honourable, and a friend would lend his sword in it. I owe her my life. Yet, if I permit her to kill Furada, I betray my country and Shogun.

Well is giri called “burden.”

I bring you Furada and the future, my lord.

I pray that this will lead us to that one road that Kata-rii-na spoke of, that avoids the “fire-rain” in our future. I cannot bring Kata-rii-na. Furada, untrustworthy as he is, must substitute for her, until our own wise men unravel his methods of calculation.

My lord, I know that in the past you have been opposed to the closing of our borders, and the expelling of all foreigners. This has caused friction between yourself and your honoured father, great Ieyasu desiring our land to remain, pure and enclosed, free from the influence of gaijin.

It is for this reason that a humble samurai dares to address his Shogun. When you hear what Furada has to say, my lord, you will be even further convinced that we must not close ourselves away from the world—that there must be some other answer found, that will both give us our great maritime empire, and spare us the fire from the sky.

(last few kanji illegible—then possible signature)

Rochefort, Memoirs

40

There are men in the Low Countries, in those egalitarian sects that infest Amsterdam, who do not kneel now except in two contexts—to their God in church, and their whores in sexual congress. From my acquaintance with them, it's clear to me that they are forgetting what it means to kneel in a submission to one's superior that recognises the social order, or in honest service, or in any supplication that is not erotic. Consequently, they assume all submission is erotic, and lose sight of the complexities of the matter.

On the dock at Nagasaki, I found myself surrounded by an entire country of men who think nothing of prostrating themselves on their faces, every time they speak to a man of superior rank.

It happened around me as Gabriel Santon and I pushed on briskly through the crowds, toward the newly anchored European vessel; passing samurai lords and their servants.

I visualised, briefly, what it would have been like in the court of Henri of Navarre if every man had been thus obliged to kow-tow to the King, and to every noble superior to them. M. le Duc de Sully, even: head down and arse up in front of his noble monarch! I could see Sully's stiff dignity surviving the experience, if only because no man would dare laugh.

But not the dignity of M. Rochefort, I realised. And found myself thinking, for the latest in a countless number of times, of Mlle Dariole.

"You think it's her?" I demanded of Gabriel, despite myself.

"Sounds like your description of the boy. The girl," Gabriel Santon corrected himself.

There was a moment of silence between us, filled only by a dog yelping as it pelted past us between men's legs, and the chatter of food-sellers. Gabriel put his hand over his face, and gave way to a muffled howl.

"A *girl!*" he managed, at last—what time I had needed to remark, to several Nihonese passers-by, that my nambanjin servant was in no wise sick or mad.

"Merely overly amused," I growled. "Southern *barbarian* is perhaps no misnomer, in his case."

Gabriel lowered his hand, and put his arm about his belly. I saw he bit at his lip.

"Laugh," I invited sourly, "since it's clearly either that or rupture yourself."

"I don't believe it." He shook his head. "Not that you ever had much in the way of wit, Raoul. But a boy that's a girl...God's teeth, has no one ever taught you *anything?*"

"I spent too much time in the army. It stupefies a man's intelligence."

"That it does." Gabriel gave me a very deliberate look up and down. "Wouldn't be here, otherwise, would I? Something has to account for that."

I shaded my eyes as we came towards the end of the land. Beyond the foreshore, in Nagasaki harbour, with furled sails backed against the distant mountains, a Dutch carrack rocked gently on the glittering water. “Besides which, Gabriel, I don’t recall *you* ever noticing him to be a her.”

He spluttered. “A woman!”

“I perceive I shall continue to hear about this. Since you so obviously find the amusement tireless.”

Gabriel put his hand through his thinning hair and replaced his wide straw hat on his head. In the shade of it, I saw how he reduced his expression to something that was not a broad grin, but was nonetheless cheerful.

It’s the extremity of relief, I reflected, halting, watching a group of the samurai port officials ahead, arguing with the rangaku ship’s officers—making matters difficult for them: a man does not need to know all the language to see that.

Neither Gabriel nor I can believe this: that we should come so far—*live* to come so far—and find her, now we are over the journey....

The sea is large enough that two men, once parted, will never meet on it. I would have bet all of Cecil’s copious gift of funds, when I left England, that Robert Fludd and the samurai would set down at Lisbon; I could not rely on Mlle Dariole realising the same thing. When the feel of the ship altered under my feet as we headed out of London—I am practised enough in ship-board matters to recognise us leaving estuary waters for the open sea—the sky ahead was dark enough to show stars, and behind us the last sun glowed orange from Greenwich’s windows, and I wondered if perhaps I had, without knowing it, already had my last meeting with Mlle de la Roncière.

Storms, lee-shores, pirates, starvation, and losing one’s course. She’s travelling alone: she may have her throat cut before she passes Rochester. Twelve thousand miles, the Spanish and Dutch ships sail, to reach the Japans....

On the run down to Lisbon I slept with a premonition of that twelve thousand miles in my mind, and a consciousness of the black gulf beneath us, separated from warm bodies only by a few oaken planks. And in that depth a man might try to breathe, swallow his lungs full of water—

Lurching up from a nightmare of Dariole dead under the sea in the Bay of Biscay, her face obscured by her floating hair, I woke to find us docking at Lisbon, where there were too many Fathers of the Jesuit order for my comfort. I applied myself to uncovering news, and identified two men answering Fludd and Saburo’s descriptions—who, having better weather in their passage than we, had left, a week before we docked, on a ship bound for Nagasaki province in Nihon. There was no particular news of a young man, or a young woman, travelling singly to the same destination.

I had no choice but to follow Fludd.

The best I could find was a vessel sailing to Madagascar. After that, I thought us not lucky in our choice of vessels, or the fortunes of wind, tide, and storm. We moved deep in a sea of ignorance, also—if Dariole did follow, she might have caught up with Robert Fludd; he might be dead and buried in the hot earth of Goa or Macao, and we should never know it. I should say much of M. Santon’s uncomplaining fortitude, on that journey: he bore with my fears and dreads, as well as the discomforts of tiny cabins and huge seas.

It stayed in my mind that, could we find which ships Doctor Robert Fludd sailed on, we might be assured that those vessels would not sink.

“He mayn’t have worked out every little last thing that could go wrong with killing King James,” Gabriel Santon observed, when I told him of what had transpired. “There ain’t time. But I’d bet he did do what any sensible man does—found himself a bolt-hole, in case it all did blow up in his face.”

I thought that a reasonable supposition. There was, however, no trace of him. Months passed: Autumn, Winter. We touched the lands of the Arabs, and those of Hind. When we finally came among the thousand tiny islands that lay in the sea about Nagasaki province, it was Spring. And in the port of Nagasaki itself, cosmopolitan as it was with Portuguese, Spanish, and men from the Low Countries, I could find no news of any man resembling Robert Fludd, or any samurai by the name of Tanaka Saburo. I went so far as to travel to Hirado and back, further up the coast, but the Dutch and Japonais authorities there could tell me nothing.

“Maybe we had a *better* journey than them,” Gabriel suggested, tentatively. “Made better time? It’s not impossible, Raoul.”

I could fret about events in Paris, half a world away, and eat my heart out over the boy-girl, or I could possess myself in patience here, I decided. The theory was good. But, even established in one of the city’s lodging-houses, up a hill off the Dutch quarter, Gabriel Santon’s temper exploded every other day, with a direction that I should cease moping.

“I do not *mope*,” I said, with some dignity.

Now, as men bellowed orders, I shaded my eyes against the over-brilliant light and saw a smaller boat leave the carrack.

“Evidently the port authorities are being co-operative.” I supposed a bribe to have changed hands. Water flashed as the oars lifted. There were several men in the boat: I could see heads and shoulders. I folded my arms, conscious of some trepidation. This is not the first ship from Macao I have walked down to meet.

The first men to step ashore from the boat made me turn about and stand looking back at the basin of land that holds Nagasaki, and the hills beyond the houses, so that my face should not be seen.

The dozen or so men in black robes passed me, and two in grey. I watched their backs. Their robes seemed odd against the pale linens of Saburo’s people—Kirishitans, I heard them called. Both Jesuit and Dominican, I noted.

Their procession turned aside in the direction of a chapel: I relaxed somewhat.

“Cheer up.” Gabriel, at my shoulder, also watched them go. “At least no Jesuits ain’t going to *hang* us, here. I hear the Japans-men nail their criminals up on crosses....”

I shot him a glance. “Remind me again: just why is it that I employ you?”

“Master like you can’t get anybody better.”

“Ah. Yes. That would be it.”

I faced about to the harbour again, giving a last glance to the sailors leaning on their oars. One more man threw a bundle ashore from the boat, joined it, swung the blanket-roll up onto his shoulder, and began to walk towards us; between dogs, black Nubian servants, half-naked slaves carrying palanquins, and men with twin swords jammed into their cloth obi belts.

A thin figure of a man, middling-tall; age indistinguishable at a hundred yards.

He will be the one whose description Gabriel has bribed out of the customs officials.

I squinted, in the bright heat, my sight playing the usual tricks of *is it* and *isn't it*, until my eyes watered.

I believe I desire an end to anticipation, I thought. Desperation and disappointment; I am familiar with both. The men of the Japans think all gaijin look alike. Many a description over these last few weeks, that I had sworn would be Robert Fludd or Mlle de Montargis de la Roncière, has turned out to be nothing like.

The man looked young.

Walking through the dust towards me, he slowed his steps as he came closer. And, finally, he stopped in front of me, dropping his bundle to the earth.

I looked down into wide-set bright eyes, in a face boiled red under the sun's heat and a velvet cap. He seemed clean-shaven, moustache a mere swipe of dirt under his nostrils. His hand rested down on the hilt of an Italian rapier

“So what is it this time?” The lips did not quite move in a smile. “‘Herault,’ or ‘Belliard,’ or ‘Rochefort?’”

I looked down at Dariole, too stunned to answer her, or even to bow in greeting. Now she stood close....

“You are—so little different!” I marvelled.

Her hair fell a finger's width longer, perhaps two; straggling onto the shoulders of her doublet. I did not think her any taller.

I stepped forward, to put my arms about her.

She moved a half-step back.

Circumvented, I let my hands fall to my side, and at last managed a creditable bow, not able to take my eyes from her. As the relief of a known face faded from her, what replaced it, as she looked at me, was a restrained but unmistakable chill.

“So. Rochefort. Does this mean you've got Fludd?”

Too stunned to be mendacious, too dazzled by her real presence to desire to be, I could say only, “No. I don't know if he is yet in Japan.”

Her head lifted. My surface familiarity of a few weeks vanished, and I saw everything new again through her eyes: the furious chaos of thronging men and low square buildings that is Nagasaki port. She scented the air. Heat had already made her sweat through the under-arms of her shirt, where she had taken off her doublet sleeves. The material looked darkly wet. Her face burned, and she slitted her eyes against the brilliance.

It is she, I thought. *It is she!*

A voice called, “Monsieur Dariole!”

I startled. The Dutch ship's captain gave her a salute as he passed by. She snatched off her cap and

bowed, returning it. *Yes, she has been as sociable as a young man might be, on the voyage....*

The rangaku captain kept to doublet and trunk-hose. His officers and men had (as with Gabriel and I) changed to a form of Venetian breeches that gather not at the knee, but at the ankle, and are made of a very light, voluminous cloth—the sailors claim cotton as cheap here in the East as linen in France. I watched Dariole eye their cooler clothing, and the Nubian page that carried both the captain's hat and a great parasol that shielded him from the sunlight.

Dumb with a wonder not befitting my age, I thought, *Barely, I believe that it is she who stands in front of me....*

Gabriel Santon's gruff voice jerked me from my thoughts. "You'll need somewhere to stay. We're in a lodging-house up past the Dutch slopes. It isn't so bad a place, little mademoiselle."

She glanced past me, at him. "You're Gabriel, right? I remember you."

Gabriel gave her the look I have seen him give young recruits in the United Provinces army, and she gave him a grin that was both brat and young woman together. He snorted. "You ain't surprised—guessed Monsieur Raoul would be here, did you, mademoiselle?"

She cocked her head a little to one side, in that gesture which I had pictured so constantly. "If I'd thought about it, I probably would have realised he'd get here first. Luck being what it is."

As if all were agreed and arranged, Gabriel scooped up her bed-roll. "I'll take that."

He rested it on his broad shoulder, and made a bob of the head that would not have passed for a servant's bow in Paris.

She looked at him for a moment. "All right. Lead on."

He turned and began to walk towards our lodgings.

Unless I would be left standing, I must move. Two long strides caught me up with her. "Mademoiselle—your journey—your health—"

She mercifully cut me short in my babbling.

"Rochefort, since you *are* here—we've got a problem."

Something of common sense began to return to me. "I would suppose so. You're intent on killing Robert Fludd."

For answer, she merely nodded. Under the surface of her brusqueness, I thought I detected excitement—at the newness of Nihon to her, perhaps. She gazed about at the rising green landscape and mountains beyond. The town was nothing but up-and-down, all single-storey buildings on the sides of steep hills, mixed in with trees. The roads between the peak-roofed houses teemed full: crowds of men and women—whom I could not always tell apart, for their dress—and children and chickens, the latter much the same as Southwark. It did not occur to me until I watched her see these things how much I missed the smells of Paris and London over the strangeness of the cooking-smells of Nihon.

Dariole abruptly side-stepped, dodging men dressed in fundushi loincloths alone, carrying heavy boxes hung off yokes between each pair of men. With a skip, she turned about and walked backwards for a pace or two, watching them go.

“*That’s* the way to dress in this heat! Hey, maybe *I* should do that. . . .”

For a moment, I saw that familiar tilt of the very corners of her mouth—at my outrage, I suspect. She about-faced, and walked at my side again.

I looked down at her. “You will have had time to re-consider. You—I do not wish to begin with a quarrel—”

“So don’t.”

“You know I cannot permit you to kill Monsieur Fludd!”

“Can’t ‘permit’ it?” She drew in a breath and let it out, pressing her lips together. Very deliberately, she said, “He had me raped. I intend to kill him. I didn’t come all this way for my health! Are we clear?”

The eight or nine months since leaving Europe had left me oddly ill-at-ease with the manners of Fontainebleau or St Germain, I found. Abandoning manners for honesty, I said, “Mademoiselle, I know how much this is to ask of any man. If you might begin to see beyond your personal concerns—”

“‘Personal concerns!’”

“*Hey!*”

Gabriel Santon’s booming voice cut her off, his broad forefinger pointing straight at her. She dropped her hand from her rapier-hilt in what I took to be astonishment.

I realised he glared at me, also.

“Cut it out!” Gabriel said curtly. “Raoul, why don’t you go ahead and see if Mama-san has an extra room for mademoiselle here?”

I stopped in the street, towering over the people about me, and stared at him.

Dariole put her hand up over her mouth, thumb and fingers each to either side of her jaw. My heart raced, recognising that she in that familiar way hid the beginning of a grin.

“I tell you what, messire—you certainly can’t get the servants these days. . . .”

I felt my lip twitch. “Mademoiselle—do you suddenly have a feeling that you are one of two squabbling children?”

Without pausing for her response, I dropped Gabriel the salute of an infantry trooper, and thrust ahead between men and horses.

She lives. Doctor Fludd, if *he* lives, is still a resource—and, if I may bring him back from Nihon, the one guarantee of M. de Sully’s safety. Nothing has changed. Nothing! And yet, she *lives*.

It will be a year, soon, since Henri’s death. Not knowing what goes on at home, now, is enough to put a man into a fury. Does Sully live; has he been hanged; what?

Gabriel Santon is a wise man in not wanting to see his master begin a quarrel he may not press to its extremity. *I still cannot harm her.*

The owner of the lodging-house—or perhaps whore-house, I had never been quite sure—accepted my explanations in Dutch, Portuguese, and makeshift Nihonese that we should have another guest, and

promised to make a room ready. Dariole and Gabriel arrived somewhat later than I thought they should have, which led me to suspect one or the other of them desirous of speaking covertly with the other.

“Here, mademoiselle.” I knelt and slid back the screen blocking off her room.

“It’s *empty*.” Dariole turned about and about on the wooden corridor, looking into the other rooms with their interlocking white mats on the floor. “And flat. And there isn’t any furniture.”

I smiled at her reaction. Tatami mats on the floors; shoji panels, like windows, that slide aside instead of doors...and the constant flat wall-screens that divide up the houses. Yes: empty, to my eyes, when we first came here. Since then, I have acquired more than (as soldiers do) the beginnings of the language. I left Dariole squatting inside her door, bed-roll beside her, sliding the screen back and forth, her boots leaving dusty imprints on the matting. Behind her in the room was only a niche in the wall, and something that might have been a joint-stool, had it been wider, or stood higher above the floor.

“Gabriel?”

He emerged from an inner room—that, nonetheless, was not dark. The houses here are much brighter inside than in France, where rush-lights might stink and a dozen together give no better illumination than a rain-heavy sky.

“Thought you might want something to eat.” He put a deep tray down on the mat, and squatted down, very ungainly.

The porcelain dishes held an odd mixture of Nihonese cooking and European dishes, which I suppose in Nagasaki is not so amazing. I ate, and about half-way through the meal Mlle Dariole came wandering down the passage, and entered to join us.

She ate in silence. I saw her glance from time to time at Gabriel Santon. At last, almost politely, she said, “What do you think, Messire Rochefort—is Fludd still mathematically forecasting us, or is travelling to the Japans just desperation on his part?”

I wanted to touch her, to hold her to me. Her face had the glaze of memory. Fludd, in the Tower; Fludd, and Northumberland’s men Luke and John, whom he did not command to stay their hands or their desires. She did not say so, but I thought it unlikely she had been had only by one of the pair of them.

“It’s difficult to say,” I confessed. “From what I observe...he may be a man who knows, to the hour, when his pursuers will arrive where he is, and so he leaves before we arrive. Or—he may be lost.”

She wiped at her nose and made a tiny snort of humour.

I passed her a cup of the *cha* that Gabriel had come to like, although, for reasons I didn’t begin to comprehend, his serving of it made the Japanese guests in the lodging-house wince. “Mademoiselle, I am willing to set the matter aside until such a time as we know where Fludd is, but, you will not kill him.”

She stopped chewing at the rice and fish, prodded it with an eating stick, and gave me a long look.

Without speaking, she went back to eating.

I looked at Gabriel.

Ah—I understand. He has directed her not to quarrel with me.

I desired above all things to put my arms around her, as I had done in London; that, I knew, would be if

anything more disruptive than a quarrel over an as-yet non-existent Robert Fludd.

Leaning back out of the door, I bellowed into the depths of the house for a flask of sake.

Days passed. The rest-house in which we lodged, if it was one of ill repute, was discreet. As well as European merchants, local samurai came to drink the disgusting *cha* beverage, and talk, and play at games. I made myself amiable to all, as far as I might, improving my knowledge of Nihon's languages, and seemingly the more welcomed because of it.

Search where I might, inquire as we may, no man claimed to have heard anything of *Robuta Furada*. Or of Tanaka Saburo.

Venturing to the court of the King of Japan is not what I desire, I thought. Because if he hears of Fludd, he will want him. But I can see I shall be left with no alternative.

When we first landed, I had sent messages via a Dutch merchant to one Master William Adams, an Englishman rumoured to be high in the service of the retired King of the Japans, Ieyass. By what would have been May at home, rumours were current that this retired Shogun had marched down to Kyoto with fifty thousand men at his back—and then, confusingly, this was supposed to have been to watch Nihon's old "Emperor" retire, and the new one take his throne. That would be part of the impenetrable politics of this land, I supposed. Still more impenetrable to me, since I had assumed a "Shogun" to *be* their Emperor-King.

I realised I would have no answer, nor no help, from Adams.

"These people may not know one namban from another," I said to Gabriel, as late Spring came to Nagasaki. "You would think, however, they would know one of their own. There's no word of a Tanaka Saburo."

"Maybe they drowned on the way. Him and Fludd." Gabriel looked cheerful at the thought. "Tell her that, Raoul, then we can go home."

Dariole ordered a local tailor to make her a suit of what I remembered Tanaka Saburo calling *kosode* and *kabakama*: his shirt and breeches. Contrary in all things, the chemise opens at the front, and the loose, unconfined cotton breeches at the side.

Dariole, wrapping a long cloth belt about her waist, looked—other than the boiled colour of her skin—no different to the thronging crowds outside the lodging-house.

"Dressing as a man still, mademoiselle," I remarked, handing her her hat—a great wide straw dish, to be worn upturned on the head.

"Haven't you noticed?" She pointed again at the crowds passing by. "They all wear the same."

A slow grin spread across her face, and I could not express how glad I was to see it.

"You might as well say that you and Messire Gabriel could try dressing as women...."

"You *might* say it, but I wouldn't say it in Gabriel's hearing," I observed. "I judge that despite equality of dress, and their bearing of weapons, women here are not any less ill-thought-of than they are in Europe."

She snorted at that, but fell silent, and after a while her hand moved down to rest against the guards of her rapier. The which, I may say, did not sit easily in appearance with her Nihonese dress.

“Shirts and chemises are no dress for a soldier!” I remarked to Gabriel a day or two later, as he finally copied her and put on kosode and hakama.

“I heard a proverb in their drinking houses.” Gabriel grinned at me, hitched up his loose trousers, and thunderously broke wind. “In breeches and boots, what escape for a fart?”

He slapped his thigh and laughed hard enough to rupture himself. Such things are embarrassing in servants—as I considered remarking to Mlle Dariole, who leaned at the entrance to the house, and spluttered into laughter with a young man’s complete abandon. I decided against any comment. Forty years have taught me *something* in the way of caution.

And besides, to see her laugh is a joy; she does it so rarely now.

“Ro-bu-ta Fu-ra-da.” She practised it, and looked over at me. “He might have a different name, I suppose.”

“There is description, too.”

Gabriel snorted. “All *I* get is, ‘you gaijin all look alike!’”

Dariole smiled again. I realised that he was deliberately cheering her. *I believe he has taken to the boy-girl.*

Nagasaki held gaijin enough that he and I—and she—might go around the gambling-houses without being remarked. The weakness of sake gave me an advantage that the unfamiliarity of their games of chance did not quite negate. I found myself almost hoping that the bizarre Summer might extend indefinitely.

The slightest hint of Robert Fludd—and our truce is over.

Monsieur Kenshin was a samurai of perhaps fifty years of age, a frequent habitué of the rest-house; he and I had fallen into the habit of playing games of chance on the veranda overlooking the courtyard, while I improved my Nihonese.

It being late afternoon, and cooler, Dariole sprawled on the tatami matting inside the open door-panel to the house. She fidgeted, switching about to sit first one way and then the other, all under pretence of watching the samurai and myself play at the game he called “go.”

“Do you wish that we practise again?” Kenshin offered Mlle Dariole.

She had at least the grace to blush, albeit I thought she looked as hopeful as a puppy. “I wouldn’t want to interrupt your game, Messire Kenshin....”

The samurai, it seemed, practised with wooden swords curved as their own cattan-blades. It was inevitable that Kenshin find himself training Dariole in their use. She enthused. She had constructed also a wooden European sword, with a simple cross-piece in the fashion of a hundred years past, which she sometimes used to demonstrate rapier technique to Kenshin.

With the cattan-blade, she was at that stage where desire outstrips technique, and Kenshin regularly knocked her arse-over-crown in the dusty courtyard below the steps. While this afforded me much amusement, I was gratified that she should have found an enthusiasm that ate up every waking moment,

gave her such evident pleasure, and—I thought—kept her mind from Fludd’s injuries.

“We might finish this game later,” I offered Kenshin.

Studying the board, where he had just opened a new area to play, it was evident to me that I needed a move in hand to suppress this new skirmish—and, of course, I did not have one. I should have to spend my move to combat defeat in the area I was already fighting in.

“Every game is a metaphor,” I sighed, managing not to smile at Dariole as she bounced up onto her knees on the mat. “Monsieur Kenshin, even giving me nine black counters to place in advance won’t see me winning this war. Why *not* train her?”

Kenshin also smiled. “Hai!”

Dariole stayed entirely in Nihonese dress, out of respect to the heat, going barefoot, or in waraji straw sandals. In kosode and kabakama, she reminded me of nothing so much as peasant children at home running about in just their shirts.

Like peasant children, Dariole had a dislike for giving her clothing up once she had it. I found a constant source of amusement in observing Mama-san’s mistress-of-the-wash and other house-servants watch their chance, and abstract Dariole’s clothes from her room every two or three days. By the time the young duellist would come, fuming, to wear her “lucky” kosode, the tacking stitches would have been undone and the garment reduced to cloth panels for washing. I dare say she had never been so clean.

That, I suppose, moved me also to abandon the stuffed, sewn, and flea-ridden doublets I had brought, and wear Nihonese kimono over the long hakama-breeches—albeit I found the shapeless garments something of an embarrassment when, as now, I must shift my legs as I sat tailor-fashion, so that the state of my unruly member should not be exposed to any other.

I desire her still, I thought.

And I desire more than that she punish me....

“Get bokken.” Kenshin pointed.

Dariole dipped her forehead to the tatami mat, bounced up onto her bare toes, and ran into the house.

Catching my amazed stare, he observed, in his improving French, “I succeed in teaching her manners—some time!”

So that he should not see me smile, I returned to studying the go board. Minutes passed in silence.

“Raoul!” Gabriel Santon hailed me from the corner of the veranda.

I nodded to Kenshin and rose, picking up my rapier and dagger that I had placed beside the board, and walked over to where Gabriel stood. The street outside showed a pale pall of smoke or dust hanging in the air. As ever, the space was packed: men, women, horses; one of the rarely seen wheeled carts, screeching; slaves and palanquins.

“He’s watching us,” Gabriel said. “Want me to sort him out?”

I saw a young Nihonese man not attempting to hide himself, in particular; he stood between a seller of astonishingly coloured foodstuffs, and a writer of letters, his gaze fixed on the lodging-house.

Kenshin rose and bowed, discreetly retiring into the lodging-house. Dariole came out onto the empty

veranda and looked puzzled, wooden bokken in hand. I beckoned her.

“A man. He may have information. God He knows, I’ve put enough money about.”

Gabriel looked grim. Neither of us said *assassin*; I would have put money on both of us thinking it. *Perhaps that truly would mean Fludd is in the country—or Saburo.*

Dariole dropped down into a very samurai-like position, watching the courtyard. She sat back on her heels, forearms resting on her thighs. With the cloth band that pulled her kosode against her body, it was clear that she had both breasts and hips. The local inhabitants might tactfully assume that hair grown just long enough to touch her collar meant she was, as a matter of course, male. I couldn’t see a European now making the same mistake.

The young Nihonese man entered the courtyard and walked towards us. Reaching the bottom of the veranda steps, he bowed to me.

“Rosh’-fu’-san desu ka?”

“Close enough. Hai! I’m Rochefort.”

“Message.”

I did not meet Gabriel’s eye. A look would send him piling into the Nihonese boy despite the cattan-blades at his waist. I nodded. The young samurai bowed again, and placed a sealed paper packet on the steps.

As he turned and strode off, Gabriel slid down and into the crowds behind him. We have worked together long enough that I need not signal him obedience in such matters.

“I doubt he’ll follow him to anything useful,” I observed. “Although it’s true Gabriel has less of a European look in those clothes than many gaijin.... Mademoiselle, I have a suspicion. It occurs to me that I have, in my life, had at least one too many letters from M. Robert Fludd. I suspect this to be another.”

Dariole rose to her feet, and padded down the wooden steps, her eyes fixed on the paper. “He’s written here?”

“I believe I recognise the hand that superscribes it.” I took the letter as she handed it up to me. “Yes. I know it well. Fludd’s handwriting.”

Dariole made a face. “He’s had nine months on ships to do his mathematics: of *course* he knows where we are....”

I broke the seal.

“Well?”

“A place and a time. The name of the place is not familiar, but I imagine we can find it. He says nothing else besides *Let us talk.*”

“Talk!”

“It’s not for five days. I imagine the place is some distance away.”

“Or it’s a distraction, and they’re going to ambush us!”

“Or that.” I folded up the paper, putting it away in my kimono-sleeve, and looked down at her. Rhetorically, I demanded, “How do you hunt down a man who always knows precisely where you are?”

Her skin waxen under the burn of the sun, Dariole completed my thought:

“You wait until *he* finds *you*.”

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Well, it will be a trap,” I remarked to Gabriel, before I retired. “The question is, can we turn it about? Make it a trap for him?—for *them*. I have a quarrel to pick with that whoreson Tanaka Saburo.”

“Crucifixes.” Gabriel Santon mournfully stretched out his hand, and mimed the striking of a hammer. “You wait and see....”

Having made it my business to visit the execution grounds, wondering if I might see Fludd’s corpse, I was now in a position to correct him. “In fact, they tie you up there. Rope. Can’t afford the nails. Which, in your case, would truly be many.”

Gabriel made a grimace half-way between humour and that apprehensiveness which the cruelty of the local lords had impressed on him, and I went to my room.

Nothing occurred in the evening, or the night; I heard the night-soil collectors going about with their buckets, and then after that was silence, not even a rat in the rafters.

About the wolf’s hour (which here they call the hour of the hare), when false dawn brightens the sky, I became aware of a shadow in the interior doorway. It did not perturb me: I recognised it from the first glimpse.

“Mademoiselle.”

I crawled across the tatami mats to the sliding door, and pushed the panel aside, so that I could see her face in the grey light. I paused, heart in my throat.

“These screens, that are thin—you’ll find the people here see only what it is desired and seemly that they see. We have privacy, if you desire it.”

I stuttered on the word *desire*.

Not even the shadow of a smile rewarded me.

Dariole took my hand as I silently offered it, and in no weak woman’s grip. “I wanted him to be dead. That would have solved all of this.”

The light through the shoji screens only let me see a little of her expression. I did not draw aside the screen to the veranda.

“I wondered that you didn’t pursue this man Luke,” I said softly.

She shook her head, a touch of impatience in the movement. “He was Fludd’s hands, Fludd’s eyes, Fludd’s cock. Fludd didn’t even stay to *watch*.”

I frowned. “That would have been better?”

“I could have understood it!”

Possibly more had gone on in Les Halles, during the time she stayed with the whores, than she has ever told me. Two years back, I thought her fool enough to try to turn a trick for the fun of it. *Her understanding of men is partial—but, where it exists, painfully acute.*

She climbed past me, over the mats and into the room, moving to slide the outside shoji screen an inch or two ajar. Warm air eased in. I moved back to my bed-roll. She settled herself at my feet, without a word, and despite the warmth of the departing night, what of her flesh brushed me felt ice-cold.

“We might consider,” I said, “how appalled your assailant Luke would have been, to find himself with a master who *calculated* on his base character. . . . Would it not make a man remarkably wary in his employment?”

I do not know any woman other than Mlle Dariole who responds so readily to that half-serious and half-mocking contemplation of a topic. There was no confusion in her face as she smiled, very faintly.

It faded. “There is a ‘we,’ is there, messire?”

“All the time that I am *messire* to you, and you desire to have me on my knees, or—however else it pleases you.”

Her eyes were large and dark in the shadows of the empty room. It was not possible to say whether they darkened with fear, or arousal, or both.

“Suppose I never can bed a man?”

“Hush. Mademoiselle.” I did what I had been aching to do, sitting in my bed-roll, and put out my hand to her. “You are so young! What’s a year, say? Nothing! You were *hurt*. I can wait longer than your ‘never.’”

She leaned forward and put her lips on my mouth, inaccurately in the poor light. She felt warm, and soft; smelling all of honey. I felt her shudder before she sat back, which served to quell my rising reaction.

With something between malice and affection, she said, “You’ll have been to whores since we last met, messire, right?”

“I have no desire for the pox!”

It was not quite true. The blatant lewdness of the Nihonese people—or perhaps their refusal to find anything sexual embarrassing—had led me to a woman at Kenshin-san’s recommendation. She laid me down, beat me hard enough that I thought it must be a game of submission, until my muscles relaxed under her pummelling; and then by skill of her fingers, lips, and cunny, moved me to spend twice in one afternoon. It was after that that a fear of indisposition kept me away from her and her sisters.

The low but growing light showed me Dariole’s look, which I thought held both scepticism and acceptance. My heart thudded in my ears. I thought of what I had dreamed, on the ships from England: that we would meet, and she would strip my dignity from me with her wicked hand.

“You’re going after Fludd,” she stated.

I nodded. *The less converse we have about this man, this moment, the happier I will be!*

“How are you going to stop me following you and killing him?”

Moved, aroused, bemused; I shook my head. “I have conceivably learned one lesson, mademoiselle—I do not plan to make any man’s plans for him. Come with Gabriel and I. If I cannot persuade you that M. de Sully’s life matters—”

She lifted her hand and hit me.

I did not resist.

In the next hour, I let her bind my hands and do what she would. If, outside this room, I had been “Messire Rochefort,” inside it I was a thing she kept tied for her pleasure—which, in the most, consisted of remembering her hurts and inflicting pain. If I were to walk the next day with a certain stiffness, I thought, it would not be through a Castilian dignity, but from bruises and wrenched muscles.

I felt the fear in her blows. I wondered if she had had similar fears and dreads before committing herself to a duelist’s life in Paris, and if that was where she discovered that action and skill removes her disquiet.

That, also, was the only hope I had for carnal satisfaction.

A man might have supposed that a thing such as I, desiring to be humbled for my lewd enjoyment, would have found that shadowy room a heaven. I did not, at first, realise the source of my disquiet. At the beginning, tied and helpless, my body reacted to her acts of vengeance with a squirming avidity, and if she called me *dirt* and *animal*, I could only agree with her. Only a little later did I discover that, spend as I might, what I gained from it was not pleasure.

She is not happy, I thought, as I shed sweat and blood. She might thrash me into pleading incoherence where I was, but there was none of the liveliness with which she had tormented me in Paris. None of the joy.

“You deserve this!” she whispered, as hard-eyed as any fanatic beating novices in a monastery.

I miss her insolence, I realised.

She does not call me by name.

That, I saw, was because it was not I that she had in her mind.

She did not pursue any contact of flesh, keeping herself aloof. The most she did, as the hour wore on, was to thrust her hand inside her own breeches.

I have become the men who raped her, I thought, and there is no liking for M. Rochefort here—no realisation that I am here at all.

Shamed, I confess what I realised: that I miss her insolence, her swagger, her smile; above all, I miss her desire to put M. Rochefort on his knees in the dirt. At this moment I could be any man, any male flesh; so long as she punishes some man, she does not care.

And yet, I care, I thought.

I might hire a whore in Les Halles to beat me—they are used to every perversion of men there, and if

some move them to merriment afterwards, they will let themselves be well paid enough that they do not show it to a man's face. If I paid a woman, she might put me into torment—but she would not mean it.

Under the hard blows of Dariole's hand, I put my face into the tatami matting, wincing more at the realisation I arrived at. A whore will have no reason to care whether I am a proud gentleman brought down to kissing her boots and weeping for her mercy, so long as she gains her livres at the end of it.

“Merde!” I yelped, lifting my head, wincing. “That hurts!”

I think that Mademoiselle Dariole, to Messire Rochefort, would have said, *Yes—it's supposed to!* This hard-eyed woman only met my gaze with impatience, planting the palm of her hand over my mouth, and using her other hand for pain.

“Mademoiselle,” I said, stiffly and painfully, after she untied me. “Be pleased to remember, I am *not* the man who raped you.”

She grunted assent, not looking at me, but swept all my bedding into a nest on the mats, and curled up under it; sleeping while the light of dawn came over the city roofs down the slope below us, and the blue waters of the harbour.

Understanding came to me, whether out of my outrage and frustration, or whether from pity, or experience, I do not know.

One cannot pay a whore and beg her to *like* a man.

What's missing from Dariole is affection, I reflected, wiping at myself with my kerchief. A man may not beg for that. Not without killing the very thing he desires. I had thought, in London, it existed between us—conceivably in Paris, though most well-hidden....

She said something unintelligible in her sleep: a stream of muttered words. I rose and leaned over her, and stroked the pads of my fingers across her brow. Her unquietness gradually ceased.

I lay back on the tatami mats, leaning on one arm and watching her, attempting not to fall into sleep. With my free hand, I brushed the hair out of her eyes.

Am I to bind myself to such a woman?

What has he made of her, Robert Fludd? He, and her vengeance together?

The morning brightness told me I had slept a half-hour or so, when I next opened my eyes. I found myself looking at Mlle Dariole, out on the veranda in the delicate light, brushing out her too-short hair and attempting to tie it up behind as the samurai did. In the timelessness of dawn I lay caught between doubts of encumbering myself, and the sheer enjoyment of watching her arms lift with the brush, and the rise of her breasts under her kosode.

Mademoiselle, I understand how much you need to kill Robert Fludd.

She spoke curtly, without turning her head. “Gabriel needs to buy us horses. It looks like a long journey up to this ‘Chikuzen province.’”

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A row of single-storey tea-houses ran down the side of the steep street, their backs to the sea.

I let Gabriel get on with using his mount to shoulder away the female touts who tried to drag us inside for their custom. At the foot of the hill, over the peaked roofs, a metallic dark sea ran out to what might be a line of islands—but, if the directions were correct, would be a promontory.

Dismounting, I bought rice balls from a bare-legged street seller, and pointed. “Is that Hako?”

He grunted assent.

I re-mounted, and offered the food to Dariole. She turned away in her saddle. For all the clenched muscles of my gut, I ate. A man should not be weak before he goes into combat. Chewing, I rode through the villagers; between men weighed down with boxes that they carried on shoulder-yokes, on towards the sea.

The dark blue began to lighten as we rode along the shoreline. Out on the water, white sails marked fishing boats—*who may hold any man*, I thought. Fludd. Spies of the Shogun. Saburo’s *hashagar* soldiers.

Two wheel-lock pistols were thrust under my obi, inside the body of my kimono, where the loose garment makes makeshift but readily accessible pockets. For the rest, I had not taken to cattan-blades. My rapier being well fitted to my hand and eye, I will not risk a new weapon yet.

Gabriel touched his heels to his horse’s flanks and caught up with me. “Who do you reckon’ll meet us?”

“Troop of pikemen?” I had been searching for the shapes of morion or cabaset helmets against the horizon. “Led by a Jesuit Father? A troop of soldiers in Tokugawa colours?”

“Plenty of cover out there, Raoul.”

Long grass grew up to the edge of the sand, the wind passing over it now in great whispering waves. We would not see or hear men approaching through it. Hako Promontory looked to be forested in pines, of the kind peculiar to the Japans.

“It all says ‘welcome to the ambushade,’” Gabriel remarked. I did not contradict him.

South and inland of us lay hills; far, far to the south-west, Nagasaki. If I have a choice, I thought, I will bribe some fisherman to take us back from Chikuzen province by a sea route. My arse is sore.

“You two can go back.” Dariole’s light voice interrupted my scanning of the landscape for soldiers. The wind blew her hair into her eyes, now it had grown just long enough. She appeared to me as half-samurai, half-gaijin; the weapons at her thigh, her rapier and European dagger.

“Girl’s no brighter than you, is she?” Gabriel grunted. “Sieur.”

“I’m ‘sieur’ again? I must be in your bad graces....”

Gabriel smiled crookedly. Dariole did not respond at all.

I wish that she would boast more, and mean less.

“You don’t charge in and get yourself killed,” I ordered. “You don’t kill Fludd. Mademoiselle, as far as I know, you have no wish to harm Gabriel.”

She gave me a puzzled scowl and finally spoke. “No.”

“Which is why I will tell him to take you off that beast and tie you hand and foot, if I think you’re about to commit folly.”

Gabriel raised his brows and blew out his lips. Dariole for a long moment locked gazes with me. She might well escape Gabriel, but not without wounding him; plainly both of them knew this.

A perceptible tension went out of her shoulders. “If you want to hear what he has to say, before—”

“—I have no interest in what Doctor Fludd has to say.” The edge to my tone surprised me. Collecting myself, I added, “I want only to be sure what guard M. Saburo has thought to bring with him. His estate isn’t far from here. This is ‘neutral territory’ only by courtesy.”

Gabriel put in gloomily, “And we’re doing this, why?”

Dariole, surprising me, spoke out.

“Because now we know where he is. If he’s here. Just for this minute, we know where he is—instead of him always knowing where *we* are. If we miss him here, if we go back, we’ll never catch him again.”

She did not add, *Therefore, it is the time that I can kill him.* I did not mention M. de Sully’s name. I perceived how these things hung heavy and un-spoken between us.

Waiting until she looked at me with attention, only her shifting weight controlling the dun beast she rode, I said, “By that same logic—Fludd would not be here if he calculated he will come to any harm.”

Slowly, she inclined her head in assent. There was something of the duellist even in that simple movement. I wished for an intense moment to roll her out of the saddle and into the sea-grasses, and bury my face against her naked skin.

Were I not a complete fool, I thought, I would wait until she paid me the compliment of a moment’s inattention, and have her off horseback and into that sack I have long promised her.

Except that, after Dead Man’s Place, I do not believe I can violate her will in that way.

My hope must be that the situation doesn’t permit murder. Which I admit, were I Doctor Robert Fludd, I would make as near certain as humanly possible—and his humanity is less fallible than most. Therefore it’s probable, at least on this occasion, that I can prevent she and I from coming to open conflict.

“Swords, pistols, wits,” I said. “Depend on them; watch each other’s backs. Now: we ride.”

In a scuffle of sand, we galloped the beasts up from the sea-grass, slowing as we rode under the pines of Hako Promontory. A scatter of sampans fished where the water broke over rocks, twenty yards out from the land. I moved us deeper into the trees. *No reason there should not be a man with an arquebus out there.*

The further out along the promontory, the scarcer the pine trees grew. The hooves of the horses thudded on rich green grass, eaten down by deer. Briefly, I was taken back to the hunting chases cut through the forests of King Henri. The smell of this sea reminded me how very far away I was from France.

Glancing back towards the mainland showed me only the village; the small peaked roofs alone distinguishable in the haze. *Not a hunting chase*, I thought suddenly.

Prompt on that, Dariole spoke, her eyes bright. “Normandy, messire. Doesn’t it remind you of that beach, in Normandy?”

“I see them,” Gabriel interrupted, with a slight movement of his head that a man watching would not notice. “Directly ahead. Two of them.” He paused. “Only two of them.”

Towards the end of the promontory, the pines clumped; then thinned down first to open earth, and a strip of white sand beach. A torii gate showed half-hidden in the last grove of trees. Past that, two men stood on the beach, with only the sea beyond.

Dariole looked across at me from her saddle. The sun has marked her face, I realised. She is as brown as the peasant girls at Brissac, getting in the harvest. The gap of her missing tooth showed as she smiled broadly. The memory of how she lost it hurt me to the heart.

“I knew what I was getting into,” Dariole said firmly. “Caterina was right, messire.”

Without warning, she jammed her heels into the flanks of her horse.

I had not seen—or had not noticed, it seeming so natural a thing to me—that she had put on spurs.

The dun, being of Nihon, was in no way used to spurs; he reared up, almost unseating her, and I by the width of a finger avoided both his front hooves crashing down onto my thigh and saddle.

I reined in hard, feeling the straw bindings that the Nihonese use instead of metal horse-shoes lock in the wet grass, and managed to stop my horse bolting.

Dariole’s rearing mount circled, kicked Gabriel’s gelding—which reared up in turn, backed two steps, swung about, and bolted back into the pines.

“Gabriel!” *He’s let it get the bit!*

Dariole’s spurs gouged bloody channels down the dun’s flanks.

The animal abruptly charged forward at a flat gallop: only luck taking it in the direction of the promontory’s end.

I rammed my heels into my mount, slashing him with the ends of the reins—he threw up his head and backed, no easier to move forward than if he were hard up against a wall. “Merde! *Dariole!*”

Two tiny figures, down on the white sand at the end of the promontory, looked and pointed.

My horse backed, circled; would respond neither to whip nor rein. I flung myself out of the saddle, abandoning him, and began to run at full speed over the lush grass. *I may catch her—if she stops—if her mount misbehaves again. . . .*

It felt as if I ran through glue; quicksand; deep mud. I do not move slowly when I run. For all that, she dwindled away in front of me, past the pines and the torii gate.

Her horse pecked and stumbled, out in the open ground before the beach.

I heard a thin, seagull-like cry.

The horse stood, head down, reins trailing.

I drew in a breath to call her name, and Dariole struggled up to her feet beside the lamed animal.

Pounding on towards the narrow ribbon of beach, I realised I could make out the two men.

Robert Fludd.

And beside him, Tanaka Saburo. *God damn his Judas face.*

Breath heaving, I sprinted over the hoof-bruised grass. Ahead of me, Dariole reached down to pull off her spurs and drop them. She limped slowly onward, between infant pines too scant to hide men in their cover. Exposed to the sampan boats fishing on the sea.

No shot rang out.

No other men emerged from behind me, from the thicker pines.

Only the two men stood at the end of Hako Promontory.

Sweat ran into my eyes. A short, stocky samurai in a brilliant ochre and blue kamashino, over green kosode and kabakama. *Is that Saburo? Or is it just the expense of his dress confuses me?*

Beside him, Robert Fludd.

No doubt in my mind—a European in doublet and trunk-hose, all in sober greens and greys, the sun making a white disc of his face above his small ruff. A skinny man, by his calves, who should be wearing a robe to give him bulk.

Yes, I am not liable to forget.

Saburo strode forward.

“Stop!” The same deep, authoritative booming command.

Dariole slowed, halted, fifty yards from Robert Fludd, thirty from Saburo.

I pounded up level with her and stopped, bent over, hands on my thighs, gasping. As soon as I could straighten, I dropped one hand heavily on to her shoulder, pinning her where she stood. *She has tried and I have prevented it!*

There was not enough cover for Gabriel to follow behind me and flank Saburo. We stood as exposed as the samurai and Robert Fludd.

“Is that Fludd?” Dariole wiped sweat off her face, breathing hard, and shaded her eyes with her hand.

“The gaijin. *Is that him?*”

“You do not recognise—? You’ve never met the man!” I corrected myself, struck suddenly with wonder. *To come halfway across the world, only knowing a man from his description!*

“Saburo described him—in the Southwark house. I saw him once. From a distance. And I’ve got a sketch, from Milord Cecil’s files.” She remained staring forward, her eyes narrowed, squinting against the sun. “I thought he’d be more impressive.”

I did not release my grip on her shoulder.

“Doesn’t take being impressive—to let other men do the dirty work.” I glared at Saburo Tanaka, now he came forward to within conversational distance, including him in my anger.

Saburo held up his hand. The folds of a paper fan caught the light.

The off-shore fishing boats turned as one, men rowing them in to the beach behind him. Thirty or so men in cheap armour, carrying thin long spears, climbed out and splashed ashore, taking up ranks behind Robert Fludd.

Dariole muttered, “What the *hell!*”

“I am sorry, Dari-oru, Rosh’-fu’.” Saburo called across the space between us with no apparent effort, his voice deep and clear. “Honour means I must defend this man. The Shogun needs him. We must talk, here. Declare peace.”

A quick glance counted me forty of his *hashagar*, in rank and file behind Fludd. Are they as disciplined as they seem, when it comes to fighting? How much may I hazard on the chance?

A second boat landed, closer up the promontory to us. “Fishermen” stripped off their loose kosode and picked up long-barreled teppo from the bottom of the boat. *Nihonese-made or imported, they are still muskets.*

Saburo walked a few paces aside to speak to the officers among his heavily armed “peasants.” I saw how his face seemed thinner, his hair showed more grey; and he had shaved the front of his head. Two sword-hilts projected from his obi. His hands were not near them.

Fludd stayed back, all but in with the first rank of the other soldiers. The distance.... Over-long for an accurate pistol shot on my part; not over-long for a volley of musket-fire to shred us.

“If you play me another such trick,” I said to Dariole, keeping my voice steady, “You’ll get no closer to revenge than a teppo blowing your head off—and it may be mine! Do you understand me?”

Dariole nodded without looking at me or speaking.

“I fear that lacks commitment, mademoiselle.”

Saburo’s officer yelped something.

“Monsieur Saburo!” I pointed behind me. “My servant Gabriel Santon is like to come out of these woods. Be pleased not to shoot him.”

“Hai.” Saburo glanced over his shoulder and grunted.

That sound, familiar as it was, took me clear back to London. I could not restrain contempt. “You wanted a Nostradamus of your very own? For the King of the Japans? That should always have been in my mind, monsieur. I reprove myself for not thinking of it.”

Dariole said nothing.

Her gaze fixed on Fludd, not Saburo—although she might well have blamed him also; the samurai having been there when she was in the Tower, and on the road to Wookey, and being fully cognisant of every action taken by Robert Fludd. And, afterwards, thus as much of a Judas to her.

She ignored Saburo.

I knotted a handful of the shoulder of her kosode in my fist.

“Do nothing.” I managed to look about me, ostensibly casual. “So M. Saburo is a traitor? So. Offer any man a precious resource, and he will take it. That is human nature—which, I have often thought, is much more like that of Judas than any of the other Apostles.”

Saburo turned away from his soldiers. “Rosh’-fu’, this is difficult for me.”

I let him see me look at his *hashagar* troops. “Evidently.”

“My duty to you and my duty to Tokugawa.” He scowled across the distance between us. “Dari-oru-sama! Furada doesn’t die at your hands. Furada-san has told me this himself. He made calculation on the ship.”

“Yes; he calculated we’d be fool enough to come here and be killed,” I said bitterly. *Why does a man ignore his instincts and walk into an ambush? I knew these men must be here!*

A glance to my side told me why.

Because she would be here whether or not I am. Whether she could ride, or whether she had to walk until her feet bled. I am merely here with her. Even if we stand diametrically opposed: and she needs Fludd dead, and I need him to live; I will still keep her out of any harm I may.

Saburo turned his black gaze on Dariole. He called, across the open ground, “I defend Furada! Don’t attack him. I don’t want to kill you, Darioru. My duty to the Shogun means I will, if you force me.”

Dariole stared.

“I regret and beg pardon.” Saburo bowed. “Shall I tell Furada now that you consent to speak with him, Rosh’-fu’-san? *He* desires peace.”

In the French that I badly hoped Fludd had not taught Saburo, I said, “Go along with this, mademoiselle, or we are dead men here and now.”

A long moment ticked by. Sweat rolled down my back, under my kimono. Dariole gave a single nod, and seemed to shrink into herself.

“Tell him we’ll talk!” I called, at the same time releasing my grip on Dariole. I flexed cramped fingers.

Saburo bowed sharply, turned about, and stomped back towards his first troop of *hashagar*, and Fludd. They spoke. Fludd took the samurai’s arm in European fashion, and took a turn or two up and down on the beach, where thin grass grew out of the sand. The soldiers leaned on their twelve-foot spears. The scent of burning match-cord drifted across the yards between us.

“I do not believe I ever asked if you could swim, mademoiselle.” I looked down at her. “In more than a few feet of the Thames-river.”

No glimmer of recognition or a smile crossed her face. She watched Fludd as if she watched the gates of Paradise shut in her face. Saburo gave Fludd a curt nod, spoke to the officer of that troop, and then strode over to the flanking squad.

“I mention this, mademoiselle, because there will likely be more men in the trees behind us now, and swimming may be one better method of escape. Depending on how well they shoot their muskets—”

—*she isn’t listening*, I realised.

“Dariole—”

Pain jolted through my gut; knocked me breathless, and down on one knee.

I could realise it only in retrospect—with all of a duellist’s speed of reaction she dropped her hand to her dagger, drew, and slammed it back into me, just below the joining of my ribs.

I fell, straining for air through glass-filled lungs.

No blood! I realised, crouching on the earth, bent over; arms clutching involuntarily across my belly.

The *pommel* of her dagger—why?

Dariole moved forward, not stopping—she walked with a sure, direct stride, anger showing in her clenched fists. Her face was set.

“D—!” I could not get breath to shout out or move. *And I thought her move made when she spurred her horse. . . .*

She went forward towards the end of the promontory, looking neither to right nor left, immune to the noise and shouting that began. There was barely a split second for the *hashagar* and Saburo both to see her coming. The sun glinted back off her hair, that shone as she walked faster, picking up her pace. The soldiers lowered their spears and lifted the teppo; Saburo cuffed one man, bellowing orders over the noise and shouting. No man fired.

Saburo strode forward, away from his men, to intercept her. Coming across on a diagonal, to cut between her and Fludd.

“No!” Hobbling up to my feet, pain catching my chest, vision blurring; I dragged one of the wheel-lock pistols out of my kimono.

I cannot guarantee who I’ll hit.

Saburo smoothly drew his cattan-blades as he walked towards her. Dariole strode on as if she didn’t see, her gaze fixed on Robert Fludd. I could only think *No, don’t do it, never go into a fight angry—!*

She’s not angry. She’s in a cold fury.

The samurai’s two swords took the slightest amount of light from the air and flashed it back like mirrors. Two curved blades, heavy as sabres or broadswords.

Fludd stared across the white sand at Dariole, his expression avid.

This is what he’s calculated. That she’ll attack. And she’ll die. She’s angry, she’ll make a mistake, she’ll die.

I brought up my pistol; every man of the nearest troop of *hashagar* pointed their muskets at me.

Dariole drew her blade as she walked. The same thirty-six-inch Italian rapier that I brought to her at Wookey. She fumbled her dagger in her other hand, almost dropping it. I knew, from that, what fury must surge through her veins, how it will cloud her judgement, ruin reaction-time, leave her dead on the samurai blade.

Am I to bear this: Fludd making Saburo her murderer and I still must keep him alive—?

All of it happened in a few seconds: while a man might tell twenty heart-beats.

Dariole walked forward, not breaking stride, beginning almost to run towards the samurai. Not until then did I realise she saw him in her path. Saburo raised the point of his cattan-blade, a frown appearing on his face. She called out something, I could not hear what.

My hand clenched, white-knuckled, on the pistol. *I dare not fire at them so close together!*

I must do *something*.

Dariole broke into a run, straight at the Nihonese man. Rapier-point out at full stretch, and she didn't stop coming, she ran on—almost running onto the chisel-point of the samurai's blade, and Saburo curved fluidly and expertly into a long lunge, and thrust instantly home.

I heard myself make a stunned noise.

On the instant he struck, her left arm came up, deliberately blocking the thrust. Blood gouted; flew out in a long, curving string on the air.

Bright metal stuck in; jutted out from the other side of her flesh.

As if it were the sole focus of my vision, I saw his cattan-blade jammed between the radius and ulna bones of her forearm; stuck straight *through* her forearm—

Still coming on, no break in her pace, Dariole thrust her left arm forward, pushing it *up* the cattan-blade—bone grating against steel—and grabbed the metal disc of the sword's guard, her fingers locking into the holes cut out of the iron.

Blood doused her hand, her arm; streamed like river-water off the point of her elbow.

In the same second Dariole's rapier licked out, took Saburo's smaller cattan-blade; made it a flickering whirl of steel that thudded into the dust as she knocked it from his hand.

Tightly gripping his long cattan-blade's guard, she yanked the weapon towards her. Hauled Saburo towards her, his sword immobilised; pulled him into her own thrust with her rapier. *Inside his guard*—

Shock held my chest rigid. I couldn't breathe.

Dariole's rapier blade glinted in the sun and winked out.

Saburo looked down at his stomach with surprised wonder.

Dariole thrust deeper into his body, pushing forward, leaning all her weight into it. Saburo staggered heavily back, Dariole gripping his sword-hilt tenaciously. Her rapier's razor-edge yanked in a series of jerky movements across his belly; sliced back up towards his rib cage—

Her rapier-blade twisted.

The cattan-blade's hilt fell out of his hand.

Still with his sword stuck through her arm, Dariole yanked her rapier's length out of his flesh. Back out of Saburo's stomach, above his navel.

He staggered back a step, Dariole advanced; the impaling sword trailing grotesquely behind her.

His men yelled; shouted.

Saburo fell onto the sand, first on his knees, then over onto his side.

Dariole collapsed down, one knee touching the sand. Her rapier fell out of her hand. She staggered upright again. She did not look at Fludd, where the man stood. She stared down at Saburo on the ground.

Loud, imperative noise burst from the *hashagar* soldiers; shattering the shock that held me.

I made it to Dariole at a limping, breathless dead run, tensing against the impact of musket-balls.

The *hashagar* soldiers in the front rank moved.

A score of them grabbed hold of Robert Fludd.

Rochefort, Memoirs

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I knelt down, seized her, and held her steady; gritted my teeth, and drew out the inch-wide long blade before the weight of it mangled her flesh still more.

It pours, not spurts; the artery is safe—

She fell back: I caught her under the arms, my hands instantly covered in blood. “A surgeon! A moi! A surgeon here!”

“Messire,” Dariole said, sounding bewildered. “I hurt Saburo....”

The sea-wind whipped at her hair, bringing the smell of salt and fish and blood.

Her own blood, pouring out of her butchered arm.

“Whoreson bastards! A doctor—physician—namban igaku!” I could call for gaijin medicine, if not for a doctor. Even as I spoke, I wrenched at the sleeve-cloth of my kosode, ripping it out of the rest of my garment and wrapping it tightly about her forearm.

The cotton instantly reddened, soaked through.

I ripped the remainder of the kosode over my head and bound it over the first makeshift bandage, yanking off my obi-belt to tie it down.

“We’ll go!” I got one hand under her arm, and drew my rapier. Not that this will stop a teppo....

In the bright sunlight, and the souging of the sea-wind through pines, the *hashagar* stood still, to a man.

Footsteps hammered behind me—and resolved into Gabriel Santon, running from a place where I would have sworn the pines gave no cover sufficient for a man.

“Oh, Jesu! that was brutal!” Gabriel muttered. “Monsieur, is she alive? Will she live?”

“She may if we leave here—” I broke off.

One of the Nihonese soldiers came forward at a dead run; an officer by his armour.

I raised my sword.

He fell prostrate to the ground, head in the sand half-way between Saburo and I, and rattled off words too fast for me to comprehend.

Sluggish, shocked and thick, Saburo’s voice spoke from the ground. “He’ll hold Furada, Rosh’-fu’. Until you’re ready. They’re under my orders, my ashigaru.”

I stared.

Held by the men in Tanaka Saburo’s colours, Fludd yelled out “*Traitor!*” and then himself shrieked high as a sea-bird, although I could not see how they hurt him.

Saburo raised himself up on his elbows.

Sweat ran down his forehead. His clothes were soaked red from chest to thigh, blood pooling and running into the sand under him, and around him, blackening the silver. He looked down at himself.

“A seppuku cut.” Despite the glassy skin and sweat, he smiled. “Thank you, Dari-ko.”

Her weight slid out of my hand. She dropped to her knees, and crawled forward the three or four feet between herself and the samurai.

I came out of my stupor and got her under the arms again, lifting her, helping her across to him. She sank on her knees before Saburo’s body.

The *hashagar* officer scuttled forward to kneel behind Saburo, supporting him.

Dariole, collapsed down, echoed, ““Thank you?’ How can you say thank you!”

“It’s an honourable cut. Honourable death.” Saburo made a movement with his head, as if he would have bowed. I saw his fingers dug nails into his palms.

“Gabriel, do we have any drink?”

Gabriel stood; looked about for the strayed horses.

The samurai shook his head. “I need nothing.”

“Why don’t you help him!” Dariole stared over Saburo’s head at his officer. “Why don’t you get a surgeon?”

“Because he’s dying and there isn’t time,” I said.

“There’s time,” Saburo contradicted.

I looked at him, aghast and hopeful. “Do you mean we can get help?”

Saburo gave a curt shake of his head. “The yamabushi Kata-rii-na. She told me, I can live ten hours, after the death-stroke. I’ll ask you to give me the second’s cut, when I’ve finished. Gut wound is a bad death.”

The details of the custom of seppuku have come to my attention. I cannot disagree with him.

Silent tears poured down Dariole's face. She knelt with her right hand pressed over her mouth, her left hand hanging limp, blood slowly dripping from her finger-tips.

The samurai's skin crinkled around his eyes. "I didn't know it would be you until now, kitsune, little White Fox. I didn't think you would be good enough, Dari-ko. That was samurai! Remember, no man can be stopped if he isn't afraid of death."

The wind blew cold across my chest. I considered sacrificing my shitage under-shirt to mop the blood from his belly. Already a man could see the pink of intestines squeezed out into his lap. No need to hurt him uselessly.

"I also would ask for the mercy-stroke under these circumstances." I knelt down beside Dariole, put my arm around her shoulders, and held her up. "Mademoiselle, let the man speak."

Saburo gave me a nod.

Dariole screamed hard enough to wreck her throat. "*Why?*"

I felt it shudder through her, and tightened my grip. Blood loss and grief conspired towards her collapse; only sheer determination kept her up and staring at the samurai.

"Understand, all of this, my plan." Saburo stopped, momentarily. His hesitation was the only sign of what must be agony.

The officer unstopped a bamboo water container and held it to his lips. Saburo drank.

"I asked more things of Kata-rii-na than I told you. Now you and Rosh'fu' will be the only others to know that—I've lied to Furada."

He paused to smile at the noises coming from Robert Fludd, where the European was held by the soldiers, their hands gagging him.

"And I lie to Shogun Hidetada, when I write to him," Saburo said. "But it was necessary."

"*Why did you do this!*" Dariole gasped.

His smile was more gentle than any expression I'd seen on his face before. "I spoke with Kata-rii-na. Then, I lied to Furada—*he* thinks I have brought him here to be advisor to Hidetada Shogun. Like the Anjin-sama, to Ieyass. To build an empire of Nihon."

"And you haven't?"

I realised, too late, that sarcasm is perhaps not a proper tone to adopt to a dying man.

Saburo chuckled, reached up with one bloody hand, and patted me on the shoulder. "I knew every man would believe that!"

I took his hand, and let him take out some of his pain in his grip of mine. It felt as though my bones crushed. God He knows what the belly-cut felt like.

"Every man believes in building empires." Saburo actually smiled. "Not *all* lies—I told Furada half of what Kata-rii-na tell me. That there is a terrible weapon that will be used against Nihon in three, four hundred years' time, before comet. Fire raining from the sky kills all of Nihon. All Nihon, all our enemy;

all other lands too. . . . I tell Furada, to stop it, we must build empire—Furada come to be advisor with Hidetada, Ieyasu's son. Then, Furada advisor with Iemitsu, Ieyasu's grandson. *That* is where I lied."

His hand fell away from mine. The ground all around him was soaked the black red of clotting blood. The smell caught in my throat, and I felt my gorge rise.

Saburo spoke evenly. "The rest of what Kata-rii-na truly tells me is this. That fire-rain will come *if* we have empire. No other way to stop this, but to close our country to the namban. Not conquer. No empire. To exist for ourselves, pure, alone. . . ."

In the corner of my vision, I saw Fludd slumping in the soldiers' grip.

"Fludd didn't prophesy *this*," I muttered.

Saburo gave a weak amused grunt. "Almost. Furada, that eta, wants to be another who'll steer the country from behind the Shogun. This is what he say to me, when he came to me at Whitehall."

Dariole's shoulders quivered in my grip. She said something so weak I couldn't catch it. Her face showed white and tanned together; shock and bloodlessness making her look sick. I noted with relief that the second cloth on her arm was not yet soaked through.

"Does Furada think I'm a fool?" Saburo said amiably. "He plans, he would be our secret master. . . . steer us to conquer Korea, and Chin. . . . and then on. Sow the seeds of hatred against us. The powerful are always hated. But this is not for Nihon's good. Furada doesn't care *who* has way to defeat his comet, so long as *some* land does. If way to defeat his comet comes through same weapons as fire-rain. . . . who cares for us, ne? Not like Katarii-na—Fludd thinks there are other countries left, after Nihon is gone."

Saburo switched his gaze back to Dariole and, with much effort, reached out; touching her wet fingers with his own.

She burst into noisy tears.

"Shh! *Htt!*" He shook his head in remonstrance. "You are not boy, now. *Listen.*"

She dragged her sleeve across her face. "I'm listening."

Her voice was not in her control, but the effort she put into trying made me ache.

"Furada say to me, he cannot make England-empire after Wô-ki, with King-Emperor James alive. The time has passed. I think he calculate, when he foresees I come to England-land, where to go if all things go wrong. Another island. Another sea-empire. . . ."

Saburo gripped Dariole's good hand hard enough to make her wince. I tightened my grip about her shoulders. There are no surgeons. Selfish as it might be, I could not help the desire in my mind: *She will live. She must.*

He looked at Dariole from tar black eyes. "Kata-rii-na prophesied for me. I saw her in the great caverns. She knew I would ask. I think she wanted so bad to get rid of Furada, she look out for me. . . . She told me that I might save us from most, maybe all, the fire-rain, if the land is shut off from foreigners. Told me how I do that, how I should take Furada here, to Nihon. . . . Now, I myself will die at a gaijin's hand—and this will discredit Furada, and all he says, and shift the balance, for Nihon to be closed."

His smile was all satisfaction, all peace.

“She said, I would know the gaijin who kills me, when I saw. When I see you, Dari-oru, I think it will be Rosh’-fu’ kills me, after I kill you. *Because* I kill you. I didn’t think that you’re good enough to kill me. Now, I’m glad I’m wrong.”

Dariole only stared at him. “I don’t understand.”

Saburo reached up and touched her cheek with his blood-wet fingers. “You’re all three gaijin. So, how it will look to Hidetada? There’s been a murder of a samurai, who has not long come back from Europe—and three gaijin have run away. Obvious, they are all guilty. Conspirators. How can we trust these foreigners? They must be plotting against Nihon! Lord Hidetada will support every effort to declare gaijin and Kirishitans and Jesuits forbidden from Nihon, perhaps for always. And in three, four hundred years, the fire-rain will touch us only a little, if at all.”

I knew that later I would think of what he said. Now, I could do no more than listen, stunned, and hold Dariole’s shaking body.

“I killed you!” she said.

“Yes. Thank you,” Saburo repeated. “Now Lord Hidetada and Lord Ieyas’ close the country, like Lord Ieyas’ wanted. I wanted to tell true, why I lie to Hidetada Shogun—true is that, Ieyas’ is always my master.”

He smiled at me. And looked back at her.

“You kill me, Dari-ko; that wipes out my debt to you. I have owed you my life, since the other beach.”

She stared at him, outraged. “*No.*”

Tanaka Saburo laughed. Weakly, and with pain harsh in it, but nonetheless a laugh. I sweated at the knowledge of what it must cost him.

Dariole looked at him, speechless.

“Is funny, little White Fox,” Saburo said. His body lay still, all except his hands and feet. They now began to shift in very small movements, constantly. *Pain.*

“Funny,” Saburo repeated. “On the ships as we come here, I watch Furada at his mathematics. He tells me all where you are. He tells me to fight. He tells me we can fight *this* day, here and now—because his calculating tells him I win.”

He gave Fludd a look of scathing contempt.

“You skilled,” he said, turning back to Dariole. “I am a humble captain of ashigaru, but not bad swordsman. How can Furada calculate every cut, in swordfight? Would need more than three parts of a year!”

“It needs ten years,” I said. “Or so it did, the last time.”

“Eh?”

“No matter.” I shook my head. “Fludd has reason to want to be rid of Dariole and I.”

“I let him send a messenger to you. I knew he’d fail in all his plans.” Saburo made a motion that would have been a shrug, and fat, clear beads of sweat appeared on his forehead. He stared, for a moment, and then spoke, his voice unwavering.

“None of these my men speak any namban language. They have their orders to witness what they see—a quarrel between Furada and other gaijin, then their captain murdered. They will *not* tell they have ship off-shore, sailing to Goa—my orders.” He gave a sudden violent grin. “I owe you half horse, Rosh’-fu’! Ship will have to do.”

I thought of the Normandy beach. “Indeed it will.”

He added, “You go, Dari-oru-ko. Need gaijin discredited and *gone*, not dead. If they interrogate, they find no namban plot. Also, I don’t want you and tall samurai here crucified, common criminals.”

Dariole’s body shuddered against mine. Pain and shock, yes; but most of it grief. Tears sheeted down her face in silence.

Saburo’s eyes shifted; I thought that he took in the dark blue of the waters, and the winds in the pines of the promontory. His gaze met mine.

“I understand, now, why I didn’t die when my lord Kobayakawa Hideaki did. I was left behind, to perform this one great task. Now I can die peacefully, and hope always to find a Nihon in which to be re-incarnated. Perhaps with Lord Hideaki’s spirit. One must be loyal to one’s lord, Rosh’-fu’.”

“I know.”

His tone altered, becoming harsh and practical. “I don’t want Furada dead here. Will just confuse matters. Take him away with you. Dari-oru, kill him when you’re far from Nihon. Go! Take him!”

The urgency in his tone got her up onto her feet. Swaying, and hunched over her bleeding arm, but up. She bobbed her head, as if the bow of the samurai had become automatic to her. Her voice bewildered, she said, “Good-bye, Saburo.”

The young woman hobbled across to the *hashagar*. I heard Saburo say something quietly to his officer. At the officer’s signal, the soldiers gathered around Dariole and Robert Fludd, shielding her from seeing the dying man beside me.

“Rosh’-fu’, you have good blade.” Saburo seized my wrist. “You know what duty of a second is?”

“I know enough to know I’m not worthy.” I took a deep breath. “And I know my blade isn’t sharp enough. If you desire this, give me yours.”

A smile broke out over his face, and he for one moment looked young, carefree, joyous.

“Better and better. Samurai beheaded by gaijin with own sword! Lord Tokugawa Hidetada *shit*.”

He held his hand out from his side.

I picked up his cattan-blade, heavy and beautiful in its balance and brightness. I saw him scent the grass and pines; listen to the voices, the wind, the waves.

His hand cut sharply down through the air.

Rochefort, Memoirs

Blue sky and blue sea set together disorient the world.

I wondered, on the deck of the *Santa Theodora*, whether the sea rose far above my head, or the sky continued down under the ship. A week out of Chikuzen province and I stood watching the wet, blue backs of dolphins shining as they leaped, and could not tell whether or not they danced in the sky.

By the end of this first week, I accepted M. Saburo's word for what he had done—accepted that this ship was not a trap.

Because I have seen him die for his belief.

Translucent and blue, the waters made it always worthwhile the crew dropping a line or two over-board while they sailed, pulling up brightly coloured fish which Gabriel, if not I, took much pleasure in eating. On occasion, through air-clear water, I saw rocks the colour of rubies and sulphur growing up towards the surface.

Messire Saburo had confidence enough to give his life because of what Caterina said will happen in three or four hundred years—so far away as to be unthinkable!

Leaning on the ship's rail, looking down into the unpredictable water, I reflected on Robert Fludd and his calculations. Which are the same as Suor Caterina's, in their origin.

Fludd, also, predicts the future of the world; half a millennium from today....

I have a decision to make.

Dariole stayed shut in the tiny cabin I had bribed the first mate into vacating for her; a wooden box barely bigger than the Earl of Salisbury's coach on land. She said she slept. Certainly she spent her time curled in the box-bed built into the side of the hull. She pulled the doors closed; I could not tell how she stood the humidity and the dark.

More than one decision.

Steady winds moved us west. Salt stiffened hair and clothes. Damp heat made European ruffs (no matter how much starch put into them) droop and lose shape. The officers of the Portuguese ship continued to dress as if due at some diplomatic embassy; I kept to the clothing of the Japans, grateful in that it played a further part in isolating us.

Robert Fludd I did not shackle nor bind. Where might he go, in the in-finite wastes of sea?

Prompt on that thought, I made certain that either Gabriel or I should be watching over him. There is always one escape for any man. And perhaps more than one, when a man truly sees what the future will be.

"You will pardon me my suspicions," I remarked to Fludd, where he lay in the corner below-decks that stored our meagre belongings. "I had thought you defeated before, in London, and...well. You see the result of that."

He did not move. Dim light showed me his shattered expression. His gaunt face seemed ten years older than it had on Hako Promontory. He had not spoken two words together since he saw Tanaka Saburo's severed head on the once-white sand.

Ten years of mathematical work, all put at nought. . . .

I watched the skies of the South China Sea and prayed to avoid the yellow-bruise clouds that presage storm. The Portuguese officers spoke of tuffoon, the non-European crew-members of taaifung: a great wind of Heaven sudden and swift enough to leave not even oak-wood fragments on the surface if it should pass over the *Santa Theodora*; death coming for us as precipitously as ever it had been invited by Saburo.

Dariole did not speak.

Gabriel Santon, joining me in the middle parts of the ship on our fifteenth day from Nihon, said bluntly, "What do we do now, Raoul? Take this tame monkey back to the English King, like you said? You don't think we'd get a better price in Paris—Rome, maybe?"

His sideways glance allowed me to know how much more there was to his question than the surface of it.

I said, "Fludd has predicted correctly. Where he didn't, it was because of Caterina—and she did. You and I have no way to know about the far future."

Gabriel grunted.

"But," I said, "a man might extrapolate from the one to the other. Say that, because what is predicted close at hand is true, then—well, then, Saburo was no fool to die as he did for something afar off."

Gabriel grunted again. "It's not like we can do anything about it, Raoul. We'll be lucky to get to Goa without being drowned like rats in a sewer."

My first impulse, I realised with surprise, was to go and beat out of M. Fludd how safe our journey might be.

If I have come so far as to trust his knowledge—

"Leave me to think," I said to Gabriel, and he walked away with a satisfied nod.

Knowledge is power, often. A spy knows that. Who better?

But knowledge is a killing matter, too, and a spy also knows that.

I cast my gaze up, looking at the cloth-slung masts where they diminished up into the infinite sky. So far, clear weather. But if a man could know what the ship would meet on the voyage. . . .

"Would he not have an accountability?" I said softly, to hear the words spoken making the reality come home to me. "A responsibility, to his fellow passengers, to warn them of storms—or smooth the waters, if that was in his power?"

I am not, of late years, accustomed to think in these ways. I wished I might speak again with Tanaka Saburo. We could profitably discuss together that word of his, *giri*, and how he describes duty as "burden."

He and I: both in the same position. And he has made his choice.

I closed my hands over the salt-drained wood of the ship's rail, gazing at the horizon.

Since I woke in Paris and set out to kill King Henri, I have been at the beck and call of other men. No

matter whether I have played my hand well or badly, the pack of cards has not been mine.

I have the knowledge of Doctor Robert Fludd's skill, and the possession of the man himself. This card that I may play on the Duc de Sully's behalf. And then, also... I do not know how I will do this, yet—but it is plain to me that I cannot turn my back and pretend I must leave the greater matter in the hands of kings and princes.

Kings, princes, ducs, comets.

Who else knows, and has the power to act, now, except I?

I shoved Robert Fludd brusquely across the deck of the *Santa Theodora*, and into the cabin ahead of me, ducking my head to avoid the beams.

If I am to do anything, I must first make sure that all the loose ends are tied.

Where she lay on her back in the box-bed, Dariole startled up onto her elbow—onto her right arm—with a muffled exclamation.

“Mademoiselle. This is a doctor.”

Dariole stared at me, incredulous. “You think you should bring *that* anywhere near me?”

Robert Fludd snatched in his breath and spoke thinly. “You need not have trust in me. I'm certain Master Rochefort will kill me if you don't heal, whether that stems from sabotage of your wound or mere Nature.”

Slowly, Dariole sat up. Her wounded left arm fell naturally into her lap, as if she were learning to cradle it there. “Whose idea was this?”

I gave her a nod of acknowledgement.

“And you think I'm going to let him near any wound of mine!”

Robert Fludd frowned. “I swore the physician's oath.”

“Does that have anything in it about having women raped?” Dariole kept her eyes on me, although she spoke to him. “Or kicking men in the stones, if it comes to that?”

Fludd's face coloured. I should as soon not have been reminded myself. He gazed at her for a long moment, glanced at me, and then stared down fixedly at the knots in the oak planks of the deck.

The rhythmic creak of the ship filled the silence.

“You're right.” Fludd broke the quiet. “I chose to ignore my oath. All the remorse in the world won't change what happened to you, Mistress Dariole.”

Dariole's voice was cold. “That's right.”

She rested back tailor-fashion in the box-bed, shifting with the movement of the vessel, her spine against the hull. She looked at the English physician, finally, acknowledging his presence. “Why *are* you here?”

He shrugged and spoke with what I thought was honesty.

“I prayed, when I began this, that I was right. That even if I was damned by what I had to do, that I could save the others. But—the Unborn are not here, are they, Mistress Dariole? One day they’ll be as much flesh as you are. One day we, and all this, will be dust in a grave. But this is this day, and you are alive—and hurt. Of all I’ve done, I regret your suffering the most.”

Dariole looked flatly disbelieving. “Why me?”

I saw him pull back his shoulders, straightening up in rigid pride. “Because you had no part in this except suffering. I pity you, Mistress Dariole, as blameless—”

Dariole laughed.

I winced at the depth of cynicism in the sound of it.

Not enough light fell from the unshuttered glass casements of the cabin into the enclosed bed to make her expression clear. Dariole leaned forward, her face becoming more than an unfocused blob. She stared levelly at me.

“Messire, what happened in London wasn’t my fault. Maybe. I’ll give you that. But nobody made me kill Saburo.”

She jerked herself clumsily forward to the wooden edge of the bed, the arm evidently paining her. She stabbed a finger at Robert Fludd.

“*You* didn’t make me the person who’d go straight through Saburo to get to you. That was me. All me.”

“Saburo desired it,” I said shortly.

Dariole shifted her gaze from Fludd, looking up. “He was my friend!”

“And now you have arrived at the time in life when you have killed not only enemies and casual attackers, but also a friend. What did you think it would mean, mademoiselle, when you took up the sword? Did you think revenge would be unmitigated good?”

Her eyes closed for a moment. Her face shone tired and white in the gloom. I wished I had cut my tongue out rather than spoken so to her. “Dariole, understand it or not: Messire Saburo desired to die. You gave him what he wanted.”

Tears showed in her eyes as she opened them again; glimmering in the tenebrous light. She rubbed the heel of her hand against her eye-socket.

“I know.... You’re right, messire.” Dariole shook her head: defiant. “I didn’t want to murder him, and I could hate him for that—Saburo, I mean. And I don’t want to. Because *I* did it. Not him.”

There was nothing else I might do other than put my hand out and touch her cheek.

She did not pull back. Her skin felt warm and damp with sleep-sweat. And also somewhat of a fever about her, I judged.

Determined, resting my hand heavily down on the shoulder of the silent physician, I said, “You will let this man treat you, mademoiselle. None of Saburo’s people would countenance seppuku by neglect.”

Dariole’s shoulders hunched. She looked smaller, more alone, seated in the enclosed bed. “But—*Fludd?*”

“There’s no European doctor within a thousand miles that we may use. And besides, mademoiselle, he is here and he is alive—and I intend to have it continue so.”

Fludd bit at his thin lip, absent in thought, for all that Dariole looked at him with apprehensiveness in her face, and quiet murder.

She said, “You do, do you?”

I did not react to her challenge, signalling to Fludd.

He said, “Show me your wound.”

At that hint of the authority of the physician, she reached up, single handed, and pulled undone the tie on her shitage-undershirt.

Knowing what would be the response if I offered help, I contained myself in patience, shifting with the movement of the ship. When she attempted to shuck kimono and shitage down in one I did move forward to the box-bed, loosening her obi, and easing both sleeves together down her left arm. Better I do it than he.

The crumpled cloth falling into her lap, although still held in place by her obi, did not conceal the pale curve of her shoulder and the swell of the top of her left breast. Seeing her naked flesh, I thought, *I wish I could desire you as I do when half-waking from sleep at night.*

For once, my gaze was not fixed there. She ripped the dressing off her forearm. Yards of cotton, wet with yellow fluid. I could only stare. Angry scar, swollen flesh: everything from the elbow down misshapen, red, white, weeping. *She is nowhere near as healed as she has pretended!*

I managed not to look away. “Can you move your hand?”

The merest twitch of movement in her fingers accompanied the satirical look she gave me. “I thought he was the doctor?”

Robert Fludd reached out. I let my hand stay on my dagger hilt. She permitted him to take the fingers of her cold, unused hand, and lift up her arm, flexing it at the elbow. He pushed very gently against the black-edged crevasse in her flesh, that ran from below her elbow, halfway to her wrist.

I saw fear in her gaze, but I doubted it was of Fludd. Of being crippled from this her seventeenth year onwards, perhaps. She watched him with a keen and absolute hate, that grew over the minutes that he examined her.

Fludd rested her arm down in her lap with surprising gentleness. “Fetch me a bucket of water, from over the side of the ship. I need to wash out the wound. Mistress Dariole, I warn you: this will hurt you.”

Her brows went up. She gave him a look of such sardonic irony that I was not surprised to see him flush.

His hand still holding her finger-tips, Fludd blurted out, “I’m forsworn in everything, I know, but I am a physician!”

The creaking of the planks sounded loud in the silent cabin.

She did not move. I made a signal to Fludd that he should proceed.

He glanced at Dariole. “I’ll need paper, and the master’s navigation charts, so that I may see where we

lie in relationship to the constellations. I may need to buy herbs at the next port, if they have them not in the ship's galley. There will be local substitutes for those I can't get."

Dariole lifted a shoulder—her right—and dropped it again, with the air of a Paris duellist showing how little he cared for the cast of a die.

"Do what you want. But I'll tell you this, if you need telling. It doesn't change anything between us. Not a thing. Don't ever believe you can apologise to me."

It is a beginning, I thought.

Whatever I do—and for very different reasons—I cannot afford to lose either of them.

The *Theodora* strove against the waters: I made Dariole swim every night in the warm seas, when we hove-to, watching her scarred flesh under the clear swell, and keeping a loaded pistol by me in case of sharks.

"Caterina was correct," I remarked, as she climbed back up the side of the carrack, rope finally gripped in both sun-browned hands. "You heal like a young dog."

She swam in shirt and drawers, her hair sleeked wetly back. Some of the crew, the men of south-east Asia, at least, I thought might know her for female. The Portuguese did not. She carried a knife and a grin always, as if she desired to kill a man—any man—and the *Theodora*'s crew avoided her not out of cowardice, but out of the same fear a man feels in the company of the insane.

She stretched out her arm in the sun, in sarcastic display. A mass of lumpy tissue clumped below her elbow, on upper-and under-side of her arm; turning from red to pink around the great scar that vertically cleaved her flesh. "Pretty, isn't it?"

"You have tendons, still," I remarked.

"I know. It won't ever be what it was." She looked at it as if it only rationally fascinated her; jumped to the warm deck, and padded off, leaving dark, drying footprints on the oak.

Some things are apparent to the meanest intelligence, when a man is willing to look at what's under his nose.

I am not done yet. She is broken in more than her flesh: I must find some way to heal her.

I made my way to where Robert Fludd stood at the stern rail, Gabriel beside him—Gabriel with the smile that plainly says, *He won't drown while he's with me. Until you want him to.*

I can at least trust Gabriel not to be precipitate.

"What else can you do for Dariole?" I demanded.

Robert Fludd shook his head in the manner of physicians. "I can do nothing now but let Nature heal her."

"Nature is rarely kind," I observed, and let my height provide a more subtle threat than putting my hand to my sword.

Robert Fludd's thin mouth twisted. He raked me with his gaze, and sighed, as when a master meets a

stupid pupil. “And yet—these things are not so terrible, when you consider what vast amounts of misery and disaster happen to the great mass of mankind, every day.”

Bitter self-mockery sounded in his tone.

If this is an end loose and difficult to tie, the more need of my attention.

“One thing, at least, I can conceive of, that you might do,” I said. “Will you tell me you were lying, and have spent no time thinking of how you might apologise to her? Atone?”

The marks of journeying were on Fludd, his blond hair lightened by grey at the temples. He had chopped his hair short and shaved his beard down to the minimal before Nihon; all things to confuse those who might recognise him, if by chance they arrived where he was.

Has “chance” haunted you, monsieur?

Now he went clean-shaven. He could not disguise his pale eyes, or the lineaments of his jaw and forehead: I would have known him under the weather-darkening of his skin if I saw him one in a thousand men. Let him slip away at some port and I will still find him.

“Yes. I have thought,” Fludd said quietly. He looked me in the eye. “You see how she is. I think she will kill me if I try again to offer her an apology.”

A nod from me had Gabriel’s arm locked into his, so that the scrawny man had no chance of removing himself.

“We will see if we can settle for a little less than that,” I observed.

Need him as I might do, I still cherished the expression on his face. I need not *like* this man.

“Gabriel, lead Fludd to ‘Monsieur’ Dariole’s cabin. I am to warn the captain that this physician’s latest treatment of ‘his’ arm is liable to cause pain—and that should the captain hear any man crying out, he should ignore it.”

Fludd looked sweatily white. Gabriel gave me a complicitous grin. I sought out the *Theodora*’s master and gave my message.

I found the first mate’s cabin crowded already when I returned, with the presence of Dariole, Gabriel, and Fludd. The noon’s damp heat sent condensation rolling down the wood of the hull. I ducked my head away from the beams again, looking at Dariole where she stood by the casement.

“He is yours, mademoiselle,” I said quietly.

She looked up, startled. “Mine?”

“You did not die of the rape,” I said bluntly. “Therefore, he should not die of your revenge. That is all I stipulate—because I need him alive. For the rest, settle it as you need to. Before we move on.”

“When was it *your* business to settle *my* affairs?” she demanded, her voice rasping.

Robert Fludd moved forward, two steps in the tiny cabin, to stand on the sun-spotted planks directly in front of Mlle Dariole. In the bright light from the partly open doorway, he seemed to grow hot from his ruff to his hat.

“Mistress Dariole,” he said, his voice croaking.

Dariole stared.

He reached up and removed his hat, and—awkwardly, almost over-balancing—knelt down on the deck in front of Dariole.

I shot her a look. She seemed too taken up in his presence to acknowledge anything belonging to night-games.

He said, “I apologise. I will atone.”

She spoke almost over his voice. “What are you going to offer me? I want to know. What... *what* do you think you could do, to make up for...?”

“You were violated.” Fludd brought the word out with real courage, considering how close she was to him. Stress made his face look strained. “Be-cause of my actions. Or lack of them. I know that you are of good family. I made calculations, Mistress Dariole. You were a virgin, even after your marriage, and now your maidenhead is taken by a man not your husband. Your family will disown you for having lain with a man unlawfully.”

An ugly red blotched her cheeks. “So?”

His thin face peered at her, his expression resolute.

“The papist marriage you made in France cannot be annulled—any examination would show you no longer virgin. However, your husband, Philippe, will not interfere if you remain outside France. Come back to London. I will give you back your honour. It’s all I can do to atone. Allow me—allow me to offer you my family name. I will marry you.”

Surprise stunned me.

I cannot grab her dagger-hand in time to stop her killing him; have not room enough to draw, myself, in his defence—

Dariole turned about—and opened the window, letting in warm air, and the sound of the slop of waves along the sides of the ship. Her head came back: she breathed deeply in.

Without looking round, she echoed, “‘Marry’ ...”

“I know it is not what you want.” Fludd spoke surprisingly gently, where he knelt. “A woman has only her good name, and I offer you mine. What else can I give you?”

I caught sight of Gabriel Santon, crammed up against the doors of the closed box-bed, his mouth a round O of amazement. I realised there must be little difference between he and I.

“Marry,” Dariole repeated.

“In name only!” Robert Fludd sounded momentarily flustered. He gave her a look of despair. “Bruno’s Formulae tell me a man’s action, not his mind. Still less a woman’s mind. I am no better than the next man when it comes to dealing with the outliers in a group. I see what people will do, but I am unskilled at telling why they will do it.”

Dariole turned about. Her gaze crossed mine, so intensely that it took my breath away.

She looked down at the astrologer-doctor.

By her face, I judged that she had no words for how deep was the misunderstanding between them.

I said, "I require him to be able to work, mademoiselle."

Other than the by-now bone-deep reflex of shifting with the *Santa Theodora*, Dariole did not move. I heard orders shouted outside: some or other of the sails on the ship's three masts needing adjustment. Sunlight from the casement began to move across the deck, illuminating patches of ill-shaved white stubble on Robert Fludd's cheek. I glanced at Gabriel.

The wide-shouldered man shifted, automatically, to block any exit from the cabin. He rumbled, "You can do a lot to a man without killing him."

I spoke, over Fludd's head, to Dariole. "Choose. Leave him alive, but choose. What will you do with him?"

Dariole stared down at the kneeling man.

She made a gesture that started tentatively, and ended with authority. "Hold him up."

I have experience moving the recalcitrant bodies of men. I easily got my hand to Robert Fludd's wrist and elbow, lifted them up behind his back, and brought his thin body sharply up onto his feet.

He cried out.

She drew back her empty hand and slapped him across the face.

Blood splattered my sleeve as his lip split under the impact.

I rode back with it, holding him in that grip that, if he attempted to wrench himself out of it, would dislocate the big joint of his shoulder. Bloody spray filled the dim brown-gold air as Fludd tried to speak. He seemed barely to know I held him: all his attention focused on Dariole.

"'Marry.' 'Apologise,'" Dariole echoed. "Atone."

The words sent a pang through me from chest to belly.

I would not stand where Fludd stands now. That would mean I should have injured her beyond the bearing of it. It puts me in mind of Nagasaki and how all liking, all affection, was gone from her voice.

If this were a game, I might play it. But off the stage, and in cold reality...it is unbearable.

Dariole took her dagger out of its scabbard.

The light caught it: a glimmer of silver and blue in the steel. She touched her thumb to the edge, and took it away. A thin red line showed on her skin. Her eyes moved, looking at Fludd. She did not raise her head. She stared at him from under her lashes.

Disturbed insects buzzed out through the cabin doorway. The musty smell of too much human inhabitancy made me wish to stop my nose. But what we do here will not be seen, and so the concealment, I suppose, is worth much revulsion.

She is not a child, I thought. If she desires, truly, to kill him, can I force myself to be fast enough to prevent it? Even with what hangs on this?

Fludd gasped, in my grip, and managed to speak. "Forgive me!"

Dariole looked back at her knife. “Oh, now, that’s just silly.”

Robert Fludd flung himself into a paroxysm.

Almost, he took me by surprise. Shorter than I, and thinner, he was still no weak man; he thrashed, fuelled by the panic men have when they at last truly believe that they can be hurt.

I shifted my grip, hooking one leg over his and scissoring him close under my ankle. I caught hold of his ruff, so that in straining he could only choke himself, and dragged his wrist further up his back, drawing his elbow and shoulder taut.

That allowed me, crammed up against the ceiling beams as I was, to look down over Robert Fludd’s shoulder at Dariole.

She, far too calmly, reached out to the front of his trunk-hose.

“I’m sorry!” Fludd bawled, loud as a bull calf.

I was not sorry I had no hand to gag him, nor did I call on Gabriel. *Dariole deserves to hear this*. Even if, by the disgust on her face, she is used to duelists who are far too willing to die rather than beg. . . .

She opened his hose, and slit open the front of his drawers with her dagger.

“Please!” Fludd wept. “I’m sorry! I swear! I’m sorry!”

His voice pitched high with terror. I went hot with shame for him.

She reached into his clothes and scooped out his cod, flesh a pathetic white against the grey cloth of his trunk-hose. She put the sharp edge of her dagger into the root of his prick, among the sparse hair.

Gabriel, by the door, rumbled, “Jesu!” in both admiration and disgust.

Fludd’s body jerked in my arms: straining and choking.

When I have seen Mlle Dariole kill, it is with sheer joy, as on the beach at Normandy, or, as later, with grief or rage.

I said softly into Fludd’s ear, not knowing until then that I would speak: “You made her the woman who can do this.”

White showed all around the pupils of his eyes, and slime ran out of his nose.

Tears began to roll down Dariole’s cheeks, one after another.

Her voice did not shake or quiver. “You’re not sorry. You just don’t want me to kill you. You’re lying in your teeth. I ought to cut off *this* and put it up your arse.”

Dariole reached out to touch Fludd’s prick. Her face showed an expression of disgust as she pried the wrinkled small thing up by the foreskin. She stretched the limp flesh out from his belly.

If it had been I, facing her now, I should have begged to be spared too—and not for erotic excitement. Did I not think, once, in London: she has the capacity to be a killer who kills without any remorse?

I felt my sac contract, and my testes desire to crawl back up into my body.

Dariole tightened her grip, taking a pinch of Robert Fludd’s foreskin between her thumb and finger,

pulled his whole penis until it stretched out from his belly, and slashed her dagger down.

Blood spurted, white flesh instantly reddened.

Fludd shrieked like a woman in child-bed. His body reared up in my arms.

That startled me. Unprepared, I clenched every grip I had on him. His whole body jerked, involuntarily, away from her; a crack reverberated through my flesh.

His right arm came limp, fluid, in my grasp.

All the full weight of him slumped back against me.

Dariole opened her hand.

Only the tip of his foreskin lay in her palm. The merest pinch of flesh: less lost than a Jew does.

Gabriel blurted out, "Good God, will you cut a man to pieces by inches!"

I grunted; even a slight man's unconscious weight is heavy, and Fludd was not so slight. "He's fainted."

Dariole stared.

Slowly, slowly, the intense look went out of her eyes.

One hand came up, and she touched the shoulder of Robert Fludd's doublet, where his flesh bulged under the cloth. She pushed at his arm, senseless and hanging limp as cloth itself.

"He has dislocated the shoulder," I said. "Or broken it. It can be put back." I paused. "If you wish to. He will have the use of his arm again. It is, however, an easy and useful way to cause pain to a man, while it is so dislocated."

She nipped a tiny part of her lip between her teeth. The look she gave me had apprehensiveness in it. I went hot with shame of a quite different kind. *Yes, I know these things; it is a part of my profession.*

"Are you done?" I said. "There will not be another chance."

"Put him down," she ordered.

Nodding to Gabriel got him to open the doors of the box-bed. I felt Dariole's gaze on me as I draped the unconscious man on the pallet.

Moving the out-of-place joint as I lowered him made him mew, half coming out of his faint. His head lolled. I laid him flat. His prick and balls caught in the flap of his breeches, hanging out in his lap, the cloth speckled with blood.

This is no new situation for an agent of the state.

It has been a comfort to me, in the past, that it was not my place to suggest either a surgeon, or a knife into the soft spot behind a man's ear.

Now....

I began, "Dariole—"

Her skin had gone yellow and white together; she looked as sick as Magister Robert Fludd himself. The

sense of something, if not irreparable, then at least irreparably sordid, made me flinch internally.

She said, as if to herself, “How can he be sorry? He knew what they’d do. He didn’t stop them. He *sent* them so Luke could do it.” She looked down at the blood on her hand. “Luke made me wet inside with this.”

My vision became a flat white tunnel; I fixed every ounce of self-control on not reaching out, taking Fludd’s neck in my hand, and snapping his vertebrae.

Dariole moved closer to the bed. I saw her survey the indisputable blood soaking the fly of his trunk-hose; the disfigured shoulder and useless arm. A line of white shone under Fludd’s eyelids.

It cannot have been more than three minutes by the clock: it seemed to me that she stood and looked at him forever.

Squatting down beside the bed, staring into his half-open eyes, Dariole wiped her blood-spattered fingers, and the fragment of his skin and flesh, down Fludd’s doublet.

Her knuckles jarred his arm, free now of its socket. He whimpered, eyes rolling, mouth wet.

She said, “You remember me. Every time you take a piss, you look down, and *you remember me.*”

I have preserved him, I thought, looking at Fludd’s semi-conscious but living body.

Now I must decide what use I will make of a man who—given time—can tell what Time itself will do.

Gabriel Santon brought a tiny elderly brown man up from the forecastle, who jerked Doctor Robert Fludd’s arm back into his shoulder-joint with one seemingly careless snap.

I shut Fludd in Dariole’s cabin, on public pretence of his “accidental injury” needing to mend, and watched Dariole herself sleep out on the deck, under the brilliant stars. If I slept an hour or so in the day—and Gabriel a different hour—I found we might both serve to guard Fludd and Mlle Dariole by shifts at night.

“Don’t tell her we’re watching her,” Gabriel muttered one night, at change of guard. “God alone knows what she’d do to us.”

“She has been given much to consider,” I said. “She has not yet become used to the idea of not having killed Monsieur Fludd.”

“Nor have I.” Gabriel shot me a look. “But you’re planning something. I know the signs of *that.*”

The *Santa Theodora* sailed into the mouth of the Madovi River, and so upstream until we docked at her destination of Goa.

This western coast of Hind appealed to me, lush as it seemed. I am perhaps at heart a traveller. I took us lodgings behind the new Basilica of Bom Jesus, locking Fludd in whenever I had cause to leave the rooming-house—Fludd’s slow recovery from his injuries making him a recluse in any case.

Not unwise, I thought, it being a Portuguese colony. A man can never tell how Spanish agents will react to the English. Or the French, if it comes to it.

I set about seeking a ship sailing further west, otherwise bided my time, and—on the fourth day after our

landing at Goa—felt it at last to be ripe.

“Quen vim Goa excuse de ver Lisbon,” I observed. “Who has seen Goa, need not see Lisbon.”

Mlle Dariole, one hand on her rapier hilt, looked about the cobbled square of the cathedral and raised her brows. Her lips twisted in an awkward attempt at a smile. “I don’t remember *those* in Lisbon...”

It was unclear to me whether she referred to the feather-leaved trees surrounding the centre of the square, or the parrots, pigeons, and lizards that infested the place.

Having returned to dressing in doublet and hose, in preparation for landing at Goa, Dariole had abandoned them for kosode and hakama as soon as the wet heat soaked in. As with Lisbon itself, a man may not move out of doors between the hours of noon and four. I urgently desired the onset of evening, for the cool—and for the evening tide.

Avoiding the brightly and strangely dressed crowds as potential eavesdroppers, I steered her into the Basilica—more for the welcome chill of the Baroque stone after the heat outside than for any religious consolation. True, the white marble of the side-chapels had a variety of lurid gold-leaf decoration that one might see in any church in Lisbon. But, like the numerous Hind and Arab tongues I heard among the parishioners, as well as the ever-constant Portuguese, it had a streak of intriguing strangeness.

I knelt in one side-chapel.

“Are you content?” I said.

Mlle Dariole dropped neatly down beside me, gazing up at the candles and the porcelain white face of Our Lady, and not across at me.

“I wanted to hurt him.” Her voice broke the hot silence. “It’s *horrible*.”

“Yes,” I said.

“And it’s like somebody lifted a weight off me.”

“Yes. That, too.”

“Is this always what it’s like? If I killed him, would I feel any worse than this?”

“I still do not propose to allow you his death,” I said. “I will explain why in a moment, now you are well enough to hear it.”

She ignored me. Her hands shook where she clasped them in prayer. “I didn’t want to...make game with him.”

Her eyes, in the cathedral’s shade, were big and dark.

“You mean, that belongs to night-play,” I said. “Not the daylight world.”

The ancient scent of candles and incense, familiar from childhood, is odd when mixed with the spices drifting in from the cooking-fires outside, and the flower-scent of Goa. Bright scarlet and green bird’s feathers blew in along the stone floors, with the dust. Almost Lisbon, almost France; not quite either.

Mlle Dariole’s expression became intense. “Messire...you always wanted to be on your knees to me,

didn't you?"

At another time I might have supposed such a question to be asked to humiliate me. Now, I saw it as a request for reassurance. I glanced across, unafraid to watch her while I supposedly prayed.

"Mademoiselle, I have never been afraid of you in the way that Fludd was. I do not know how long I desired to be at your feet before I let myself know it. Let us say...some considerable time."

She flashed me a smile that vanished on the instant. "He was scared of me. What happens if I think I...want that again? I don't think that would be good for me. Mixing the two: the night-world and..."

Her voice trailed off.

I said, "You will never have that kind of fear out of me, mademoiselle."

Her face I thought a picture: half-affronted, and half desiring to be reassured that indeed it was so.

I could not help but smile at her. "I confess that it occurred to me, some time ago, that you have degraded me, whipped me, and held me up to public humiliation—but you have never hurt me. I regret to tell you, made-moiselle, that I know I am...safe...with you."

She turned her head to give me a small glare. Without her hat, tendrils of short hair were stuck by sweat down over her forehead. The fullness of her lower lip looked of such a softness that I desired to place my finger-tip against it. All young man and young woman in the one body.

"I could make you afraid," Dariole said, with a magisterial sniff.

"You can make me desire to put down my dignity." I inclined my head to her. "When it's a burden. For the rest... You are not a cruel woman. Or, you have a chance to avoid becoming so."

Her eyes blinked, focused: what I thought might be a miraculous movement of Our Lady's hand disclosed itself the flick of a green lizard's tail. Dariole watched the beast. She shifted on the hard tiles.

"Mademoiselle."

I waited until she looked across at me, even though she still clasped her palms together in prayer.

"If I'm to bring Fludd back to England, I have enough to contend with with storms, ship-wreck, slavers, and the undeniable fact that if Gabriel must guard Fludd any longer, *he'll* probably kill him."

She did not want to smile; I saw so much. The corner of her lip moved, nonetheless.

"Mademoiselle...perhaps, you did need to kill Robert Fludd."

I made it almost a question.

With her eyes fixed on the motionless lizard, she spoke in a low tone. "I thought if I had revenge, it would be... What Luke did to me: that it would wipe it out. Make it never have happened."

"Ah."

The lizard vanished with the instant disappearance of its kind. I could have laughed to see how, within half a heart-beat, both Dariole and I, by habitual reaction to movement, had hands on sword-hilts where we knelt, and a keen idea of the locations of all priests and other worshippers.

Her shoulders untensioning, she said, “Nothing can do that, can it? Make it not have happened? Even if the future can be altered, we’re stuck with the past.”

“Yes. I have no other answer for you.”

Dariole looked back at me. “Is it evil if I *do* feel better, messire? For hurting him?”

“I think so, yes.”

She nodded slowly. “I think so too. But...I do.”

The burning white sun spread fan-rays across the stone floor, pushing into the brown shadows of the Basilica by way of the great door to the outside world. As it swung to, patches swam in my vision. One man in a black cassock walked past us, his sandals clacking loudly.

Dariole turned her head back from watching him diminish towards the Baroque splendour of the main altar. “I’ll tell you something, messire. I’d been thinking, after Sister Caterina, that I could be proud—that *I* was the one special enough to upset all Fludd’s calculations. But, you know what? All that means is, I’m somebody not...normal. Someone who’s—bizarre. Deviant.”

“‘Prodigious,’ ‘rare,’ and ‘strange,’” I said. “These are also words.”

Dariole shook her head, not even smiling at *strange*. “Messire, a madman or a beggar would have done just as good. Upset his plans. You know that?”

It was beyond me not to touch her hands, where she clasped them palm-to-palm. A second passed before she drew them back.

“And you know what else?” She looked at the Virgin’s pallid lips. “I managed to spoil his calculations, but that’s not the end of it. I still have to be this person I am. The one he hurt. The one that— isn’t like other women.”

Quite involuntarily, I muttered, “Thank God!” under my breath.

Dariole looked at me.

Things are not done with, put aside, I thought. This is only the beginning.

“Why do you want Fludd alive?” she asked.

I could not repress either a smile or affection at her directness.

“One reason is this. If a man were to lay a bet, it would be that Robert Fludd did not make his way out to the Japans without first calculating by what ship he could safely arrive—and also, by which ship he could safely return, if Nihon became an ill place for him.”

After a moment Dariole dipped her head in what I took to be assent.

I rose to my feet, genuflecting towards Our Lady. The wooden geta Dariole wore clattered on the stone, walking from the side-chapel.

“Yes,” she said. “Travel by ship...terrifies me, frankly, messire! Given how much luck we must’ve got through by now....”

She makes such admissions as if they harm her self-worth not at all.

I said, “If I weren’t sick for home, *I* might let that terror persuade me to live the rest of my life in Hind. However. Monsieur Robert Fludd can tell us which ships safely withstand storms, are not wrecked on reefs or lee-shores, and are not subject to attack and murder by pirates.”

“He’ll lie!” Dariole exclaimed.

“He might.” I saw Dariole give an excited nod, and inclined my head to her. “But not if they are the same ships on which *he* is travelling with us.”

The steel sunlight, battering from above, made her squint her eyes into slits. She took out of her obi the folded parasol that she kept by her rapier, and moved her hands to construct its shelter.

“Why can’t I kill him?” The oval of shade released her to open her eyes again, and gaze up at me. “Because you want him to do mathematics for you?”

“Not merely for me,” I said. “But you’re correct, mademoiselle. I do desire that. And...it occurs to me now that I may have been assuming too much. There is an immediate question we must ask of Robert Fludd.”

I found him back at the lodgings, with Gabriel Santon and the baggage from the *Santa Theodora*, and news of two or three other vessels due to leave Goa for more westerly ports.

I put a foot up on one of our boxes, and stared down at the English doctor, where he sat on the bare boards of the floor. “You can say which is the better ship.”

His gaze fell. “Yes. I confess it; I can.”

“You can say somewhat else, too.” I made no move to prevent Gabriel Santon or Mlle Dariole hearing what I said. “It may take you longer, but we will be lucky to be home inside a year. I’ll keep you supplied with pen and paper, Monsieur Fludd, and you can work on your calculations for me.”

His eyes seemed brimming with clear grey light when he lifted his head. Between Saburo’s death and the terror he felt for Mademoiselle Dariole, I thought all deception might have been shocked out of him.

“That year has *passed*, when things might have been changed. I... What is it you wish me to calculate?”

“Two things. Prince Henry Stuart, for one,” I said, the hours of contemplation as we sailed from Nihon bringing me the words easily. “Whether or not we’ll arrive back to find Monsieur King James dead by his son’s hand, and my treaty with France lost. That’s the first thing. The second—”

Robert Fludd looked at me silently.

“Your ‘ill-omened comet,’” I said at last. “I want to know if any of these events have changed it. To know if the destruction you believe in has been averted, or—not.”

We sailed on many vessels.

If I no longer had dread of the taaifung visiting me with as quick a journey to the grave as that great gentleman Tanaka Saburo had, I began to feel an equal dread of how long we had been gone from European shores, and of what might have happened in our absence at home.

I did not, curiously, think of Henri IV’s court as it had been before I left: Henri in his late middle years, surrounded by wife and mistresses, legitimate sons and tribe of bastards, and still with the energy to plan,

tirelessly, for a European war. The memory in my mind was of Henri of Navarre and the Duc de Sully—then plain de Rosny—at Arques and Ivry: younger men, in the bloodshed of battle. Sully had been wounded. *But not so gravely as I have wounded him, years after, failing to prevent King Henri's death.*

And what does Marie de Medici do in France, now? Is Sully alive?

The Dutch ship that we travelled on carried presents from the de facto King of the Japans to Prince Maurice of Nassau, at The Hague. The “re-tired” Shogun Ieyass’s gifts included an armour, enamelled and braided in the Nihonese fashion, complete from helm to greaves. Examining it by the captain’s permission, I saw at last what Tanaka Saburo would have brought to King James.

It was very poor, I thought at first, compared to the gold-chased steel plate of an English armour; being only so many tiny pieces of metalwork tied together by Nihonese rope-work.

But if the box-like body-armour and hanging square tassets did not impress me, I found myself contemplating the fine mail rings sewn to the cloth of the arm-defences, and their shaped and double-curved steel splints of the forearm; so strong, and yet so supple that a duellist using the rapiers of Europe might easily have worn such, to avoid a thrust or tendon-slash, and yet found no limitation on his own movement.

“Wasted on James Stuart,” Dariole observed, finding me entranced. I could not but agree. She rubbed at her own arm, all unawares, as she left the cabin.

We found a ship that Robert Fludd promised would arrive home the following Spring.

I must have come to have confidence in these “Bruno’s Formulae” of Fludd and Sister Caterina. His assurance sustained me that Summer, and through the Autumn and Winter months; through every tedious sea-mile of the journey—and on every occasion during doldrums, sickness, and tempests, when mere terror would have been welcome, as I was otherwise completely certain we were about to die.

A day came that the sun—the last in the sign of Taurus, in the new year of 1612—rose over what looked to me to be an infinite brilliance of sea, but that the first mate told me contained the Isles of Scilly, at the mouth of the Channel.

“Well?” I demanded of Robert Fludd.

Dariole and Gabriel convened themselves in the ship’s waist with me, standing between hull-cover and rail, Robert Fludd between them. His pale eyes shone in his sun-darkened face.

“These are rough calculations, only. Given the time.” He shrugged, self-deprecating rather than stubborn. “I don’t want you to think otherwise, Master Rochefort.”

“And?”

“And Prince Henry Stuart is unlikely—yet—to have killed his father. Although there is more I must say of the boy, and soon.” He looked down at a blotted sheet of paper in his hand. “And, as I discovered by chance, while using Bruno’s Formulae on Henry, Sir Robert Cecil is likely absent from London this month. You may have either the King or his Secretary, it seems.”

Fludd was aware enough of the Medici treaty to know I would seek out both those men, as soon as I might. I nodded. “And the other matter?”

I knew before he spoke.

Fludd looked down at his brown hands, where every alien variety of ink that I might buy him ingrained itself in his fingers.

“No.” He spoke as if it were possible any of the three of us did not guess. “Nothing done has changed it. The comet still strikes.”

I nodded, and looked towards the ship’s stern.

“I thought it might be so. Gabriel, ask the captain what closest English port we may divert to—I have business, now, in the West Country.”

Rochefort, Memoirs

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Bristol being a large port, it took me no more than an hour to find two French ships also docked there and ascertain my essential news.

The Duc de Sully: alive.

Queen Regent Marie de Medici: not dead.

Well, a man cannot have everything, I mused.

“What else?” Dariole demanded, when I entered the dockside tavern in which I had left her.

Being barely inside the door, I took a moment to order ale, greet Gabriel, and seat myself on one of the wooden settles by the hearth.

“What else? Rumours that the Duc is no longer part of the Regency government. Which may be true, or else not; that, I think, we shall not discover in England. For the rest, James is still England’s King. . . . Other than squabbles with their parliament and heretic priests, there seems little changed since we left home.”

An odd word for it. *Home*, I thought, leaning back and drinking my ale. Even if it’s England and not France, it is nonetheless home after twelve thousand miles, and half a world either too hot, too full of storms, or too steamy with humidity. . . .

Outside the leaded glass windows, a busy port and river bustled. Beyond them, hills shone green, going down blue into the distance where there might be a hint of mountains. I could have sat and watched all day. The rear door of the tavern stood open, gulls quarrelling over the cobbles for scraps, and the wind brought the scent of Western cooking.

Dariole banged her tankard down. “Bristol’s not up to much, is it? Even if it *has* taken us nearly two years to finally get here.”

I needs must smile at her, as she nodded thanks to Gabriel for another ale from the jug.

He sat down with us, and took a pull at his mug. “What day is it, Raoul?”

“May, now? About the twenty-first?” I put down my leather jack. “Fludd has succeeded in his calculation?”

Gabriel, who sat beside me now as if he were a gentleman or I a servant—and I did not feel inclined to reprimand him for it—muttered something into his mug in a disgusted tone that nonetheless sounded like agreement. His love for Fludd’s “black mathematics” had not grown.

Dariole shot a look up at the ceiling, beyond which Robert Fludd stayed under lock and key in our chamber.

Gabriel made a vague gesture towards the east. “Seems your Lord de Cecil’s closer than we thought. He’s been down in these parts. Bath. Taking Roman spring waters.”

I cocked a brow at that. Milord Cecil had not necessarily struck me as a ladies’ man, and iron-water is notoriously one of the cures for pox.

“Is he still there?”

“On his way back to Hatfield, north of London. But Fludd says we’ll come up with him the day after tomorrow; his coach will be travelling slower than men on horseback.”

“Do we want to?” Dariole absently rubbed at her left forearm with her other hand, which she did much, now. I supposed it still to pain her. On the odd occasions when I saw her without her shirt, the great rope of a scar had diminished to near white. She had not, yet, shown a full use of her arm.

“Seeing Mr Secretary soon would be advantageous, one would think,” I mused.

Gabriel grunted. “Wouldn’t trust that little weasel Fludd if I had his cod in my fist!”

A smile moved one corner of Dariole’s lips. I did not catch her eye. Some things—some things that make my body shrink to consider them—are far better left as metaphor.

“No matter of trust arises,” I said. “We have swords, we have pistols; we have, also, over-suspicious minds. For my part, if we may ride to London, rather than go on ships again, and my feet are on firm ground, I rejoice in it.”

I rejoiced further when we rode out a few hours later, on newly purchased horseflesh, having taken the opportunity of being in a city to sell M. Fludd’s physician’s instruments for a good price. I could not help wondering what had become of my Andalusian jennet in France these two years, and if I would ever trace his route of sale. The bay stone horse sold to me had few bad habits and good conformation, but if he had a spark of intelligence I had as yet failed to find it.

We rode south and west out of Bristol, towards flat lands, and the green hills that shrouded caves. Gabriel, as ever, was no further than a yard from Fludd; a cudgel at his belt. Mlle Dariole rode ahead. After a while, her voice floated back in less than harmonious song.

Three parts of a year and I have not touched you.

She had accepted the comfort of an embrace, in her nightmares, but nothing more. I am not a boy: I have patience. Since we left the Japans, I had not forced my presence on her. I feel as if some Venetian glassblower had cast a bubble about her, and I dare not shatter it, in case she broke, too.

Perhaps she is healing.

Gabriel came up boot-to-boot with me, as his and Fludd's mounts caught up. "You had some tale about you and the King of England singing to the peasants around here, Raoul?"

"Yes. Why?"

"Damn good job you didn't have *her* sing as well!"

The dignity of a gentleman does not admit of outbursts of mirth. I coughed.

We did not ride so far as Wookey, dismounting when the walls of the gorge at Cheddar rose up to either side, and lighting lamps to guide us into the caves there. The silence, broken only by water dripping, brought those other caverns to mind. No one had been here since we: a few discarded and broken pieces of horseman's equipment reassured me on that. The silence had taken every echo of the voices of Spofforth and his men.

I found Suor Caterina's papers where we had left them, bundled in a dry cave.

The paper felt damp and gritty to the touch, but I saw it to be legible, for all the eighteen months and more it had lain here.

"Gabriel..."

"I know: that's why we've got a pack-horse with us." He glanced across to Mlle Dariole's lamp-lit face. "You want to help me pack these up?"

She didn't speak, but nodded. I thought her eyes too bright for the smoke from the lanterns to account for. *When last we were here, both Saburo and Caterina were alive.*

At Bath, we had confirmed news of the Earl of Salisbury's entourage on its way to Hatfield House by way of the London road.

James and Marie de Medici might be the best of all powerful monarchs to have as Fludd's patrons, not being prone to conquering wars—but they do not think in terms of five hundred years. They are not—and nor, I freely confess, am I—the statesman that Mr Secretary is.

Cecil is a man I most urgently need to see.

England in May: every tree had leaf, every hedgerow a bird; the pigs of peasant farmers lay by the side of the road, suckling litters of tiny squealing piglets. I thought myself like to be drunk on the clear, sun-warmed air. When we halted by a river for the horses to drink, I reminded myself to watch the doctor. Fludd sat morosely astride his pale animal, whose good ambling pace did not redeem its bad habit of nipping at a man's legs. Robert Fludd merely eyed it, dourly, and moved his foot.

"Where are we to catch up Milord Cecil?" I asked him, drawing the bay stone horse out of the river-grass into which he desired to wander, and mounting up again.

The scrawny man pointed. A mile or so ahead, roofs were very faintly visible, mostly hidden by trees. In France, it would have been the house of some great estate.

"We're close by Marlborough," Fludd said quietly. "That is St Margaret's Priory; there you will find him."

Something in this is a trick, I thought, and touched a spur delicately to the bay, bringing him around on

the deeply rutted but dusty road. "Ride ahead, where I can see you."

Fludd shook his head; not in disagreement, I saw, but in negation. "You have no need to distrust me. Nor she. Everything is—past."

"She changed your religion for you, monsieur. One day you might resent that. If I thought you would ever be in a position to harm her, then—despite all else—you would be in a grave in Nihon." I let that lie for a moment, to see if he would pick it up. "If there was a man in France I could trust to keep you in custody, we wouldn't now be in England. As it is, if you're to live, Cecil will make your best gaoler."

I rode on behind him, while Dariole and Gabriel chattered in front, and considered how I might best bring about my desired circumstances if this truly was Milord Robert Cecil here.

A servant or lay brother ran up as we walked the horses in off the road, into the courtyard of the great priory; blathering that every room was full, he must regretfully refuse us hospitality. Had it been an inn, I would have sought to bribe him for extra space. That might not be wise with even a heretic religious.

"Why so full?" I demanded.

"My Lord the Earl of Salisbury has taken every room, staying no man knows how long!"

"Take word and my name to the Earl." I interrupted the lay brother as he opened his mouth to object. "He will wish to receive Monsieur de Herault, I promise you. Delay, and he will whip you as if you were his servant."

A delay was no unpleasant experience, in the sun and the shade beneath the English oaks, but I thought it not a good sign.

Are we forgot? Has Mr Secretary changed his allegiance?

"Monsieur de Herault?" a tenor voice said.

I rounded, to find a plump man in the religious clothing of the English heresy standing under the trees. I thought him pale, for an Englishman, they being usually ruddier in countenance. His eyes were red about the rims.

"My name is Bowles," he said. "I am the Earl's chaplain. My lord is almost beyond earthly business. He has been ill some months; he is at last dying."

The skull-face of the hunchbacked man shone like a marble memento mori, seen between the curtains of his tester bed.

I am familiar enough with the signs of death from illness, as well as violence. *Not beyond one or two days more*, I thought, shocked; hiding it behind a respectful bow.

If that.

In the great refectory of the priory, where Robert Fludd had stood with Gabriel's bulk to one side of him, and Dariole straddling the bench on the other, I had accused him frankly. "You knew this!"

"If I had told you, it would have got us here no sooner. I...did not desire to bring disappointment. I knew we could arrive in time."

There might be no more charitable accommodation at the priory; that did not mean that every brother, servant, local man, and traveler had not flocked here, drawn by rumour, waiting for a great man to die. They ate and drank in the refectory. I gained a handful of stories in as many minutes. When the chaplain, Bowles, returned to show me to the great chamber in the hospice, I had no clear idea whether or not Robert Cecil was in any position to speak of a treaty signed close on two years past.

I left Gabriel and Mlle Dariole in charge of Robert Fludd, or thought I did. As I followed Bowles, rapid footsteps sounded behind me, and Dariole dropped into a walk at my side.

I said nothing.

The pale gothic room in which the Earl lay was dark, despite the sun outside, the physicians having closed the shutters. It took my eyes moments to adjust. I saw him, between the bed's drawn curtains.

The death's-head's eyes snapped open.

"Messire Rochefort?" a thin, whispery voice out of the gloom said. "But wonderful! It has been one of the unanswered questions in my mind, that I have never known what has become of you."

I crossed to stand by to his bed-side, Dariole a silent shadow beside me. Even in the gloom I could see her face whitening.

Lost in the bedding, Robert Cecil's tiny, hunched frame could have been a child's body. As a man does, when meeting another after several years, I reckoned up in an instant all the changes between then and now, and was aware that he did the same.

"Time has dealt easily with you, Monsieur Rochefort." Cecil's drawn face moved into a sardonic expression. "Not so with me. I have a tomb made at Hatfield. At the top lies Secretary of State Cecil in his robes, and underneath—a skeleton in his winding cloth. Before, I modelled for the one; now, I might model for the latter."

The lack of more light kept me from seeing the full extent of his illness, but enough was visible. The flesh of his body had melted down like wax. His skin was the same stained-dirt colour of tapers. The eyes in his head, great and dark and luminous, were all that remained recognisable of the Cecil I had known two years before.

Seeking a moment's reflection in pleasantries, before I broached the main matter, I introduced Mlle Dariole.

"The hic mulier." Cecil's smile exposed teeth as long and yellow as an old sheep's. "Mademoiselle, you are welcome. You will not know this, Monsieur Rochefort—mademoiselle was once pleased to ask a favour of me."

He's rambling, I thought.

I caught Dariole's embarrassed shift from one foot to the other.

"She did, milord?" I murmured.

"Mademoiselle de la Roncière asked me for your life," the Earl said, with a wheezing laugh. "I would have given it to her, so prettily she begged, even had I intended to take it."

I bowed a respectful acknowledgement. That she must have seen Cecil before she was allowed into the cell at the Tower, I knew. That she had assumed Master Secretary genuinely about to execute me....

No, that I did not know.

Her cheeks and ears showed rosy even in the darkened room.

Robert Cecil caught my gaze, and smiled. A politician gives up the manipulations of men only when he is dead.

“You will have heard that Rosny—M. de Sully—is alive.” He spoke with a hoarse quietness. “Although no longer on the Council of Ministers.”

To have it spoken as truth jolted me. Without that protection from the Queen Regent’s malice—

Cecil continued, “He and I fell from power in the same month of the same year...Albeit, I still have influence with my monarch.”

“She removed him?”

“There are too many for it to be the Queen Regent, alone. France has changed, Master Rochefort. You have been gone many months. A year, is it now?” He suddenly looked confused.

“A little more than that.” A sudden pang went through me, which, in another man, I would have called pity. “Milord—do I take it the treaty stands?”

“It will, I think, if you have Fludd, and take him to his Majesty James. You have Fludd.”

He spoke with confidence enough to flatter me.

“I have brought Doctor Fludd to you, milord,” I said politely. “He is downstairs, in the care of my man. I had hoped to entrust him to you as a prisoner in the Tower. But...”

His eyes glazed as if he lost concentration while I spoke, and I thought him so deep into illness that he could not listen.

As I mislaid the words I would say next, his dark eyes snapped to me, and one long, elegant finger rose and pointed. “Bring him to me.”

Before I could speak, Dariole nodded, and darted out of the room on silent feet. The young do not like death-beds, I have noticed. Although we who are in age more close have more reason, perhaps, to be fearful.

“The Queen Regent has brought a number of new ministers onto the council, all of her choosing, and none of M. de Sully’s liking.” Cecil seemed to have no energy for declining to give ‘M. de Rosny’ his title. He smiled wearily. “It was a long, drawn-out battle, but she mostly withheld her hand from it, that I grant her. Nonetheless, M. de Sully went into retirement last year, while you were absent. Some say he may still be an influence behind the scenes, but I find no trace of it.”

I looked at this English Secretary of State, about to lay all titles down in perpetuity. “And Fludd’s return?”

“You are barely in time, Master Rochefort.”

His gaze changed as he got the gibe out; I saw in his expression the knowledge that it applied even more to he, himself.

“I am sorry,” I said, and bowed.

“I’m weary.” The small man smiled, unexpectedly. “My work isn’t done, Master Rochefort, that’s all I regret.”

I realised I was attempting not to inhale the odours of the sick room. A man’s body as it decays is one thing, the purges and leeching of the physicians quite another. Cecil’s body will not have been strong to begin with, small and frail as it is. *Any man may see you have worn yourself out in the service of governing a country.*

I did not speak it: it being known to both of us. I bowed again, with respect.

“Madame the Queen Regent is a woman of steel purpose, under her softness,” Cecil observed quietly. “I take her to be running fast out of patience. If his Majesty King James now reminds her of the treaty, and she sees Master Fludd and the benefits of his knowledge, I believe she may refrain from more harm to M. Sully. It’s true he is a man of too much integrity to make himself the focus for Huguenot dissent, and revolt against the Queen—but she does not credit that. I fear she may execute him, as a dangerous man, or let him spend thirty years in the Bastille.”

“If I go to Paris—”

He interrupted me as casually as great men interrupt their inferiors. “She would have you stabbed on the spot, or strung up at Montfaucon without a heart-beat’s thought! Master Rochefort, must I remind you, it needs no second trial to have you hanged? Madame the Queen Regent bears you a considerable grudge.”

“I am complimented, milord.”

By his expression, he considered that right and proper—and considered it also below Marie de Medici’s dignity to concern herself over a servant. In a different mood, I might have laughed.

“His Majesty King James will confer with her by way of the Ambassador in Paris.” Cecil made a signal with his hand, as if the matter were done with.

The sound of footsteps came outside the door.

“Well, Master Fludd.” Cecil’s voice creaked. “I have had enough of your profession proclaiming over me. You can give me a more accurate diagnosis. When is it that I die?”

Fludd gave him an apologetic glance. “I can only calculate what is likely, my lord.”

“I *know* what is likely.” Cecil stared at the younger man for a long moment. “What day?”

“Tomorrow, my lord.”

He took it without a flinch. “Are you willing to serve King James?”

“Yes, my lord. I swear.”

For a long moment, Cecil stared through the gloom at him. “Whether I were dying or not, you would in any case need another gaoler, in case I fell further from power.” He turned his head towards me. “There is always jealousy at court, Master Rochefort; you know this. I give you a gaoler who will not fall—put Doctor Fludd under the control of his Majesty.”

I startled. “King James?”

Dariole said quietly, “He’s the other man who knows about Fludd’s mathematics.”

Dariole's shoulder pushed into my side—and I realised she did not know that she was doing it; that she unconsciously backed away from the tester bed with the dying man in it.

I put my hands on her shoulders, to steady her. It was a minute or so before she moved.

How may I broach, to this dying man, the necessary uses of Robert Fludd?

The word of a powerful man, after his death, has no power.

As if he came with painful effort to a decision, Cecil nodded to himself. "I have put the Earl of Northumberland back into the Tower; he will never set foot outside of it—at least until his Majesty dies: after that, I cannot guarantee. Master Fludd, it is my order that you stay in London. I had purchased a house in Cripplegate, ready should you return. It is my order, also, that you go no further than the boundaries of that London parish, as long as you live. His Majesty will uphold me in this. You may practise your art of medicine, but you shall chiefly be advisor to the King, holding yourself and your mathematics always at his command. Do you understand me?"

There might have been no man else in the room but Fludd and he.

The physician-astrologer said, "It will take much time out of my days, and I may be observed...I wrote books at Oxford, milord. I was sent down for them. I might publish those manuscripts sequentially, now, pretending to be writing them, as a concealment for servants and others, as to how I spend my time. I will serve King James as you desire."

"What is your reason? Fear?"

Robert Fludd looked at him. "Atonement."

"Yes. That, I understand." The dying man leaned back against the bolsters.

I caught a creak from the door, as he did so, and saw Dariole there, half-in and half-out. While Cecil exchanged another word with Fludd, I beckoned her to me.

Dariole shook her head. I crossed to the door.

"I'll be down with Gabriel, messire."

"Will you not say farewell to a brave man?"

"I don't like sickness. It's different in a duel." She looked at me. In the dim light, I saw her make an expression which I did not understand. "All *right*."

"And this is true?" Cecil said, as she and I re-approached the bed.

Robert Fludd bowed his head. "I need more time for my calculations of the formulae, milord."

"Ah, yes. Time. You will see." Cecil made a small gesture that took in the sick-bed and himself. "I am not over-well supplied with time. Tell me what you have to your hand to date, Master Doctor."

Fludd bowed, his hands in the sleeves of his robes. He might have been any physician, about to lick the finger dipped in his patient's urine-flask. His eyes caught the faint light from the window, and I could see their blueness from where I stood. Clean-shaven as he was, he somehow gave the impression of having nothing to hide. *And perhaps he finally does not.*

"There are two most likely lives for Prince Henry Stuart, now," Robert Fludd began, with something of

his old professorial air. “Henry may die young. That future is unlikely in comparison to this one: that he will succeed his father, soon, on the thrones of England and Scotland.”

An expression of pain distorted Cecil’s face. Had he not been ill, I knew his self-control meant we would not have witnessed it. “And he is a good king, Henry?”

Fludd’s head moved in a twitch; I realised he had been about to shake it and stopped himself.

“Sir,” Cecil demanded.

“He will be a—valiant king.” Fludd knelt down, suddenly, and raised his eyes to the man in the great bed. “I admit it: this is my fault. I thought I would be there to mentor him! Henry desires to be the man the French King Henri would have been: a crusader, conquering all of Europe. Prince Henry Stuart desires to do this for the Protestant or Puritan cause. My lord, the Catholic houses of Spain and Austria are strong, but there is Daneland, and Sweden, and the United Provinces, and the Germanies.... I wish I might not tell you, my lord, how long the wars will last. This century will not see the end of theM.”

He does not mention his comet either, I noted. *That will be too far off for Cecil to care about.* But England, now and for the next nine decades....

Cecil’s cornrake voice rasped, “So long?”

“Religion is not subject to reason. When a war spreads out to take in every country out to the borders of the Turkish lands, and atrocities are done on all sides, then it becomes a matter of one generation revenging the deaths of its fathers on another. Blood and memory, my lord. That can continue endlessly.”

Slowly, Cecil nodded. “But you cannot be sure of this? It may be averted?”

“I can further study the papers of Suor Caterina, now.” Fludd bowed his head. “My lord, I am certain war comes. So also was she. Our best hope is that it is still possible to shorten it—by years, or, if fortunate, by tens of years. But, now that he will brook no guidance—now that the murderous qualities have been brought out in him—this is where it begins, my lord. With Prince Henry, and his Protestant crusade.”

Fludd glanced back at me.

“The Huguenots in France will revolt and join him; there will be civil war.”

He did not say, nor did he need to, how Sully’s fortunes might go, dogged Huguenot as M. the Duc has always been.

“How can we tell for sure what *will* be?” Cecil demanded.

“Only by hindsight.” At an impatient signal from the bed, Fludd climbed back up onto his feet. “And then it is too late.... My lord, you begin to see why I was forced into the things I did! We cannot know everything. At the same time, we cannot deny that we know *something*. We must act. Or refrain from acting, and bear the responsibility for that, also.”

Feeling Dariole’s shoulder against my arm, and how she shivered, I put my arm casually about her. I looked somewhat warily at Robert Fludd, finding myself in agreement with him. “Ultimately one must make the decision to trust and act, or not trust and act otherwise.”

“And what would you do?” Cecil demanded waspishly.

Before I could make any reply, he snapped his pale, elegant fingers.

“There—I will leave it in your hands.”

I blinked. “Monsieur!”

“You will not bring grief to James by speaking of his son to him.” Cecil’s voice sounded ragged, his face paled in the shuttered darkness of the room, but he had every bit of his old authority. “Do you understand me, Fludd, Rochefort? The Prince has grieved his father enough. What you will do, is to calculate until you know and see clear whether this is the future to be. And if it is, and there is no escape from it, then, Master Rochefort, you will act as I desire you to—you will take the Prince’s life.”

His hard gaze met mine.

“I am weary of being an assassin,” I grated. “One king would have been enough, and the attempt on James is the nearest I will ever come to another.”

“Granted it should not be you.” Cecil waved dismissively at Robert Fludd. “It should be this man. He enticed the Prince to conspiracy, or found it in the boy’s soul and brought it out. If there was justice, it would be he who would take blood on his hands and kill Henry Stuart. But he is incompetent in that respect, Master Rochefort, and so again it needs must be you who clears up the mess.”

There was almost a glint of humour in Robert Cecil’s eye. Returning honesty for honesty, I said, “You think I am one who will hold fast to a promise to a dying man after he’s dead?”

“I think you are a man who would desire to hold fast to all his promises.”

The supposition of honesty, I find, can hurt far more than the supposition of villainy.

Cecil slumped back, propped up on the bolster, face feverish. “Master Fludd says there’s a chance Henry shall die young—when is that?”

Sounding startled, Fludd blurted, “October of this year, my lord; I can ascertain the day.”

Cecil turned towards me. “Make sure, if necessary, that such a chance comes about. You hear me? Swear me your oath, Master Rochefort.”

“I perceive you will make use of anything, Milord Cecil; even the pity a man may have for your death.”

Cecil gave me a disquieting grin, that showed all his death’s-bed teeth. “I have never spared myself more than any man. Come. Will you do it? I will give you introductions to some of my chief intelligencers. If Henry continues to conspire, you will know of it. And then—swear it, monsieur!”

“I will not swear.” I held his gaze. “I will...remember that you requested this.”

The amount of power concentrated into his tiny body, and the absoluteness with which he must now give it all up, informed the gaze with which he watched me. He gave a short nod.

“You had better take this man Fludd to the King.” Cecil slumped further down in the bed, for all he attempted not to. The great hollows of a man’s skull, underneath the eyeballs, showed clear as day in his face, even in the dim light. “If you will do me the honour of taking a message from me... Send in my secretary. I’ll dictate his Majesty a letter. You may take it to him, Rochefort. I will write you letters of introduction, also.”

The light in him, having flared up, sank down. One of the doctors in the anteroom peered in through the

door, gesturing for us to leave.

“Return for the letters in fifteen minutes.” Robert Cecil’s thin voice sounded sharp, in the dimness. “I believe I shall sleep. If I do not see you again before your departure, monsieur, I bid you farewell. And if you should chance to see his Majesty before I do. . . . Inform him that I have always regretted not seeing his venture onto the boards at The Rose—and in Somerset. That would have been a fine, fine thing to see.”

I bowed. Mlle Dariole, to her credit, managed a bow that would not have disgraced the Louvre palace. Ignoring the doctor’s ushering hands, I left the hospice room.

Downstairs, I signalled Gabriel to bring Robert Fludd with him out into the priory’s courtyard, and I stood and breathed in the sunlit air, under an open sky. “Can *nothing* be done?”

“Nothing.” Fludd put his fingers through his greying hair, and glanced up at the room with all its windows shuttered. “It is a stomach-tumour, of long persistence. But, truly, this country has used him up. Do you know, monsieur, he is forty-nine?”

“Jesu!” Gabriel winced.

I felt inclined to join him.

The heretic priest, Bowles, brought out the letters sealed with Robert Cecil’s ring. We re-mounted, rode on past Marlborough and further east, and stayed the night in another town.

I have lost my best ally; I must re-think my fledgling plans.

Towards the late afternoon of the following day, towns began to greet us with criers giving news to their populace—the latest news being the death of Robert Cecil, Earl of Salisbury, Secretary of State, Lord Treasurer, and first minister to his Majesty King James.

Rochefort, Memoirs

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By the week’s end, Fludd was settled in Cecil’s promised house in Cripplegate; myself his temporary gaoler and lodger. The house in Coleman Street made an excellently furnished gaol. Cripplegate itself holds all a man desires, I dare say, if that man may at any time exercise his free choice and leave it.

Those intelligencers bequeathed to me by Robert Cecil allowed me to see how unlikely it was that even Doctor-Astrologer Fludd would be able to escape his confinement, silken and invisible as it had been made.

“I see confusion on confusion,” I said to Gabriel—we having finished, between us, interviewing men of the late Earl of Salisbury; deciding who might prove trustworthy house-servants to guard Robert Fludd on behalf of James I.

“Think,” I said. “Firstly—this will not end here. If Master Fludd *is* right about Prince Henry. . . well, a man

may guess there will be other men, apart from Henry Stuart, that Bruno's mathematics will predict should be murdered, for the sake of the future. Kings, princes, popes. Or merely ordinary men who find themselves in significant times."

Gabriel grunted; a noise which held both apprehension, doubt, and reluctant agreement. "So? You've got milord's agents, until the English King puts a new spy-master in here. You can check up on this Prince, see if Fludd looks to be right."

"The Prince, yes. If there are other men—they will not all be enemies of James or Marie."

"You can't *do* nothing, Raoul." Gabriel paused, frowning. "You won't have the contacts, or the agents, after this. Queen-Bitch Medici won't hire you. Pity Milord Cecil's dead. He would've. This English King, *he* might have. But not if you're chasing his eldest son. I don't reckon we can stay in England if that happens."

Bruno's formulae and the further future left to one side, I had a vision of my life after these next few months expired—my network of agents and contacts in France doubtless fragmented by now, and my skills offered for hire to any nation that would put me in a position to exercise my profession. At my age, what else may a man do?

"That," I said aloud, confusing him, "is not a rhetorical question."

He scowled at me. "Raoul, have you got some crazy idea in your head?"

"Not yet," I said. "But I'm trying."

"How does James know he won't *lie*?" Mlle Dariole grumbled at me, as we investigated the courtyard-garden of the house.

"I dare say he may. But if I were James Stuart, I would torture him the first time I so suspected it."

She checked in her walk. After a moment, she put her fists on her hips, looking about the tiny brick courtyard. "How are they going to keep him here? He can calculate his way out!"

"His calculations take time. A man might change the pattern of guarding him, at irregular and quick intervals." I smiled at her. "Perhaps guided by the throw of a pair of true dice."

The young woman laughed. Not, as I thought, at my pleasantry. I realised that, as she pointed to the wall.

A sundial-face had been cut into stone, and the slab set flat into the brick-work; perhaps twice the height of a man above the ground. I saw the bronze gnomon, crusted green with verdigris, cast a shadow down across the grooves cut into the marble, marking us not far past ten of the morning.

I saw also that, under the Roman-numeral hour-marks, the stone-cutter had put—as is indeed more traditional— CARPE DIEM .

"I hope the hours go slow for him." Dariole rested her right hand back on her dagger's pommel, her left arm hanging free, as she now customarily stood. I watched her lift her face to the sky and close her eyes. "Real slow."

Slow or fast, I thought, the hours *do* pass. Until the future arrives.

Doctor Fludd once established in the house, I set about business of my own—sending agents of Cecil’s employ into France, to ask discreet questions; and applying to the court at Greenwich for private audience with King James. The first matter did not immediately flourish. For the second, the late Earl’s name gained me a remarkably quick entrée.

Brought in for an audience, I bowed, maintaining myself impassive to the changes in his Majesty. James differed greatly from when I had last seen him. Fatter and greyer, yes, but more to it than that—he leaned upon the shoulder of his favourite, Viscount Rochester (as Robbie Carr had lately been made), metaphorically as well as physically. It was with an appearance of reluctance that James Stuart sent the blond Carr and his other lackeys away, as far as the door of the medieval hall.

“Doctor Fludd will foretell now at your command,” I said, “under the cover of being a physician and scholar.”

“Tell him,” James First and Sixth rasped, “that if we dislike his manner, we shall send him to the Tower, and yon two wizards, he and Northumberland, can concoct their Devil’s work together. Do you understand, Master Rochefort?”

“I do: Master Fludd shall,” I said. “Or, if not, I shall explain to him how a man behaves when he is on permanent leave from execution.”

The King’s gaze dropped to my shoulder; I guessed he considered the brand-scar he knew to be there. He wiped at his mouth, and gave a sombre nod.

For all the warmth of Greenwich’s red brick and fine tapestries, his skin carried a constant hint of grey under the surface. James watched me a long moment, his eyes more blurred and watery than I remembered.

“We have lost our right hand,” he said. “The sadder because we were estranged. You saw him, Master Rochefort, before he died?”

“The day before. He spoke of your Majesty. I think, if he had one regret, sire, it was that he, also, was not set on the road to Bridgwater.”

His face abruptly altered, as if he would have both laughed and wept together. “Ah, Robbie. Can you imagine him singing before four dozen stinking farm-workers? We should like to have seen that. We should.”

I bowed, to hide my expression; a man of affairs should not show himself sentimental.

His look of gloom reasserting itself, James said, “Tell Fludd, we will be advised of what questions Queen Marie asks of him.”

“Yes, your Majesty.” Conscious of the glare of courtiers observing me, I sent an urbane glance around the Gothic hall. “Your son the Prince of Wales is not presently at court?”

James looked more sour, were that possible. “He has his own court, now. At Richmond, and St James’s palace, if you must seek him out. There are few enough men you’ll see at his court *and* ours, Master Rochefort. His are all Puritan upright men, who will have no swearing of oaths, or revelry at banquets, but prayers twice a day.”

With the skill of old practise, I kept my expression impassive.

“Your Majesty.” I wondered how far I might try him. “Do you have a first question for Doctor Fludd, now, that I might take back for you?”

James gave a heavy shake of his head. “We do not. Not yet.”

He did not look me in the eye.

“Has it not occurred to you, Rochefort, man? That some questions are better without answers?”

The Summer rain fell as a wherry-man sailed me back from Greenwich, up the Thames-river. I watched the flow of the river, speckled with the unfolding circles of the droplets; so many of them that it would take a lifetime to calculate all their intersections. And by then, they will be gone.

Responsibility.

Which, if there is no power to act, is only a curse.

Back at Coleman Street, I found myself with another question for Robert Fludd.

“If you have not already done it,” I said, “calculate the day upon which you now die.”

Over the next four days, while Fludd worked, and I worried my problem as a hound courses a hare, I saw a number of shabby or gentlemanly souls; none with ought in common save that they would pass unnoticed in a crowd. I sequentially entertained this score or more of the late Secretary’s intelligencers in the dirty-floored downstairs chamber that was the best a Western building could offer.

The last man—sailing in from The Hague, but by his own account able to be within the Louvre-palace in a fortnight—I found myself staring at, at the same time that he carefully studied me. I supposed him to be about fifty; his dress English, his skin fair, his hair bright chestnut.

At the same moment that he suddenly seemed stunned, I realised that we had met before. And at that time his chestnut hair had been dyed—further red—with henna.

“Disguising one’s true appearance with the appearance that the truth itself is false?” I said. “When I saw you last, were you not William Markham?”

He flushed; his complexion so light he could not disguise it. “My name is Griffin Markham. William is my brother.”

Ah. *That, I suppose, is what puzzled Mlle Dariole.*

“I recall I was informed, by the late Lord Cecil, that Sir Griffin Markham was his chief spy upon the continent.” I kept a level gaze on the stout man. “Which seems wise, monsieur, since I recall you to have been near-hanged and then exiled from England for treason, in the year ’03...”

Griffin Markham coughed. “William and I are very like. He lives lawfully in London. I am here, and he is in The Hague in place of me now.”

Lady Arbella Stuart was still imprisoned in the Tower, after a hapless escape attempt organised by her husband. I wondered if she might yet escape out of England. Her cause might be thought a good enough reason for brothers to change their identities, especially if they had advanced the marriage in the first place.

I thought of Arbella; her kindness to Dariole.

“If I were you,” I said, “I would go to France, and send me word from there on the subject of the Queen Regent. The sooner you leave England, the better.”

William—rather, Griffin—Markham scowled. “Ay. With Cecil dead of the pox, there are his successors who would arrest me.”

I bowed him from the room, not about to mention that it was not King James’s fledgling spy-masters he should worry about, with Dariole in the country.

Some two or three minutes after that, Dariole herself came in at the back door, knocking mud off her boots and scabbard onto the kitchen flag-stones. She grinned at me.

“If your face stays like that, you’ll frighten the gargoyles off St Paul’s! What’s the matter? James too busy creeping up Robbie Carr’s bum-hole to see you again, messire?”

“Something of that. It occurs to me, mademoiselle—that Henri of Navarre and Cecil are dead, M. de Sully retired, James Stuart much changed, and we are left with the Medici Queen Regent and young Prince Henry. A pair of vipers. Worse—vermin.”

The amusement in her eyes metamorphosed into cynicism. She gave one slow nod of her head, rain-water dripping from her hair and velvet cap. “Won’t argue with you, messire. But what can you do?”

“That is what I desire to discover.... You may,” I added, “be interested to know that Monsieur William Markham is walking down Old Jewry, at this moment, on his way to a ship for the Low Countries. You may know him better as...what would it be... ‘Cousin Griffin’?”

Surprise, realisation, and a fierce grin went across her face in the space of seconds.

“Let him live!” I added hastily. “He may be of use to—the Lady Abera-sama.”

“Oh, the kennel will suffice, messire!” Dariole’s voice came back rich with amusement, drowned out by a banging door and departing footsteps over the cobbles.

What is it that I can do? I wondered, dismissing the Markham brothers from my mind.

I would give every groat of Cecil’s pension to have Caterina alive, and her mathematics a check on Fludd’s. The future—and the far future....

I made my way upstairs, ducking my head under the twisted beams, to the upper room where Robert Fludd now kept his books, his papers, himself.

“Twenty-five years,” he said as I bent to come in under the lintel, without looking up from his desk at me. “Was there a reason you wished to know my remaining time on this earth, other than to torment me?”

If he is so exact, I thought, he will have begun doing his mathematics on the ship home, to know this as fact by now.

“I have my reasons,” I said. “You are an Englishman. Tell me your honest opinion, now, of James Stuart.”

Fludd gave me a thin frown. He leaned back in his chair. “The heart has gone out of him.”

“Well, as a Frenchman, I will tell you likewise my opinion of Marie de Medici—which is, that she is Florentine to the core. And these are the people for whom you foretell the future. These, who take decisions for millions.”

After a moment, Fludd reached for his pen-knife, and began to slice minutely and carefully at his quill. So sharp an edge a pen-knife has that I automatically calculated and extended my distance from the tiny blade.

Fludd said, “You have not merely come to complain at me.”

“Indeed, no.”

“You are no more a friend to me than you ever were.”

I inclined my head. “Also true—why, a man might suppose you possessed of foreknowledge, messire!”

He winced.

“Not in this.” Fludd looked down at the spoiled quill. “A decade of mathematics; all of my work... is useless, now, Master Rochefort. Now that the year 1610 is over, and we are on a different path.”

“But within a space of twenty-five years, a man might begin again.”

Robert Fludd lifted his gaze, and I looked into his pale eyes. He carefully placed down pen-knife and quill. “What is it you intend to say to me? What is this?”

Being weary of bending away from the low beams, I seated myself in the window embrasure. The light must hide my features, I knew, in the same way that it fell full on his.

“My business has taken me of late to St James’s palace,” I said. “Your Prince, that you would have mentored, is being called Macedon’s son come again: an Alexander who will lay the world under his heel, for Britain and for the heretic—I beg your pardon, ‘Puritan’—cause. They see him as armed with all the arts of empire, which,” I added, “is no mean feat for a boy barely eighteen; I therefore take many man to have an interest in him being so. You, I assume, would have taken advantage of this?”

“At sixteen, he could have been steered, instructed!” Robert Fludd’s face seemed light-dazzled.

Merlin to Henry’s Prince Arthur. I shifted the scabbard of my rapier, where the window-frame drove it into my hip, and took the opportunity to watch his expression become unguarded. He put his hand out, resting his sun-browed fingers on stained papers.

Papers covered in line after line of tiny crabbed figures, many of which I did not recognise as Roman or Arabic. Caterina’s work, covered by the stains of grit and mould from the Cheddar caverns. He picked with one bitten fingernail at the rough surfaces.

The sound of her death is easy to call to the surface of my mind. Her tiny face as white as the moon’s under which she sprawled.

“I met Elena Zorzi first in Venice, with Magister Bruno.” Fludd’s hand left the sheet of paper, and his gaze went past me, to the window; perhaps beyond the glass. He put his hands across his all-but-shaven scalp, digging the finger-tips into what grey hair remained. His eyes shone grey as glass in the pupil, but yellow in the whites like an old man. “I thought her lost so many years ago. Or else she could not have....”

I watched his face. “Did it occur to you that this may not have been about us, monsieur? About England? Or France? King Henri, or King James? Or about Europe, either, if it comes to that?”

“Ah? Yes...Tanaka Saburo. You think this was directed in the end to his need, and not mine?”

“He had more, I dare say.”

“Four islands blackened...” Fludd looked back at me, painfully. “That’s not the same, messire. Not as all the foundations of the earth being burned away, by lack of our ability to act against it.”

Except that, by Caterina’s reckoning, we are as capable of burning the foundations of the earth as any comet. Fludd’s perspective is somewhat narrow....

The parts of a decision began to come together in my mind.

“One thing you might consider,” I said, “is the instructing of other pupils—in secret, since I doubt James or the Medici Queen would approve.”

“Other...?” Fludd gazed up from his desk at me.

True, I thought he might be uncertain about passing on Bruno’s teachings. *But we have Caterina’s papers.* And it will be possible, supremely possible, to tell when a student is well-instructed—because he will then, accurately, predict.

“It is possible,” I said, “that I shall be away from here, for a week or two.”

He looked more startled at my apparent change of subject.

I added, “I need to know, therefore, Monsieur Fludd—how long will it take you to calculate whether I can go and return with safety?”

“Watch Fludd. I have a plan for which I’ll need him when I return,” I instructed Gabriel. “You must stay here. If you go to France, they’ll hang you.”

“*France?*” Gabriel’s brows shot up towards his receding hairline. “And if you go, they won’t hang *you?*”

“No. I shall return alive. I have it on—excellent authority.”

Speaking of it to Dariole, I found her cynical. She leaned her shoulder up against the damp brickwork in the courtyard-garden, that having been where I found her; and gave me a look that spoke volumes about her resolution not to be deceived.

“You trust him? And you’re going *where?*” she said.

I must stay for the thunderstorm to break over my head, I knew. Or else she—and doubtless Gabriel, too—will merely follow to me France, and go by the shortest way to Montfaucon.

“Step inside,” I said. “Conceivably it’s time that I explained something to you—both of you.”

Gabriel stood bending over the hearth as we entered the kitchen, sniffing at meat broiling over the fire in the iron kettle. He glanced at me, clattered the hot lid back on the small cauldron, and straightened up.

Dariole pulled a wooden bench towards the hearth by one end, and straddled it; white hands down and clasping the sides. Eyes bright, she said, "Tell me!"

Gabriel moved towards the door.

I signalled to him. "Sit down."

He looked at me, I think to see what I intended; then wiped his hands on the rag he kept in lieu of a kerchief, and eased himself down on the bench beside Dariole. The wood creaked.

At a loss where to begin, I spoke the thought that had been occupying my mind earlier in the day. "Giordano Bruno's students are—almost—all dead."

I looked from the young woman's face to the older man, seeing their confusion.

"The only such man that we *know* remains alive is a pet, now, of James Stuart and Marie de Medici." I paused. "Perhaps of her favourite Concini, also; perhaps not. Likewise, I doubt James is foolish enough to make Doctor Fludd known to Robert Carr."

Gabriel gave his curt nod, that compressed the folds of fat under his chin. He watched me with the half-insolent, half-admiring suspicion that I have had from him since Breda. It says, clear as daylight, *Now what crazy idea has the boy come up with?*

I walked across to the hearth. Uncomfortably, I said, "Does it seem to you, either of you, that Marie de Medici, and King James as he is now, are the best to be trusted with the knowledge that Doctor Fludd can give them?"

Gabriel made a face. "Jesu, Raoul! Ain't a king alive can be trusted! What's in your mind now?"

The lick of small rain-drops on the leaded glass sounded increasingly loud. Gabriel, I saw, did not look concerned at my silence. *And I know a time when he would be wondering if he had "presumed." And if I were about to beat him.*

Dariole shifted about on her arse, and brought her leg across so that she sat squarely on the wooden bench; not one of her movements those proper to a young woman.

"If he *isn't* theirs..." Dariole shrugged, and leaned both elbows back on the table behind her. "The Medici bitch will stick Sully in the Bastille, won't she?—if she doesn't chop his head off. Otherwise, I could have nailed Fludd's bollocks to the *Theodora's* main-mast two months ago and we wouldn't *have* this problem."

Her eyes glinted with humour, mordant as it might be.

I felt myself moved to smile. "Not quite that simple."

The Summer rain beat more strongly against the window; drops hissed where they fell from the chimney down into the coals of the fire.

"I have come to a realisation. Which is this. That it is no longer sufficient for me to say that I do not trust these men—if I intend to do nothing about it."

Gabriel stood up silently, and bent to take the iron kettle from the chain, where it bubbled with the thick sound of a dish all but cooked. He stood it down out of the hissing drops of rain. I saw him glance over his shoulder and catch Dariole's gaze. She made a small movement of her mouth, which his expression

answered.

“I begin to feel like a man set between his wife and his mother!” I remarked with some asperity. “If you have something to say, speak!”

Dariole gave me an innocent frown. “Which one of us is your mother, exactly?”

I controlled my desire to wallop her behind, and momentarily cheered myself by managing a civil nod towards Gabriel Santon. He looked pleasingly affronted as he sat down again.

“I ain’t yer Ma!” he rumbled. “And suppose you just tell us what you’re talking about?”

I put my back to the hearth, so that I might look squarely down at both of them.

“I have agents, still,” I said. “Or, at least, there are men whom I have so employed in the past. Were I a man unconcerned with prophecies...well then, there’s no need I should live either in England or France over the next few years. There is Italy, the Germanies, where a spy-network might base itself.” I shrugged. “The Turkish Mediterranean, if matters become dire. If I desired, I might eventually employ as many intelligencers as ever I did under M. de Sully.”

Mlle Dariole and Gabriel exchanged looks.

“And this has *what* to do with Giordano Bruno?” Dariole demanded.

I took a pace or two back and forth over the trodden herbs and rushes on the flag-stones; turned about, and faced the two of them again.

“Too much has been foretold, too accurately. It seems to me...that it would be wise if there were—watch-men. Quis custodiet ipsos custodes?” At Dariole’s blank look, I glossed, ““Who will guard the guards?” Whether or not I believe Caterina was right in all she calculated for our future, Saburo had confidence enough to die for it. As did she. Fludd—” I gestured at the plain plaster of the ceiling, and by inference at the rooms above us. “*He* thinks his mathematical reasoning true, or he wouldn’t put himself into lifelong imprisonment now, for what he still hopes he can do to prevent his supposed comet that will destroy the world.”

Because, even though the time has passed, I perceive he still—hopes.

Dariole gave a shrug; Gabriel’s nod was one of more considered agreement.

“I will set it out plainly for you,” I said, standing on the rush-strewn floor before their bench. “Sir Robert Cecil made a request of me: you both know this. I have Doctor Fludd at his mathematics, to see what his predictions say has changed with Prince Henry—and, meantime, I am using Cecil’s old agents to discover mundanely what information on Henry I can. I have no wish to kill the boy. But that is by-the-by, at the moment.”

“It is?” Gabriel rumbled.

“It is, because this cannot be the sole such occasion that will arise.”

“And?” Dariole prompted.

“And—murder is a blunt weapon.”

Gabriel’s eyebrows shot up. “*What?*”

“A blunt weapon, and one of last resort.” I wished I might sit. I felt, if I must confess it, too nervous under their Gemini-twin gazes. “The skill in spying is in using information and manipulating a man’s behaviour. Witness my lord the Duc. Murder should be the last weapon to hand.”

I put my hands behind my back, clasping them to keep them still.

“Robert Fludd, *if* he continues, will make many predictions. If a man desired to avoid murder, wherever possible, but desired also to steer clear of the worst of wars and other disasters.... Well, then: a man might use agents to monitor, to over-watch, and to step in, where need is, with just sufficient force or fraud. And, if judgement demands it—kill. Men die in duels and wars with not one-tenth the reason this would have....”

In silence, rain hissed beyond the open kitchen door.

“How can I judge the interests of five hundred years in the future? I do not know, truly, whether the world will end in comet-fire. I can’t conceive of it. I *do* think we ourselves best placed to step outside the narrow interests of France and England, and consider how this great war of Europe might be avoided.”

“*You*,” Dariole said. She stood, her thumb hooking itself under her sword-belt, and her chin lifting as she stared up into my face. “This is *you* you’re talking about. Isn’t it?”

I shrugged helplessly. “There would be others, in time, recruited carefully; those who could be trusted with the knowledge of Fludd’s prognostications—”

“But you!”

Gabriel looked up. “You take orders better than you give ’em, Raoul.”

Conceivably I stiffened; it was no great difficulty to look down at him, where he sat. His expression did not waver. Gabriel Santon is no longer afraid of his master in any way.

“Yes,” I admitted. “That has been true.”

Gabriel smiled wryly at me.

I said, “But, consider where I stand now. If Fludd said one true thing in his lifetime, he spoke it before Master Cecil—a man cannot ‘un-know’ what he knows.”

I gestured; Gabriel moved along the bench; I sat down beside him. It was necessary for me to sit. Leaning forward, I linked my hands together so that no man should see them shake.

“If I foresee a thing, and don’t prevent it, am I not responsible for it?”

Dariole said nothing, only watching me intently, her arms folded across her body.

Gabriel protested, “You can’t do *everything*.”

“True enough. I’m no ambitious man.” I smiled, somewhat twistedly, at Gabriel. “And it may be true that I make a better servant than master. Who knows how long this enterprise would last; or if it could succeed—in anything? But, if I don’t do this, who else will?”

The warm scent of broiled meat mixed with that of soot washed down the chimney by the rain. The coals on the fire-stand sputtered in the silence. I sighed, and shook my head.

“I have been deciding, these last days...at least in the matter of Prince Henry. After that—” I shrugged.

Dariole, her dark eyes hooded, watched me in the rain-light of the kitchen. “How would you do this? How would you start? How would you *pay* for it?”

Fear, exasperation, and tension exploded through me; I threw up my hands, leaning back on the bench, the hard edge of the kitchen table cutting into my spine.

“Mademoiselle, I have *no* idea! I’m as yet no further than knowing it *should* be done. Who knows: perhaps James’s next spy-master will be a man of as great a mind as Robert Cecil—or Viscount Carr will transmute himself into a statesman! And then we may leave this matter entirely, and go back to our lives!”

Gabriel gave a basso profundo chuckle, which I took to be a response to my exasperation. I glared at him.

Mlle Dariole leaned over the bench, and made a long arm across the table, snaring the wine jug and crockery drinking-bowls.

Pouring the wine, she said, “Maybe we don’t have to think of it now. Not until Prince Henry—”

She stopped and looked at me.

“With all *this*—Henry; Fludd; what you’ve been talking about, watch-men—you’re going *away*? Going *where*?”

I reached for one of the wine-bowls, and drank for courage. “I am going to France, to speak to M. de Sully.”

Dariole exploded. “You’re Badlam-crazy!”

“Bedlam,” I corrected.

“*I don’t care!*”

“She’s right,” Gabriel Santon observed with a sigh. “I ought to pack.”

“You stay here. You keep your eye on Robert Fludd. And your fist if he needs it. I have his mathematical assurance of my return.”

Dariole snorted. “You’re trusting your life to *Fludd’s* prediction?”

“Well, I am to trust other men’s deaths to it.”

I rose to my feet. If I could have turned my back on her, I would; it would have made words easier to say. She let me clasp her wrist. I felt the heat of her skin under my fingers, so soft, even through my gloves; and the muscle beneath hard and strong.

“The present debt outweighs the future.”

I reached out and took her left hand, moving the lace cuff and her doublet sleeve until the end of her scar was just visible.

I said, “‘A man must be loyal to his lord.’ I find myself in agreement with Tanaka Saburo—if I do not plan to end the same way that he did. Mademoiselle, first, I *must* do this. Wait for me to return. I will be done within two or three weeks.”

“You’ll be *dead* within two or three weeks.” Her mouth set. “I don’t care about mathematics! The Medici bitch won’t have forgotten! If you set foot in France, she’ll have you killed.”

I braced myself for a long quarrel. “No, mademoiselle. I go, and I go alone. I...have a truth that must be told.”

She lifted her chin, with that stubbornness with which I am so familiar. “Why? *Why* must it?”

What did I say of Henri’s assassination, that May two years past? *It will fail, because I have arranged it so.* I smiled privately and satirically.

“Hubris on my part, mademoiselle. That is why.”

Dariole scowled at me.

“There is the man to whom I owe my life,” I said. “Even if, by now, he will have regretted saving me, and desire another gallows-tree. I take every shred of responsibility for Henri’s death. It was I who brought Ravailac to the rue de la Ferronnerie; it was I who did not guard him well enough, so that he could put home his knife into the body of Henri of Navarre. That I admit to, and I will submit to justice—but *I am no traitor.* And Sully must know that. He *must* be told!”

Gabriel stood up, also; wiping his hands down the front of his breeches. “Raoul, you think he’ll absolve you for King Henri’s death?”

I smiled, shaking my head. “Henri was his friend and master from the ’80s on; Sully *knew* Henri from not long after St Bartholomew’s Day. They fought together, governed together...no, the Duc will not absolve me. Rather the reverse.”

He grunted. “Why go, then!”

“Because I must tell him the truth. Before I do anything else.”

There is no justice in politics; that is hardly news to me—still, it sickens me that Marie de Medici flourishes, she who killed her husband and will now never answer for it. Marie de Medici: who will be Queen now, until Louis is allowed to come of age.

If I were a blade of a different temper, I would make my way back to France and see if it is as easy to kill a Queen by design as it is to kill a King by accident.

Gabriel shrugged his heavy shoulders, smelling of sweat and Cripple-gate. “You were lucky to get out of it last time, Raoul. You messed up!”

Dariole interrupted him, glaring at me. “Robert Fludd gets to stay here on a pension, and *you* get to go back to Paris and be hanged?” Her palm and fingers curved comfortingly around her dagger’s pommel. “Caterina was right. Where’s the justice in *that!*”

I managed a smile, although her outrage touched me. “Mademoiselle, I would say you are very young, to ask that question. Were it not that I am inclined to ask it myself, of late. But I shall not be hanged; I trust Fludd’s predictions that far.”

The young woman lifted her head, closing her eyes. Cripplegate, in the Summer’s warm rain: the water at least laid the dust that commonly blew into the kitchen. Outside the open door and beyond the courtyard, two dogs, wet and yelping, ran in squabbling circles down the cobbled street, and vanished into the distance.

Watching Dariole's face, I said, "You may console yourself with this, at least. Doctor Fludd will never have friends. Likely, he will not marry. His servants will be his unacknowledged gaolers. This is his life, for as long as he lives it. Because he knows the secrets of kings."

Dariole opened her eyes and looked up at me.

Without any apparent acknowledgement of Gabriel's presence, she said, "Is that what it's like for you?"

Flustered, I could only echo, "Me, mademoiselle?"

Gabriel watched Dariole, a deep crease across his forehead.

She said, "Alone. Is that going to be *your* life?"

I saw the crevasse that opened up before my feet.

Smiling, I reached down and flicked her cheek with my gloved finger. "Doctor Fludd is confined to a house, and under observation. A man may find companionship in cities, when that is not so. If I have not the companions of Zaton's, or the girls of Les Halles, be assured, I will find others, elsewhere."

Dariole turned her back on me and stalked out into the warm rain.

I watched her lean back against the soaked courtyard wall and look up at the beam-and-plaster frontage of the house, under its grey veil of new lime-wash. Every line of her body shouted hurt.

Gabriel, at my shoulder, advised, "Leave her."

I can do nothing else: it is for the best. I trust Fludd's mathematics.

Else it would be irresponsible of me to go.

Rochefort, Memoirs

47

Sully has retired to a *château* on the Loire.

I picked up word both from Cecil's men, and one of my old contacts in the court of the Archduke and Archduchess in the Netherlands, and reflected that at least I should not face entering Paris while the Queen Regent was there. Sully had gone in January last year, they said, when he retired from the royal council.

They spoke also of how unwillingly he had gone.

History has its ironies—I re-entered France by retracing almost the exact route that M. the Duc D'Enghien, the Prince Condé, used when he fled with Charlotte de Montmorency from the attentions of the late King Henri IV.

Condé and the Princess Charlotte, it turned out, had left again for France almost before Henri's body grew cold to the touch. In some ways, I regretted it. In that November of 1609, when they fled to

Brussels, Charlotte de Montmorency was both a minx and sixteen years old. I would have welcomed a word with her.

I reflected on it as I made a covert and sidelong way south and west, across country towards the river Loire. Charlotte's family had set the sixteen-year-old girl on to the ageing King—he was then near sixty—in the hope of favours. Henri had acted from the first moment like a man completely besotted. My master the Duke had thought it unamusing, and a political danger.

At the time, I had been blackly amused by the spectacle of an old man making a fool of himself over a teenage girl.

I am not within twenty years of Henri's age! I protested in my mind, with present chagrin, as my sway-backed and broken-winded mount trudged through the rain.

I am nowhere near such a spectacle as that old goat, besotted over a mere cock-tease!

The Prince Condé, married off to Charlotte to give Henri an excuse to lie with her without scandal, had taken his husbandly duties entirely too seriously, and fled with his beautiful wife when he was twenty-two.

I am hardly twenty-two, either, I thought.

If the question could have been asked without my being killed the moment I set foot in the Queen Regent's court—and without getting my face slapped, and myself into a duel—I should like to have ask Charlotte de Montmorency: how did she find her marriage now? Now that she has attained the greater age of eighteen, going on nineteen?

After two years, do the caresses of her husband, and the other young gallants she entertained in the Netherlands, satisfy her? Does she ever miss the experienced wooing of a man like Henri of Navarre? Does she ever take older lovers: soldiers, statesmen, adventurers?

Dear God, but I am pitiful!

It would do me good to have Mlle Dariole present to kick my arse.

Ah, but that's the problem.

The weather both suited my mood and seemed to be what I deserved. Rain dripped from my hat onto the cloak I had bundled about me, and the mud from the gelding's hooves plastered my boots to the thigh.

Even worrying at the subject of Dariole brought pictures into my mind. Naked and dressing herself on the ship from Goa, the roll of the vessel making her stagger like a drunken man. I shifted uncomfortably in the saddle.

A young man might have inspired her to a quicker healing. She might, by now, have been desirous of a lover's touch.

I know Mlle Dariole will not miss M. Rochefort over-much, although she might now think so. How can she help but be disgusted, in a year or two, by an old besotted fool slobbering over her? A young man like Condé will appear—and if she cannot marry, still, she will be a glorious mistress....

The rain began to clear a half-hour later. I found myself in no more buoyant frame of mind.

I betrayed M. de Sully, I thought grimly. No matter how inadvertently. There is nothing I can do, now, but make my confession to him, so that he knows that one man at least was *not* disloyal to him. That what happened was disastrous, but it was not done by any traitor's hand.

Even so, I have caused the death of his best and oldest friend. If not for Fludd's mathematical assurances, it would neither surprise nor disappoint me if he had me hanged from the justice-tree on his own estate.

I turned the nag's head to ride parallel with the Loire, on the north bank. Soon, the road widened. A few other travelers passed: monks, a group of noblemen riding back from the hunt, two women, a small child playing happily in the mud left after the rain. Houses began to appear here and there, and a small town at the end of a Loire bridge, which I would ride around in case any man should ask questions.

The country is quiet, I marvelled. No war with Jülich-Cleves. All men do not travel in groups, with firearms. I occupied myself for a few miles in turning over in my mind the news and rumours I had heard. Henri's "Grand Design," whatever conquests he intended by it, had died with his death. Is it conceivable that in terms of peace, the Medici is a better ruler?

It was almost an hour before the sky cleared totally, and I saw the red-tiled roofs of the château of Villebon over the trees ahead.

How can I leave her, to perform this act of stupidity?

How can I not?

I touched a spur to the nag's flanks and he ambled at a slightly faster pace.

My master the Duke is retired from the council, he is no longer *surintendant de finances* and first minister of France. He is still a lord with the high, low, and middle justice. This is not Suor Caterina's revolution of the people. This is a land where a man may be hanged out of hand: as much property as a beast is.

The sun warmed my near-dry cloak.

My stomach churned, seeing Villebon come closer. *It would not take much to have me turn about*, I thought, as I rode into the small town that attached itself to the château. It was remarkably crowded, and it took me some time to persuade my nag through the streets.

I rode directly to the gates of the château, which stood open in the sun. The marks of many hooves indicated that a large party had passed out, some two hours ago; Monsieur de Sully might not be back for some time, I concluded. *Although it is always possible that it is not the Duc who has ridden out.*

"You!" a voice bellowed, close enough that, if the gelding had been a spirited horse, I should have found myself dumped on my arse in the mud. As it was, the beast shuffled sideways a few steps, and I reined him in and looked down.

The guards were not faces I knew.

The young man in fashionable doublet, I knew well.

At least one of his secretaries stayed with him, I thought. "Monsieur Andre."

He called out urgently, a dozen men with muskets flocking to him from the gate-house. I sat my mount, watching. He snarled, "You can't get away!"

“Would I be here if I wanted to?”

Speaking more mildly than I felt—M. Andre has been always a pompous and humourless young man, but he has at least shown himself loyal—I held up my hands to demonstrate myself unarmed, and got down from the saddle.

“I’m ready,” I said. “You may take me to him.”

Andre scowled, confused. He shot a glance across the courtyard, towards the château’s main door. Slowly, I unbuckled my sword-belt, and held both sword and dagger out to the boy.

“Search him!” Andre ordered the men shrilly; and to me: “I hope he sticks you in the pillory before he hangs you. Offal and flints, Rochefort, and I hope you lose an eye to it!”

A shame *you* were not the Queen Regent’s spy and murderer, I reflected, while two of the musketeers took me by the arms and shoulders, and a third searched me.

Even more mildly, I remarked, “The late King never failed to call his enemies ‘monsieur,’ no matter how vile he thought them. It’s a shame younger men don’t follow his example.”

The younger man bristled. I resolved to give up baiting him. *I am here for the Duc, not him.*

The young man, Andre, took hold of the shoulder of my doublet, reaching up to do it. I thought he would not have, had his musketeers not been holding my arms behind my back.

The anger in his face was so pure, I all but looked aside in shame.

“We executed one traitor, a year or more past,” he got out, “when the *Goddams* thought fit to warn us M. Gost had sold himself to the Medici. He was only a spy. You—I hope you hang as he did, but may it take you an hour to choke!”

I should not have thought of Daniel Gost, I confess—but, on reflection, the Duc’s kitchens are not so pleasant that a man working in them cannot be tempted by a bribe. Gost had been in the household longer than I. I felt a certain sense of anti-climax. But then again. . . .

Did Daniel sweat when he knew Maignan was dead, by reason of him? Did he have nightmares, and half welcome the rope when they brought it?

Men scurried about at Andre’s command. The musketeers, being ordered to hold me on the spot, did exactly that. I looked about me. Villebon was not a place I had visited often—when I have seen my master the Duke at his homes, it has more commonly been Sully-on-Loire and Rosny. I imagined I would see him, here, in much the same kind of chamber as there, or at the Arsenal. Some small, dark panelled room, with Sully seated behind a desk piled high with papers in perfect order.

And wide oaken floorboards, I thought, upon which I may drop down on my knees and beg his pardon.

A man cannot apologise for this.

I suppose I may, like Doctor Fludd, at least make explanation.

At the same moment that I raised my eyes to the white walls and peaked red-tiled roofs of Villebon, wondering where in the building I might find that room with Sully, words suddenly burst out loudly behind me.

Andre turned about, staring. I heard a disturbance at the edge of the town. Cheering? Or some other

sound?

A number of horsemen burst out of the town at the gallop, a grey horse leading. *The Duc*, I thought, suddenly all ice. The stallion's hooves threw up yellow mud; landed so hard that I could feel them jar the ground. They echoed from the walls of the courtyard as Maximilien de Bethune rode up, slid down from the saddle, and threw his reins behind him with the assurance of a man who knows there will always be a servant there to catch them. He strode towards us as his mount danced backwards in the grip of the groom, and the other riders and mounts milled around at the gate.

His beard has gone white, I thought, as he came close upon me. Under the velvet bonnet, his hair showed iron grey. He did not, despite that, look the handful of years over fifty that he must be—he strode still like the man who rode with Henri at Arques and Ivry; the gown that he wore over his sober doublet and trunk-hose flying out in the wind, his riding whip cracking at the side of his boot.

“Monsieur Duc.” I did not attempt to move out of the grip of the musketeers who held me. Behind Sully, other men were dismounting, and a few women in noble dress. I could only stare down at the man as he came closer: Henri's confidant, the Medici's enemy, retired governor of France. His round Gascon features were pale and set.

He stopped in front of me. I began again, “Monsieur—”

He raised the horse-whip still in his hand and lashed me across the face.

It caught me too fast, too much by surprise, for even a duelist's reflexes to avoid more than the very worst of it. The lash caught me from forehead to cheek, over one eye, in one knife-thin stroke. I yelled.

“Let him go!” he bellowed.

The soldiers stepped rapidly back.

His face glowed with recognition and hatred. He raised the whip again and struck, leather and cord catching me horizontally across my cheeks. I tasted sweet iron; spat a mouthful of blood.

“Monsieur Duke!” I yelled, desperate. He sliced two more blows down on my head, where I had not even had the chance to remove my hat; the second one cut my scalp so that blood ran.

I stumbled down on one knee, arms up to protect my face. The Duc de Sully's whip lashed me full in the ribs, slicing doublet and shirt as if they were nothing.

“Monsieur!” I shouted. “Listen! Listen to me!”

“Bastard traitor.”

Sully's voice was unrecognisable. I dared not look up. Blood ran down my face. Something was wrong with my vision; the flag-stones blurred, spattered with blood. I saw his boots beside me. A hand grabbed my hair.

For all he was fifteen years my senior, and a head shorter, he threw me forward bodily.

I did not resist. Bleakly, inside the pain, a small thought surfaced: *I deserve all he can do to me*. I fell down on my hands and knees, and yelled again as the whip caught me across the small of the back.

Shouts came from beyond the two of us; people watched; I could not have said who. Nobles; commoners. Some cheering, some alarmed.

I huddled my head down between my arms.

The whip is made to get commands through the thick skin of a horse. Human skin is different. With the bare protection of doublet and breeches, I rolled on the ground, and the whip caught me again and again, slicing cloth to rags. It lashed open my calf, my thigh, my wrist; the sharp excruciation curling about my ribs and leaving a bloody weal from nipple to throat.

“Monsieur, stop, listen, please!”

I bellowed in desperation at him; for all I know, he did not hear. It was not begging. For all the pain, I knew myself deserving of this. He held me with one hand in my hair, and thrashed the horse-whip down as hard as a man might on a vicious stone horse, while I rolled on the flag-stones and screamed.

A whistling cut caught the edge of my lip: I cut off in mid-bellow and an explosion of blood.

He flung me bodily down. The hard stones were almost refuge. I ducked my head and pushed my face into the hollows where the stones joined, arms over my head, belly to the ground. His whip rained down sodden cuts on my shoulders, buttocks, and thighs.

“Pick him up.”

His voice sounded ragged, bursting with fury.

I wanted to crawl away; my legs would not push me. I heard him thickly apologise, and dismiss his noble guests. And I felt the guards grab my lacerated shoulders. They hauled me onto my feet.

Upright, the world was a bright, dizzy blur. Blood trickled down from a cut across my temple that I hadn't registered. One of the men holding me upright was M. Andre. Something trickled from my hair to my torn ruff, dripping red. I could not clear my vision. I could not speak: my mouth felt as if stuffed with wet cloth.

Maximilien de Bethune, Duc de Sully, stood a yard away, his whip clasped in his left hand now. With his other hand, he punched me in the face.

Knees sagging, held up by his guardsmen, I was no taller than he. He might land his punches where he pleased. His knuckles impacted on my cheekbone, and I heard—through a blaze of pain—how he swore. A soldier's rough language.

The Duc gestured. “Take him away; I will see him.”

I did not faint, nor become unconscious, but I seemed to pass into a state of preoccupation. A sensation of warmth came from somewhere. I could not see out of one eye. The odd sensation on my skin was blood running down it: one doesn't feel it, being of the body's own heat. *I hope to God it is blood alone.* I seemed to hang in some place out of time. An urge went through me: I bent forward and vomited up all of my last meal, and blood ran from my nostrils.

Fludd had time for rough calculation only. I will return alive.

But he claimed nothing of what state I might be in.

Both my ears were singing. I could make them into voices if I chose. I chose to hear them as Mlle Arcadie de Montargis de la Roncière. *Are you punished enough?* her voice whispered to me. *Or will you beg him to hit you again?* Henri is still dead. However much pain he inflicts on you, it changes nothing.

“No, but he has the right.” No man could have made out what I mumbled, through lips already swollen.

Sully gave orders. Through my sick dizziness, I recognised his voice. Painful grips tightened on my shoulders: I became aware that I was dragged, boots trailing along the flag-stones. Carried, more than dragged. I had no idea of where, or for what. There was a hiatus that might have been two minutes, or twenty, or two hours: I snapped from it with a shout as someone threw me down on a floor.

I lay on my face for a space of time, I don't know how long, dimly surprised to find myself alive. Something under me was hard, not cold enough for stone. If I stayed perfectly still, the pain ebbed a little. I could see, in one corner of my vision, my arm, with the cloth cut into strips; and red gouges showing in the flesh underneath, set in black-and-blue bruises. Still I could not see out of one eye. I stank of puke: it stuck my ruff to my doublet.

Hands jerked me upright.

I have been here long enough for blood to dry, I realised, sucking in air, as every ripped shred of cloth tore stickily out of whip-cuts.

“Stand up,” the Duke's voice said. Both scornfully and accurately, he added, “You will not die of a beating.”

This grave Gascon duke, usually so controlled...I heard fire in his voice, damped down now, but ready to flare up at any moment. *He has by no means done punishing me for my failure.*

I managed to stay upright, if hunched over a little. When I put the back of my wrist delicately to my mouth, I felt lips painfully split, and my nose swollen. My eyes closed into slits, the left worse than the right; a fear of blindness cut through me like icy water. A moment later, I thought: *Fludd can be wrong*. If he hangs me I shall have little time to worry.

“Rochefort,” the Duc de Sully said.

He stood by a carved, armed chair, turned aside from the desk under the window. The chamber was large and palely lit.

I thought, *Does he know, I wonder, that he has that fine line of red spots decorating his ruff?*

I stared at the droplets of my blood.

Andre and musketeers stood in the doorway; the Duc swore at them to leave. The door shut behind them. I heaved in a breath; smelled the familiar scents among which I have taken my orders these past fifteen years: sun-warmed beeswax, wood fires, old ink, and amber. The light on the pale linen-fold panels made one of my eyes run. I felt a rush of chill in my belly. *Now I must tell him. Now I must tell the truth I've come so far to tell.*

I got out, “I'm sorry, Monsieigneur.”

It provoked reaction: I knew it would. There was no way of avoiding it. For a split second I saw Robert Fludd in Dariole's arms, and the flash of light off her sharp knife. Maximilien de Bethune, Baron Rosny, Duc de Sully, swore like a priest and hit me in the mouth.

I just managed to keep my balance. Blood dribbled from my mouth; I spat, and did not clear my ruff. “I don't blame you. Monsieigneur...I don't blame you. I'd do the same.”

It sounded almost wry, but I in no way felt comic. I hurt more for him than for me.

“I came to tell you the truth.” This time I got my head up, and managed to look him in the face. “No other man but I can tell you.”

Strain and age were written incomparably deeper into his round face than they had been two years ago. *Grief has not died, nor hatred.* I saw it in that face.

“What *truth?*” he exclaimed, with sudden disgust, and snatched his gloves from his hands. Both were red across the knuckles. “You try to betray me again. A trap. As if I were not watched close enough already!”

I lifted my hand again and wiped at my mouth, trying to clear my voice. Pain went through me. I tried to think that it would clear my head.

He has no way to know who sent a message to Paris by way of Cecil’s ambassador, warning him of a Medici traitor. To his mind, no reason to think it might be M. Rochefort, who vanished after a few warning letters. I gritted my teeth, and tried to speak words that would make him listen.

“The Queen Regent did not send me.” I straightened, every inch of my body burning with the lashes. “If you want to kill me without more blood on your hands, monsieur, give me over to her. She’ll hang me as soon as she can, because I’m witness against her.”

Sully glanced down. I wished I could see his expression more clearly. I dared not put fingers to that eye, to see if he had crushed the eyeball in its socket.

“Must I hear words from you?” De Sully spoke with a combination of weariness and hatred that cut me deeply. “What will you say? That it was for his *wife* that you had Henri killed?”

My heart jolted. Two years after Henri’s death and his grief is still as hot. Hotter, now he has the man responsible.

“Yes, monsieur. Marie de Medici wanted me to kill the King.”

“I will hang you,” Sully said. “That you dare come here and say this to me...”

“Monsieur,” I began. Trying to straighten my thoughts in my throbbing head. I am as guilty of the King’s death as if I put the knife in him myself; I am guilty of the death of François Ravillac; but it was accident, all accident. *Madame the Queen held your life ransom.*

I managed not to fall down on my knees. It is not for me to beg forgiveness, or absolution. It is for me to tell the truth. I looked at the Duke my master, Maximilien de Bethune. Soldier for the dead King Henri, servant and financier for the dead King Henri; most of all, friend to the late King Henri.

“Well?” he snapped.

There was a small oblong painting over his chair, fastened to the panelling; a painting, or perhaps an engraving, I could not quite make out which. Henri IV, Henri of Navarre: that profile-face which all men recognise, his lively eyes, his jutting beard.

Here is where Sully works, and he is never more than a yard from King Henri.

I cannot tell him.

It burst on me with all the force of the obvious.

How can I tell him that *he* is the thing that the Queen Regent used, to force me into killing the King?

Shock made my handicapped gaze steady. Though shadows of blood, I saw de Sully clearly: tall, dignified, brilliant, stubborn; grieving still for his friend, who came in the end of their lives to be King of France.

If I tell you that Marie de Medici threatened your life to compel me. . . .

. . . You will blame yourself for Henri's death.

No matter that it happened by chance, in the end. That, I think, would be more painful to you than if I had put the knife in the King's body myself. No matter.

He will not blame Queen Marie. He will not even blame Valentin Raoul Rochefort.

Himself.

M. de Sully will blame himself.

He could live another thirty years, I realised. With this?

"Speak, if you have to," he growled. "Quickly, Rochefort!"

Sully's black dog.

Pain and something else put a bloody tear running to drip down on my hands.

I didn't come here for him.

I didn't come to clear my debts by telling him a truth he could in no other way find out.

I came here to clear my own name, with him. And for absolution.

From the beginning, I must always have envisaged him forgiving me.

It sent me dizzy. The older man peered into my face, frowning. My mouth was open to blurt out the whole story.

All I wanted to prove to him, I realised, is that I did not betray him. Not for money, not for threats; I was his man, I was loyal!

And if I tell him what truly happened, he will forever know that there was a choice between his life and Henri's, and a man chose Henri to die in Sully's place.

It will break his heart.

Sully would have died, willingly, for Henri to stay alive; he would die now if it would bring him back. How can I tell him—

My hands shook.

I must tell him *something*.

The muscles in my legs went to water. My knees hit the floor.

Painfully, I lifted my head, and managed to meet his gaze.

"The Queen threatened me, monsieur."

Though a head like fog, I pieced it together.

“She had me taken off the street. Half-killed. She *did* kill Maignan.”

The slightest widening of his eyes made words tumble out of me. *I have to do this well.*

“Monsieur, I was afraid! She gave me money enough to go to the New World, but I came back. It’s on my conscience, monsieur; I *had* to tell you!”

Sully’s expression altered.

He had had hope, I saw, for all his brutal violence; a jot of hope that he had been mistaken in what he thought about me.

I lowered my head to the floor and wept. Not in a dignified way, as I had heard Sully wept at Henri’s funeral, but hiccuping, spilling blood and mucus from my nose, and biting at my wrist so that the pain would let me speak.

“Your justice on me,” I got out. “I came to beg you for pardon, monsieur, and I cannot!”

His voice soft with shock, the Duc said, “You, a coward? Yes...that, too, I should have known.” His bushy grey brows came down. “You are the man who begged for his life when I first met you.”

The mindless anger was gone. He looked sad, even grief-stricken, but self-possessed. As he locked gazes with me, I saw both disgust in his face, and pity.

He lowered himself down into his chair. I thought he would not speak again.

He looked at me. “I expected too much of you.”

I bit at the torn lip his horse-whip left; only that stopped me crying out.

“I misjudged your character. I saw Valentin Rochefort and I thought him something more than the usual ex-soldier and killer...something worth saving from a just hanging. When you served me, monsieur, I thought you of a particular courage. Which, I see, you are not.”

If I said, while on my feet, that the Queen Regent intimidated me, he would not believe it. With M. Rochefort on his knees, he can picture it in every detail. And he believes—oh, he believes!

More than anything on earth, I wanted to speak up, to say, *I never betrayed you!* I chewed at my ragged lip, and put my head on my arms, and wept.

He will think it fear.

“You sent me letters,” he said quietly. “I remember them now. Your guilty conscience? But...therefore, I shall not hang you.”

I felt as if I had been kicked in the stomach. I couldn’t help lifting my head, staring at him. The Duc looked back at me, his expression without rage, but with a stern contempt.

He sighed.

“If not you...they would have found another man. Paris is full of weak, brutal men who can be coerced by threats and violence. Go back to wherever it is you have come from, Valentin Rochefort.”

I would not see him again; I knew that. No matter how long either of us will live, the Duc de Sully and his man Rochefort will not meet again.

Scrambling forward to his chair, I fell down on my knees and seized his hand, and kissed it.

“Neither pardon nor forgiveness,” he said coldly. “I understand you. Be content with that.”

He raised his voice.

“Andre! Throw this gentlemen out.” He paused, and then added, “See men are warned. He is to leave Villebon alive.”

Rochefort, Memoirs

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I *still* thought I was only going to find a grave.” Mlle Dariole stripped off her riding gloves as she walked into the room. “And men like you don’t get graves.”

I stared up from the truckle bed.

After a breathless second, and with massive effort, I managed to sound both sardonic and normal. “No, indeed, mademoiselle. Only their bodies dumped behind out-of-the-way hedgerows, or face-down in a ditch. Hardly identifiable.”

A truckle bed is, in all honesty, too small for a man of my stature; even when I scrambled painfully upright, as now, to prop my back against the wall at the head of it. I thought, *How can she be here?*

Could *Fludd*—no, there has not been enough time—

Her voice interrupted the panicked chatter of my mind.

“I asked after you in Sully-sur-Loire. And Rosny. And eventually Villebon. . . .”

Her boots made the floorboards dip by a fraction and creak, as she crossed to the window. I saw her reach up to the shutters, body becoming lean as she stretched; and take one down.

Sunlight flooded in.

She turned, but even with my hand up to shade my face, I could see her only as a black silhouette. Her level voice came out of the brightness.

“An inn-keeper at Villebon said they’d ‘hunted a man a mile or two down-river. For the sport of it.’ You came a long way after that.”

I lowered my hand. The strength of the sun flooded my vision, my eye stinging.

“*Christ,*” Dariole’s voice said, out of the brilliance, so strong with urgency that I could not tell it for revulsion or pity. Neither one of which I like. She said again, “Christ Jesus!”

“He ordered them to let me live.”

“Son of a *bitch*. Your eye....”

“It is an eye. So the doctor says.” I kept my voice level, deliberately not reaching to touch the bandage. “I will not know whether I can look out of it until the swelling goes down.”

Dariole stayed silent. I felt a stab of self-consciousness, in night-shirt and bandages as I was.

She spoke with a deliberate lightness. “So that’s why you’re hiding here? Don’t tell me—you’re too vain to be seen looking like this.”

“That and not desiring to be hanged out of hand.” I shaded my eye again, attempting to make her out, and added sourly, “I *thought*, at least, that I was hiding.”

So much of a man is the company he keeps. If I had been still Valentin Raoul St Cyprian Anne-Marie de Cossé Brissac, she would have known instantly to look for me among the nobility, in the châteaux of the Loire valley. If I had masqueraded as a merchant, then the bargees or the ferrymen on the trade routes might have told her; if as a bourgeois, then asking among lawyers and doctors would have done it. Valentin Rochefort himself would keep company with those who serve the nobility, in the great towns hereabouts: gamblers and prostitutes and duellists in Blois and Tours.

I assumed myself anonymous, here among peasants, I reflected. Whom I thought I had in any case bribed well enough not to betray me.

Dariole walked back from the farm-house’s window. Close, now, I could make her out clearly. A young man in a spruce, small ruff, the cloth pressed up under her chin by the high collar of a fashionable embroidered doublet. She wore trunk-hose, and rapier and dagger at her belt; she had made no effort towards disguise other than using dye to subtly shade the colour of her hair; and, by avoiding her usual marking of her upper lip, appearing now to go clean-shaven.

I desire to touch her warm hands, I thought, looking up from the truckle bed as she stood over me. *And I must not.*

She pushed down on the pommel of her rapier, lifting her scabbard up behind her out of the way, and sat down on the side of the bed. The frame creaked; the straw palliasse shifted. Her eyes moved with her gaze, travelling constantly all across my face.

“I begin to regret the lack of a mirror,” I said, attempting the satirical.

“Sully *didn’t* forgive you!” She had a partisan glare in her eyes, I saw, that made me both ache and desire to laugh—had laughter not been so likely to pain me.

“No, mademoiselle,” I said.

“But he *must* have understood!”

“He understands that Valentin Rochefort is a servant who, through cowardice, allowed himself to be coerced into betraying him.”

She opened her mouth for some outraged remark; I silenced her by reaching out and taking her hand. This one indulgence, touching her, I will allow myself. No more.

“Mademoiselle—there are worse things M. de Sully could think. He made a mistake in the character of a

hireling. That is all.”

Dariole looked down at my fingers, and I felt her thumb slide lightly across the bruises. They were yellow and sickly green, now; not the black they had been a week ago. It surprised me that her touch on the healing scabs did not pain me.

She said, “You didn’t tell him.”

I sighed. “No. And you will not say anything to the contrary, Dariole.”

Her gaze flicked up from under her bright lashes. “Well...maybe this time it’s all right for you to make a decision for someone else.”

I had kept in my mind, as a tiny solace, that M. de Sully had been correct in his initial view of me, even if now he did not think so. Seeing in Mlle Dariole’s eyes that she might approve of my action nearly unmanned me.

Dariole, seeming to deliberately change the subject of our discourse, said, “I’ve talked to the barber-surgeon.”

I had suspicioned the peasant family called in a doctor, or horse-leech, or something of the sort, when my fever reached its height; but remembering nothing of those few days very well, I had not considered the consequences of it.

Weakly, I swore.

“None of this is *anything!* It’s healing up, as a man’s injuries do; I have had worse in duels. I imagine I frighten small children, but you, mademoiselle, are not a small child!”

“About time you realised that!”

I had not loosed my grip on her hand, I realised.

The corner of her mouth crept upward. Lacing her fingers into my bruised ones, she looked at me, and spoke in a very whimsical tone.

“Do you know that M. Rochefort has been seen duelling in France, while we’ve been in England and the Japans? I heard a lot of gossip, coming down here. A few people think The Spaniard’s dead in a field behind some convent or other. Most of them think you’re alive, maybe as a galley slave, or a pirate, or down south as some Florentine Duke’s assassin....” Her lip quivered. “I had no idea of your reputation, messire.”

“Clearly, you haven’t been paying attention.”

She broke out in a smile. Not a wistful smile, nor yet the bitter one I had seen so often after the Tower in London; but the same wide, happy smile that she wears when she fights—a bright-eyed, triumphant grin.

The small size of the truckle bed made this young woman need to sit so close that I could smell the outdoors on her clothing. And her.

“Dariole!” I leaned forward with an involuntary groan and threw my arms around her.

She fell forward against me, grabbed at my arms, my chest; sprawling on top of me and apologising as I winced at every touch. She tried to kiss me without pressing against my swollen lip. I put my hand to the back of her head and held her still, swallowing her mouth with mine, kissing until we must both have

tasted my blood.

“Rochefort!” she said. She was all in the small truckle bed with me, now, every inch of her; laying on top of me with her hilts and scabbards jabbing into my body. “Messire! I thought I’d *lost* you.”

“Dariole—”

She silenced me again. I need not have let her. The sweet smell of her finger-tips on my mouth, the touch that made my heart lurch, even as it stung my cuts and bruises, this is no reason for a man to be quieted.

A few more seconds, I thought, pulling every inch of her body tight up against me.

The scent of hay and the slight ripeness from the stable drifted in through the open window, together with the clucking of poultry. I bore the weight of her on my bruised body. Slowly, her smile grew wider.

“You’re still proud, messire....”

Part of me is, at any rate.

“Consider me abashed,” I said gravely, for the pleasure of seeing her whole face light up with mischief and desire.

Ah, no, that’s a bad error of judgement . “Mademoiselle Dariole....”

We were so close, her chin on my chest, that I could smell the sweetness of her breath. I ached to reach down and undo her buttons and points; strip off my night-shirt. She spoke all but into my mouth, the skin of her lips so nearly touching mine.

“I’m not leaving, messire.”

Twice her age, and, if I am unlucky, half-blind.

I closed my hands about her upper arms, feeling the stiffness of her left shoulder as I did so. Neither of us is without scars. Her weight on me was a blessing, for all the pain it was causing my body.

“Mademoiselle... *listen* to me.”

Not able to rest with my gaze on her shining face, I looked aside. I had not intended to have this conversation with her yet; had been putting it off, in London. *And now, here it is.*

I said, slowly, “This has been a time between us that I shall not forget. What was true, however, is still true. I am twenty years your senior.”

She tapped my cheek softly with two fingers. Startled, I looked back at her. She grinned.

“Messire, *do* shut up about that.”

“But,” I began.

“You can tell me all that later. *This* makes a second good reason....” Dariole cupped her palm and shaded my bandaged eye. Her finger-tips brushed against my skin. Possibly I saw a little less light than before she covered it.

“Second good reason for what, exactly?” I demanded.

“We’re going to Paris.”

“*Paris!*”

I realised my voice had shot up the register. Manoeuvring in an undignified fashion, I got the cross-hilt of her rapier out of my ribs. The amount of willpower necessary to push her up, so that she knelt back, straddling my legs, felt considerable. I glared at her.

“You stupid girl—”

“They have the best doctors there!”

“The Queen Regent will have me killed, and you too, since she won’t doubt M. Dariole knows all that I do!”

She looked stubborn. “No, she won’t have us killed. She won’t find us. *We’re going to Paris*. You think I’m leaving you to some local horse-butcher, here?”

Impasse.

Dariole gave a great stretch of her arms over her head, like a boy; her fingers reaching up towards the house’s low ceiling. Unlike a boy, it pushed her breasts into prominence behind her doublet. With a sigh, she relaxed.

I couldn’t help but break into a smile. “Are you so anxious to march me into Zaton’s at sword’s point?”

“You’d *love* that!” She leaned back and set about untangling herself and her scabbards, and managed finally to climb out and stand by the bed.

“Dariole.”

She shot me a glance, the while she brushed the tabs of her doublet down flat.

“I dislike being brought to confess it,” I said, with a sigh, looking up at her. “You are not a completely stupid young woman. Yes, your face, is less known than any of us—Gabriel, I take it, is still keeping a watch on Doctor Fludd in London?”

She nodded; I went on without a pause.

“If I appear in Paris, Madame the Queen Regent will finish what M. le Duc began.”

Dariole gave me the slightest shrug of her left shoulder. “Trust me, messire.”

A man of my years does not put himself in the hands of a young woman such as Dariole.

I have, in my work, made use of the shock of physical punishment, and how it may make a man self-destructive, wilful, or weak. The moral as well as the physical effects of a beating will make a man co-operative. If I feel any urge to trust her, it will be that, I thought.

Leaning my head back against the cob wall for support, I realised I could not console myself with that theory.

“It is worse,” I said aloud; and, at her raised brow, added, “I find myself indeed with the strangest desire to trust you.”

“Catso!” She grinned, and I saw how anxious she had been. “What’s happened to Messire Rochefort’s pride?”

“I said I felt the desire, mademoiselle, not that I would act on it!”

Her amusement did not lessen. “We can do it. I’ll put you in dark blue. Nobody looks at servants. I’ll go in skirts, and you can be my groom.”

“Groom!” I restrained the volume of my voice; hearing the movement of the peasants in the single room beyond this.

Dariole, in faux innocence, remarked, “Haven’t you always wanted me to treat you as my lackey, messire?”

An answer to that, short of falling at her feet, turning up her arse to be beaten, or fornicating her speechless, eluded me.

And that she should desire to keep me off-balance did not entirely surprise me.

This has no imprimatur of safety on it—and yet, do I not still trust myself in my profession?

“You said ‘second reason,’” I prompted. “What is the first? Why do you desire to go to Paris in any case?”

Dariole said, “Suor Caterina.”

I merely looked.

She began swiftly to speak. “I talked to her. Back when we were at Wookey? I asked her something. I don’t suppose all she forecast is going to happen, now, but I think this one stands a chance. Fludd says he doesn’t think we affected anything in her main line of calculation.”

“*You* spoke to Fludd?” I could not tell whether I felt more incredulous or appalled.

“He was the only one who could answer my question. Messire, if you plan to work with the man, I have to admit he’s alive and there....”

An amount of pain went through me as I shifted on the truckle bed, moving to swing my legs over and sit on the edge of it, but less than I had felt on previous days. She moved rapidly forward, hands out, and as I stood, I found myself with my hands in hers for balance.

“Did *everybody* excepting me ask Suor Caterina questions! What did *you* ask her?”

“I asked her who was going to be the most powerful man in France, for the next twenty or thirty years.”

I could only stare.

“And why would you ask her that?” I managed at last.

She gave a shrug, and looked down at her toes. “I don’t know. I just...I thought, then, Monsieur de Sully might be in trouble. Or, it was something you’d find useful to know. Or...I don’t know.”

Dariole lifted her head and looked at me.

“I suppose I just wanted to do something nice for you, messire.”

“Two years past. When I had just got you raped.” I think I groaned aloud. “Mademoiselle...”

“I didn’t know *why*.” She shrugged; I felt it through her hands where her fingers held mine. “I didn’t know then, what it means when you just want to...*do* something, for someone.”

“Dear God, but you are young!”

“I know *now*.” She looked injured. “Caterina said this man will rule Louis and France. I was trying to find you a *patron*, messire!”

Mlle Dariole has dumbfounded me before, but rarely as thoroughly as at that moment.

She added, “He’s going to exile the Queen Regent in the end. *I* think it’s because you tell him she murdered her husband. And look, messire, then he has to keep you alive, as a witness. He can protect you. Because he *needs* you. He just doesn’t know that yet.”

Leave aside the practical details—that this unknown man might find it far easier and less dangerous merely to sell me to Marie de Medici—there are other dangers.

Gazing down into Dariole’s face, I realised it not so wise, neither, to be standing en chemise (or at any rate, in a peasant’s voluminous night-gown) before her.

“Go out, while I dress,” I said. “I will—consider it. But, mademoiselle, I tell you now: I think this is lunacy!”

The danger of it pressed on me more and more the closer we came to Paris. As little as I desired my capture, I desired hers less.

I did not shave myself again, even when my skin could have born the touch of a blade; I let a thicker servant’s beard grow in. Dariole bought a plain doublet and trunk hose in servant’s blue, and I added a patch over my bandaged eye. Apart from that old rock, my height, it seemed likely this voyage might not immediately founder on some man recognising Valentin Raoul Rochefort.

The lengthy journey by river enabled me to get some of my strength and flexibility back. For the last few days on the barge, I practised the movements of sword-work on the deck. I might conceivably kill some attacker, I decided, if a man would consent to fight while hearing my yelps of pain and not die laughing.

Mlle de Montargis de la Roncière—as she gave her name at the Porte St Victor—walked with her ivory skirts held prettily up, and wooden patterns to keep her silk shoes out of the dirt on the cobble-stones. As we entered Paris, she shot me a wickedly flirtatious smile from behind her fan.

“You’ll smile like that when they hang me,” I remarked morosely. I found it something of an effort to maintain the tone, since standing taller than Mlle Dariole put me at best advantage to study her finer points displayed in women’s clothing—the first time I have actually seen her so, I thought.

She grinned. “They’ll never catch you. Who’s going to look at a mere groom, and see The Spaniard?”

“If you hope to embarrass me, mademoiselle, consider that I have engaged in many habits of disguise in my profession, some far less dignified than this.”

“Really? You *have* to tell me about those!”

I turned my head, further than usual because of my eye-patch, and gave her a look. “Be careful,

mademoiselle.”

“Messire, you wouldn’t say that if I had my sword on!”

“No, indeed. I am not a fool. I take my advantages where they occur.”

She snickered, and quite deliberately dipped her chin and looked up at me from under her lashes. Had there been fewer people on the streets, I might have thought it worth taking up the challenge. As it was, I had a hard enough struggle not to glance about me all the time.

What I did see moved me, foolish as that may be. The familiar buildings, the smells of Paris about me again, the black mud underfoot, the crowds in the streets whose nature and composition I know. . . .

And Mlle Dariole, very precise in her ivory satin stomacher, walking a pace ahead of me. At her shoulder, as a groom properly should be, I lowered my voice and spoke with gravity. “Consider that I implore you, most humbly, mademoiselle, to tell me, now—*what* have you in your hell-cat’s mind!”

Mademoiselle Dariole stifled a spluttering giggle. She looked at me with an expression of teasing delight. “Can’t you guess? I plan to put you on your knees.”

“I’m sure that will entertain the mob. Where will you have me do this? Here, perhaps?”

Her smile, that might conceivably have belonged to a court lady, gave way to her brat’s grin. “You don’t bite so easily now. Very disappointing.”

“My profound apologies, mademoiselle.”

“My profound arse!”

“You know your own arse best, doubtless,” I remarked, and had the satisfaction of reducing her to speechlessness. “*Why* am I to be on my knees, mademoiselle?”

“To make confession.”

I lifted a brow. “That may take some time.”

“Not *everything*, messire! Just the interesting bit.”

“I confess my vanity pricked by that. . . .”

We came to the gates of the Luxembourg Gardens, I saw. The pleasant expanses of clear gravel around the fountains were scuffed in places by the heels of courtiers and ladies. Other men—as unnoticed as myself—wielded rakes, smoothing areas back into neatness. Mlle Dariole seemed to have a goal in mind, by the way that she walked without hesitation past the fountains and towards the pleached alleys.

“Why am I to make confession?” I demanded.

“Because Sister Caterina’s name that she gave me belongs to a priest.”

I looked at her as I am sure groom never looked at his mistress. She gave me her teasing look, which was no less arousing in women’s clothes than in breeches.

“This is why you thought us safe—you plan to have me tell him under the seal of the confessional?”

Dariole nodded.

It startled me. But it is not beyond the bounds of possibility, I thought, considering it.

Dariole added quickly, "He'll be in the government in two years, in the Summer of '14. Maybe the Autumn. Caterina wasn't sure. He's in exile now, really, but I knew he'd be in Paris for a short time this month."

The ivory skirts of her farthingale rustled as she walked, her hands modestly clasped in front of her. I could not reckon myself used to the faintly pink-flushed expanse of bare skin between her ruff and her stomacher, that was usually covered by her doublet.

She glanced back up at me. For all the affection in her expression, what she said was practical in the extreme.

"He's going to be Secretary of State in the Medici's council. He's a bishop now, but Caterina said he never wanted to be. He's twenty-seven, and he was made a bishop six years ago. Don't you think that's impressive?"

"Possibly. Depending on how rich his family is, mademoiselle."

"Cynic!" She grinned. "I didn't ask. His name is Monsieur Armand-Jean du Plessis; he's Bishop of Luçon."

Movement caught my gaze, later than it would have done had I both eyes to my vision. A man in a bishop's robes paced slowly down the pleached alley towards us. As I watched, he gestured away a pair of attendant priests, and continued what appeared to be a pleasant walk, the sun through the lime leaves speckling his pale, long-nosed face.

I said, "You take him to be a priest who abides by the seal of the confessional?"

Dariole put her hand up and fidgeted with her hairpiece. I felt inclined to say that she, too, has been too long in the company of spies and players.

"Isn't it worth taking the chance? I'll go anywhere with you, messire, but I'd like to be able to come home sometimes, too."

That she should say that, and so casually, made me hurt.

As the younger man approached, I saw him to be a man with lustrous eyes, rich dark hair and small beard, and wearing copious lace in his bishop's robes. His hands were long and elegant, his fingers particularly white.

There is a look in the eyes of men who habitually exercise power. For all Dariole claimed him to be out of favour, he had that look.

She flicked up the fan she held, looked at him over it for a moment, and took a step or two to close with him as he was about to pass.

"Your Grace, please, may I ask a favour of you?"

"Mademoiselle, I regret I can spare you little time." His voice, although resonant, was dry for such a young man.

Dariole glanced subtly about her, alert for who should watch us. We might have been any group of idlers in the garden, pausing for conversation. There was naught for me to do, I saw; I confined myself to

resembling a groom at his mistress's beck and call while she spoke to the Bishop of Luçon.

Looking back at Armand-Jean du Plessis, she said, "I desire you to hear my servant's confession, my lord."

His arched brows arched further. "There are many churches in Paris—"

"You should hear Messire Valentin Raoul Rochefort's confession." Dariole folded her fan down and looked at him plainly. "And better here than in a church."

I saw something alert wake up in the back of his gaze as he looked at me for a second time.

He said, dryly, "I of course stand ready to discharge the duties of a priest."

If I put my trust in Fludd, in Caterina, in their mathematical art, then I admit the possibility that this quiet young man will become what Dariole claims.

If I do not speak—perhaps he will not be.

How much of this inevitability is fixed, how much dependent on choice and accident? I have only to be silent. Mlle Dariole will fly into a rage that will leave bruises, I doubt not, but this young bishop will go back to his windswept coast at Luçon, and will he ever come to Paris again? Ever begin to be a man of influence?

Doubtless I flatter myself, I thought, without letting my amusement show.

There is more than one chance in a man's life. If the ambition breathes in him as Caterina says it does, I have only the ability to open or close this one door.

He regarded me with a gaze that took some of its peculiarly unnerving quality from the fact that he did not blink.

If I am wrong, he will tell the Medici, and she will throw me—and perhaps Mlle Dariole—into the Bastille to rot.

Glancing at Dariole, I saw her not unaware of that.

What I tell this man of King Henri's death will give him a hold *in potentia* over Madame the Queen Regent, and an interest in keeping M. Rochefort alive. Whether he can bargain this knowledge into what Dariole speaks of: a place of influence beside the Medici and her son who will eventually oust her... who of us can say, when the future does not as yet exist?

We make it, omission by omission, act by act.

"It would be best," I said, "if I made confession to your Grace."

The Bishop of Luçon adjusted his robes, revealing that he wore the stole. He lifted it and kissed it. "Monsieur, if you please."

He pointed at the gravel.

The pleached alley concealed us, if temporarily. To be back in my profession, after so long, made my blood warm in my veins. I concealed a smile, and sank down on both knees on the path.

If my confession contains tacit silences, so much is only to be expected of a man acquainted both with the

late Elena Zorzi and the present Robert Fludd.

“Bless me, father, for I have sinned....”

Rochefort, Memoirs

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The Bishop of Luçon regarded me with alertness in his gaze as I rose to my feet. “And you, M. Rochefort? What payment do you desire for this? You are to be employed in your old capacity of spy, perhaps? For a new employer?”

Dariole made no pretence now of not listening. She gave me the very slightest lift of her shoulder and ruff. *Your call, messire.*

I am ashamed to confess it: I felt tears prick behind my eyes. Where she gives her loyalties, her heart, she gives with the same reckless wholeheartedness as when she throws herself into a fight.

She might like it, I thought, amused. Rochefort and Dariole, agents of this devious politician-bishop.

“No, my lord,” I said. “Not precisely.”

Du Plessis appeared sceptical—albeit, not in the matter of which I had informed him. I thought him likely to have his own methods of ascertaining the quality of my intelligence—why else should an out-of-favour cleric haunt Paris?

He said, “You do this out of charity, do you?”

I told him a partial truth. “I do it in the first instance to make certain that Mademoiselle and I survive to do anything *else*.”

No smile crept onto those pallid young features. I thought, He will be a bad enemy and an uncertain friend, because no man will ever be allowed to know what he is thinking....

“I am not ungrateful, monsignor.” I bowed my head respectfully. “I hope I shall always be in a position to oblige you. Likewise Mademoiselle. But the Bishop will not wish to be associated with any breath of scandal, such as might come from connection with that M. Rochefort who betrayed M. de Sully.”

Du Plessis looked me up and down. “I believe we understand each other.”

“It is my desire, also, to come home to France from time to time,” I added. *No need to mention that I shall be engaged in another venture.* “A man does not like to be forever exiled from his country. For that reason, I have put myself at your disposal now.”

Thoughtfully, he nodded, put away his stole, and gathered the skirts of his purple robe about himself.

“We shall doubtless be in contact with each other again, Monsieur Rochefort. I trust you will take care of your health.”

“Good fortune to you, monsignor.”

Something about him seemed more the soldier than the priest, I thought, as he turned about and strode off. He had the expression of a man considering deep decisions.

Dariole stood beside me as I straightened up from my bow. We watched the diminishing figure as he moved away down the pleached alley, the shifting of the lime leaves casting on him random sunlight and shade.

Dariole's gaze continued to follow the man, I saw her profile only. Perfectly composed, she said, "Doctors, messire. And then I think we ought to get out of town."

Before Mlle Dariole could urge me towards the physicians of Paris, I unbandaged my eye to clean it, and found my vision blurring, but with colour and shape all present.

"I am for allowing Nature her turn," I said.

One might judge Mlle Dariole's depth of attachment, I thought, by how unmercifully she nagged me. I submitted myself to the expense of consultations, while feeling the need of leaving Paris with all due urgency.

The money spent to see five different physicians bought me five different opinions.

Each morning that I uncovered my eye brought me more sight. If tears ran down my cheek at the brightness of the sun—and from the poking fingers of inspecting doctors—still, and gradually, I gained focus and depth.

"No," I remarked, as we left an expensive house in which the physician's advice revolved around a poultice containing dead mice. "Mademoiselle, no more of this! I did not come so far to hand myself over to Marie de Medici, who would happily cure all my ills. We are leaving Paris. *Today.*"

She was far from content, until I took up a bated foil in the courtyard at the back of our lodgings, and set myself to touch every button on her doublet as I numbered it.

At about the ninth or tenth hit, she threw down her own weapon, and I had the great pleasure of seeing her completely torn between weeping for joy and swearing like a Swiss soldier.

"If there remains any fault, time will cure it," I observed. "I am assured, if I may take rapier in hand and beat you, that I am not so poor a swords-man."

She wiped her flushed face, the heat rebounding off the high Baroque stone buildings that surrounded the courtyard. "Was that a *compliment*, messire?"

"Possibly," I assured her, with all due gravity, and felt my heart warm at her grin.

She picked up her foil, automatically running a kerchief over it to clean it, and looked up as she came up to me. "Messire—"

"Wait," I said.

The sun dreamed down on us, raising the scents of dust from the flag-stones. A cat jumped down from a capped well and padded silently off. Dariole's eyes seemed full of light as she looked questioningly up at me.

That this might be the extent of my will, I had not known until now.

I saw it before me as clearly as her face.

“You will do one thing for me now, mademoiselle,” I said gently. “You will go home.”

Her face, that had been alive with excitement, darkened so that I thought a shadow had gone across the sun.

“*How* can you tell me to—” She broke off.

I shrugged, keeping every shadow of pain off my face, and managed to smile at her. I touched the button of her doublet, an inch under her chin. “Go home, back to Montargis; make your peace. You’ll come back to London and pick a quarrel with me for your revenge, I doubt not. But indulge me in this. Go back once, before you propose to leave it for ever. Be Made-moiselle Arcadie, one more time; say farewell to your father and brothers. Let them know you are well.”

I puzzled her, I could see it.

I made no more protestations about how unsuited she and I might be to each other. Merely, I ask her to pay a visit to her family home.

I can’t convince her by words.

Only let her be at home, I thought, with her father and brothers who have loved and missed her. Let her see what her boy-husband has grown into. Let her become used to wearing glorious clothes, and to having servants on every hand. It is not Caterina’s utopia of the people, but it is a paradise for those in Arcadie’s position.

When she has been Arcadie and not Dariole for a month, there will be one embarrassing letter from her, and I shall hear that she has changed her mind, and that it was only “Dariole” who was foolishly besotted with M. Rochefort.

“Go home, for a little while, mademoiselle.”

She slowly nodded agreement.

My eye became used to sunlight, restoring itself, of itself, almost to normality—or, if not normality, at least something that I thought might heal towards that before the year’s end.

A cold sweat of relief ran down my back.

The late Summer months passed into Autumn: I heard nothing from her.

Gabriel muttered under his breath from time to time, but I noted he kept Doctor Fludd and other bothersome trifles out of my way.

On a day early in the month of October, I took my way to Richmond.

I made a long arm over the barricade at the side of the tennis court, and reached my clean shirt to me.

Nagasaki, I thought.

I missed the bath-houses of Nagasaki, and their bizarre notion that a man scrubs down his body *before* getting into a bath. Above all, I missed the hot, clean water, and the heat that soaks into a man's bones.

But the chill I feel does not come from my flesh.

It did not take me long to undo the buttons of my doublet and strip off my sweat-soaked shirt. A clean shirt is not a completely effective substitute for a hot soak, but pleasing to the skin. I pulled the linen garment on over my head.

"A strange thing that you do," a voice remarked beside me.

Wrenching my arms down the sleeves, I got my head out and free to see who spoke.

Henry Prince of Wales stood over me where I sat on the bench, half a hand-span taller than when I had seen him last in Wookey Hole. I rose to my feet, bowed; and set about tucking in my shirt, and shucking my doublet back up and on.

This saves me from needing to strike up acquaintance with him.

At eighteen, he is a young man, not a boy.

Henry Stuart's hair had grown considerably and he wore it brushed straight back from his forehead. *En chemise*, for playing tennis, I could see that he had filled out both in the shoulders and chest. His servants dressed him while he spoke, and he paid them no attention as they put on him a sparkling white ruff, that framed his Stuart fox-hair and his face, where his cheeks showed blotchy-red with exertion.

"You shift your linen after a game?" he queried.

"Yes, an it please your Grace." I hastily buttoned my doublet.

He gave the impression of gazing down at me, even though I had risen to my feet. A small frown momentarily constricted the skin between his brows. Whatever had sent a signal to him—and I suspected it was height, given my now-shaven face and dyed hair, and assumed Dutch accent—did not succeed in further alerting him.

Disguises are sometimes a matter of sheer conviction: *we have not met*. He may think he knows me—but a Prince meets so many men.

Conceivably, meets so many assassins....

Light slanted down into the hall from the high windows, gilding the slanted roof of the courts, where it ran three-parts around the walls. The Prince's court gathered there under the roof's edge. Behind me I heard the usual sycophantic comments a man hears in the presence of royalty, no more sincere than they are considered. Henry's match had resulted in his victory; so much I could confidently predict myself. Rumour did not have him one of those princes who desires to show himself human insofar as he might lose a sporting contest.

The consciousness of recognition failed to appear in his gaze.

I am the man who was to kill your father, who witnessed you make *your* whole-hearted attempt to murder him, who struck you; and you don't recall me?

Ah, but I was a servant.

"Your Grace might find it instructive to shift linen," I said respectfully, "since it aids a man's comfort."

“Perhaps. But you do not bathe?”

I shrugged. “It is not my custom, your Grace.”

“It is my custom to bathe in the river.” He nodded towards the hall’s door, beyond which lay the Thames-river, luxuriant and moving slowly here in Richmond. “Will you not join me, sir?”

His words went through me with a blade-like stab.

So must Fludd have felt, I thought. The first time that he heard a man speak the words calculated in his predictions.

I have only to say no.

I have only to invite Henry to a better thing; distract him; sell him a horse, offer him a bet on a cock-fight; begin to press a suit for a supposed needy relative at court—all of these things would cause him to leave here and forget his notion of swimming after this exercise today.

It is not murder. But if I stood by and watched as a man with a pistol shot him, and made no move to prevent it, even if I did not hurt him myself, I should not be innocent. . . .

“If it please your Grace, I will not swim.” I hesitated barely a moment before continuing. “A poor gentleman like myself should not swim in company with a prince.”

His head dipped; Henry absently nodded agreement to that. In another mood, I would have smiled.

Under the edge of the tennis court roof, one of Henry’s noble friends turned around. A dark-haired young man, whom I recognised. *Robert Fludd notes him the next probable actor in this.*

He called out, “My lord—let’s wager on one more game before we’re done here!”

And now both possibilities are here before me, just as Fludd foretold.

This moment: here, now . When this otherwise undistinguished young man saves the life of his future King by distracting him. . .

I knew that it would need to be not merely an act of omission on my part.

So I stand where Robert Fludd and Caterina of the Giordanisti have stood before me, seeing in solid reality what was—only moments before—mere supposition. Is this how she felt, in the heart-beat as the pistol’s muzzle touched her head? How he feels when he sees it *certain* that he may act to tip a balance?

Before Henry could react, I chose to speak.

With a hint of challenge, I said, “I will not swim, but, if your Grace pleases, I will come to witness a Prince who is hardy enough to bathe in such weather.”

Outside the door, as it opened, a man might glimpse the early October sunshine; it was, nonetheless, chill as well as clear.

“Such weather?” Henry gave a scoffing laugh. The young men about him echoed it. “Shall we show this Dutchman that we are bred hardy, here?”

A chorus of agreement echoed in the tennis hall.

I moved slowly in their wake: outside, and across the wide water-meadows to the river.

Will anything change, here, after all?

Have I just condemned a man to death? And any of these others, with him?

It has happened precisely as Fludd made claim for Bruno's mathematics predicting—the boy's desire to swim today; the other boy distracting him to a further game. Except that I am here, and I know how to prick the honour of a vain young man. So that what was the less-certain becomes the actual...

A light of Autumn fell like honey on the grass. The smaller and less hardy birds gathered in flocks in the trees that lined the river, ready to fly south—many a peasant in Brittany and Normandy will take meat for his pot out of that flock as it goes over. The sky, blue enough for Summer, had a white chill on the horizon.

In truth, I have myself swum on days far colder—in canals in the United Provinces, when we must break the ice to get to the water. We were foolhardy, and freezing blue by the end of it, but no man of us died.

Fludd's prophecy is not to do with cold.

The Prince glanced up from being stripped of his clothes again by his body-servants, and beckoned me imperiously to the river-side.

A man or two behind me muttered at the sudden favour shown by the King's son, and how a man might devise cozening tricks with his linen to be noticed...

"At least I *have* a shirt," I remarked amiably to one proud courtier, who I suspected of wearing only cuffs and ruff under his doublet, so poor the scuffs on his boots proclaimed him. Under cover of the laughter that followed, I walked across the grass, all my sudden wariness at the summons concealed.

"Your Grace?" I removed my hat and bowed in the Dutch fashion.

Henry gestured his servants aside. From further off, it would seem that the Prince and the foreigner spoke over their jest on cold water. I met the hazel-green eyes he turned on me. Does he decline to swim, now? *Shall I out with my dagger instantly?*

The young man said, "Monsieur Herault. I did not recognise you, at first."

The gleam of wit in his eyes made me curse myself. Neither admitting nor contradicting, I made another bow, and watched him in silence. Let me hear what he has to say before I commit myself.

"That was a witty way to encounter me." The Prince nodded back at the hall, barely visible across the meadows. "You have lost nothing of your skill, monsieur. I wish you to know, before anything else: I do not hold you at fault for the failure at Wookey. It is like my father to have most cowardly put on armour. You could not have known."

What surprise I felt, I suppressed instantly. I assumed an expression of chagrin. "A man might have expected it, I suppose, your Grace."

"Don't concern yourself, Monsieur Herault. I value your attempt—it was most gallant. Then, at the Tower, I suppose old Dad too well guarded by his supporters? Yes. I guessed as much."

Henry gripped my forearm, with a hand strong to wield the racket, or the sword, or the knife.

"The same is true now as was then. My father is a pusillanimous old man, with no concern for how Christ

is daily spat on in these pagan Papist countries. You have a good Huguenot name, monsieur; I know this galls you as much as it does the rest of us.”

His gaze took in his followers. *Many are older*, I thought. *His faction is not all boys now.*

“But do not fear,” Henry Stuart said, with a kindness and gallantry that might have suited Henri IV in his youth—the Henri that this Henry claimed he most admired. Henri, who would have begun a pan-European war.

Prince Henry Stuart said intensely, “There will be another opportunity provided. This, your appearance, I take to be a sign. Where we failed, before, we will succeed now. But I will speak more of this to you, later. Come to Richmond-palace. I will summon you when it is convenient.”

Another gesture, before I could speak, and his servants came back to finish unpointing his doublet and breeches, and stripping off his shirt and under-linen. The shirt was silk, with blackwork embroidery about the armholes; he let it drop to the damp grass. The line of his body, from shoulder to hip, buttock to calf, was a sweep worthy of the Italian sculptors.

He gave me a smile of surpassing sweetness—and, if he had known it, one so very like his father, James—and loped into the shallow water, splashing and yelling; followed by a half of his court.

What I have done, I have done.

As to *what* it is that I have done—if I have acted out of knowledge that is correct, then I have chosen a road for Prince Henry that involves death, and for millions of other men that does not: circumventing another Hundred Years’ War.

The wind blew fine ripples over the river’s surface; dead leaves skittered past me.

If . And, even so, I nor no man of us shall live to see the whole of it proved.

These things I thought for the next few days, while the Prince remained as healthy as a young ox.

And then the signs of approaching fever appeared in his cheeks.

I followed him through the public occasions that followed, in the October of 1612; until on the 25th he retired to his bed, and an apprentice of Dr Theodore de Mayenne—not as immune to money as his master—informed me how Prince Henry looked hollow-eyed, pale, and spoke strangely. Eleven days later, on the evening of November 6th, after continual worsening and physicians’ treatments that I would not wish upon a dog, the boy died.

Public panic suggested poison; only a few of his doctors claimed it to be the bad vapours of Thames-river, and blamed it on his swimming. The men of England discovered their golden prince taken from them, and mourned as if Christ had for a second time been crucified.

James Stuart did not come to his son’s death-bed.

“I have given it out I am afraid of the sickness,” he said to me in private audience. “But, man, what father can look his son in the eye and tell him he is hated? Better to let him go easy.”

Catching some expression I did not intend to show, the old man reached up and gripped my shoulder.

“It was meant to be. He has swum there a hundred times before. God’s Providence chose now to strike him down, as a traitor and Judas. God willed it.”

“Certainly a man may take comfort from your Majesty’s words,” I said.

But, regrettably, I am not that man.

Everything I have done, *I* have done. I do not excuse it, now, on the grounds that another man gave me such-and-such orders. I am no man’s hand, and my own are not clean.

A man cannot ignore knowledge once he has it.

Or if he can, I am not, either, that man.

Rochefort, Memoirs

50

When Mr Secretary Cecil died, six months before, it was not a day before the first lampoons and epithets appeared. Whore-master. Embezzler. Tyrant. Thief.

“But Henry, Prince of Wales...*Henry* was ‘the boy-King Arthur,’” I remarked muddily to myself.

I tilted the leather jack and drank, conscious of the warmth in my gut that now did not feel the draught up the kitchen chimney, nor the memory of men dropping to their knees in the street with grief. *His funeral will be monumental.*

“Monsieur,” Fludd’s voice said.

I looked up in surprise at seeing him having come down to this, the kitchen of the Coleman Street house.

I smiled crookedly, and could not keep amusement on my face. “It is not the moment.”

“It is,” Robert Fludd persisted, even as he eyed me warily. “I will begin by saying that you should see this.”

What he held out to me, I ignored. “I do not desire to see any more of your papers. Or Caterina’s, if it comes to that. Not today.”

Every man outside this house is drinking for grief of the Prince of Wales. I drink to—not to Henry. To the death of innocence.

I upended the stone jug, and sent the last drips into the jack, which was the best item I might find to drink from—it did not break when I threw it against the wall. Crack, yes, so that sour wine seeped into the pitch-lined leather; but not break.

The red embers of the fire, and two remaining candles, left in shadow the corners of the kitchen. They gave light enough for me to see Fludd’s gaunt features.

I turned away, slumping on the bench, considering how soon Gabriel might make his way back from the Windmill-tavern with more wine.

“Rochefort!”

The astrologer-doctor's slippers trod silently among the rushes of the floor; I did not realise he stood behind me until he spoke. I startled wildly, shifting too rapidly about on the bench.

The wood of it I supposed to have been made slippery by Gabriel's incessant cleaning; certainly I slid, missed my footing on the floor, and ended falling flat among the rushes in front of the hearth.

Pushing myself up into a sitting position, I peered at the inch of wine unspilled from my mug. "Have some of this. Wine. No—*have* some."

Fludd looked down at me; I witnessed him think better of any attempt to help me up. "Why are we drinking, Monsieur Rochefort?"

"As a medicine."

His mouth began to frame the word, and I saw a light of intelligence come into his eyes.

"Correct," I observed. "You are the only man in England who will not have been out into the streets to hear it—Henry Prince of Wales is dead."

Slowly, he reached out his hand to the table, and eased himself down onto the bench. I watched him in focused fascination. He lifted each of the bottles and jugs to weigh it, found one that dipped in his grip, and drank straight from it, trickles of red wine running into the stubble of his chin.

"Now I know how *you* feel," I observed. After a pause, while I formulated the thought, I said, "I do not thank you."

"You will not, no." Fludd spoke half-breathlessly. He held out a jug.

I took it from him, refilled my jack, and set the jug beside me.

"I'm nowhere near struck into the hazard yet," I observed, shifting my back comfortably against the stones of the fireplace. "I can still understand your English tongue... I think this will require more assistance from whatever Gabriel has been able to buy: wine, spirit, or ale."

Fludd took a folded paper out of his hanging sleeve. A little dazed in his appearance, he leaned forward and offered it. "This is one of my publications. You may recognise the Wookey mill's paper."

I drank deeply from my jack, and peered closely at the title page; rubbing the distinctive flecks in the paper's texture between thumb and finger. "'An appeal to'—to *what*?"

"To the Rosy Cross Brotherhood."

I stared.

I made some noise that—were I not a man—I might best describe as a giggle.

Robert Fludd's back stiffened, where he sat. "It's a letter I published in the same year that you and James went to Wookey cavern. A vain attempt to contact these 'Brethren.'"

"Very likely!" I agreed. With my legs stretched out in the mud and rushes, and looking up at Robert Fludd, I felt an incongruous desire to laugh.

He frowned. "This letter—"

I crumpled it swiftly in my fist, and dropped it in the fire. Fludd stared at the brief flash of the dying coals,

as the flames ate it.

“The *Rosicrucian Brotherhood*? There is no ‘Rosicrucian brotherhood’! Everybody knows that! Are you mad? No, I don’t need to ask, do I? Of course you are....”

“Listen to me!” He sounded shaky; I was, on a sudden, put in mind of the fact that he was a handful of years younger than I. “Rochefort!”

“That’s ‘Messire Rochefort’ to you. ‘De’ Rochefort,” I added emphatically.

Fludd seized another of the half-emptied jugs from the table, banging it down for emphasis. “I know the *Fama Fraternitatis* contains nothing more than a heap of Hermetic trash!”

I stared at him blankly.

As if it explained all, Fludd said, “It’s a *joke*—I always believed—a philosopher’s joke. And not a good one.”

He leaned over from the bench, taking yet another pamphlet from his sleeve, and held it out.

The cover, indeed, proclaimed itself *Fama Fraternitatis*, for all I could squint my eyes in the candle-light to read it.

Fludd snatched it back, underlining a passage with his thumb-nail. “Here! This ‘utopian’ society that the self-styled ‘Rosicrucians’ write of. It’s all that Signora Caterina thought possible to achieve! It would barely surprise me if this were *her* joke, perpetrated out of the press at Wookey!”

I snatched at his second pamphlet to consign it to the fire. Having hold of one corner, I found it falling open at a folded-down page—at a woodcut of wheels, guns, castles, and philosophers, all in unlikely juxtaposition.

“This,” I said, with great dignity, “makes no fucking sense!”

Fludd prised the pamphlet back from me, his face sharp in the fire’s light. “But—the ‘Brothers of the Rosy Cross’! Think what a cover it would be! For your *genuine* organisation of agents.”

Finding I had slid over to have one elbow on the raised hearth-stones, I wiped my mouth on my other sleeve.

Robert Fludd jumped to his feet, pointing an ink-stained finger down at me. “You have said you’ll do this! A brotherhood, to act as you’ve acted with Henry—have I not proved it to you, that I can’t keep such an assembly of men, nor organise them? But you have practise in commanding such bands—spies, soldiers...Rochefort, I can help you.”

If I have ever heard humiliation in a man’s voice, I am hearing it now.

He persisted in the face of my silence. “Here is the name of a ready-made organisation for us, that a few men believe exists, that in fact does *not*—and that most men will by habit dismiss as a mere theory of conspiracy. Or dismiss as harmless, lunatic scholars.”

In the cold kitchen, I gazed up at him for a very long moment. I drank from the jack I had forgot I held, the wine spilling stickily over my hand and linen cuff. I licked at grimy skin.

“If I am tired of one thing,” I said, “it’s over-enthusiastic amateurs. And the fact that there is no longer any wine in this jug. No, that’s two things.”

I threw the leather jack: it struck the table's corner and rattled off into the dark.

My head is by no means as numb as I might desire it.

I sighed, rolling away from the fire's heat where it began to scorch my doublet's shoulder. *Too little wine.*

I came lightly up onto my feet, as duelists do—and found it necessary for my balance to reach out and grab the rack of cooking-irons on the wall. Metal clattered and rang. I looked down at Robert Fludd, where he stood.

Candles wavered in November draughts, their light not driving back so much of the night now. The corners of the room stayed hidden. Shadows covered the plaster ceiling and the fire-irons; the pewter plates stacked on the end of the scrubbed table. The coal's glow touched the extremities of Fludd's face.

He said quietly, "I know you can't trust me. Or, you can only in hindsight, when you see the results of my—of *your*—actions. Rochefort, I'm willing to take students. I'll give you men who can check, for you, if what I claim for my mathematics is truly there."

Chill wind and circumstance made me force my mind to sharpen. I looked into the dark corners of the room, alertness and memory making unwelcome return. Robert Fludd stood looking up at me, seeming aware of how I over-topped him. This man whom Saburo out-manoeuvred, and Dariole hurt. Here he still is.

With a crack in his voice, Fludd said, "I'll tell you. When I was at Oxford, I desired to be a Paracelsan physician. A doctor that would heal what we are. Heal history, and the future. . . . Do what I could to mitigate the effects of war, disease, plague, starvation. To think in terms of charity and healing."

I made myself his *memento mori*. "A shame you did not think of that when you considered methods."

Robert Fludd flinched.

"There is more than misery at stake, M. Rochefort. Survival. A man who has suffered is better than one who is dead."

He smoothed the folded pamphlet between his fingers.

"I suppose my desires have not been so unlike the rules of this Order. To be a physician. To heal the sick—although necessity means I can't do it freely, as they would. And I can't prolong life, as they also would, or trans-mute metals, or know the secrets of the Cabala."

His unshaven chin lifted; he looked at me.

"For the rest, believe me, they sound very like intelligencers! The Brothers wear no distinguishing marks, following the custom of dress of each country. They're rumoured to know what passes in distant places."

Fludd smiled wryly.

"And if you read this, you'll read that the Brothers of the Rosy Cross discover hidden things by 'the science of numbers.'"

That brought a snort of laughter that hurt my ribs—being bruised, I supposed, from my earlier impact

with bench and floor. "If this was Suor Caterina writing, she's openly described your Giordanisti!"

He held up the *Fama* pamphlet. "May not this 'Rosy Cross' come to be a redeemed Giordanisti? I—you went to de Sully, Rochefort; you understand atonement!"

"*You do not mention his name.*"

Robert Fludd kept silent for a minute and more.

Subdued, he said, "You and I both wish to leave something on hand that will steer, unseen, the course of history, so that we do not all die—all; every man and his heir in this world when the comet strikes."

"Still, you hope." I stared at him. "It needs must be done, not as you would have it, some autocratic empire. But a word here, a word there—"

"—to work against war, where necessary; towards it, where unavoidable. Do you not feel the same? Rochefort, I ask for your help!"

There are nights when it does not matter how much a man drinks, he remains stubbornly sober.

I sighed. "I have personal cause to dislike you. I *know* the future may be changed. I am left with a debt to Saburo, to Caterina, to Milord Cecil—"

To this man, I will not say *to Sully*.

The draft under the kitchen door seeped into me, even through the warmth of the wine. I desire to have Dariole here, and to have this conversation; or Gabriel, if he would return. *There is but Fludd and I.*

I turned to the hearth, holding my hands out over the coals.

"Yes," I said. "This is precisely what I have known I must do."

A new Giordanisti, hidden by a scholars' joke. Caterina would approve, at least.

"I neither like nor pity you," I said, "but I understand what it is to fail."

Glancing back over my shoulder, I caught the moment his head turned towards me; his eyes catching the fire's light.

Roughly, I said, "I'm no doctor. I handle death. That... doesn't mean I can't make use of other tools."

Having taken wine, words came freely.

"I have few skills. Those I do are the arts of a civilian murderer. It might be that... I might desire to put those skills at the service of a worthwhile end. Compromised as it may be."

Robert Fludd wiped a hand down his face with the smile of a man weary, a little inebriated, and encouraged beyond hope. *Drunk as he and I might be, I thought, I see no deceit in him.*

"Say that this 'Rosicrucian' organisation might be set up," I said. "Say that the Giordanisti continue under this new name. To set us up under such a cover... to have you calculate for it... To recruit... It would be a handful of years before we might begin to know, fully, where we should go. And even then, we risk doing as great a wrong as right!"

Fludd drank from the jug, wine spattering in shilling-sized drops on the flag-stones. "I know. I know."

Reaching out to the masonry of the fireplace, I supported myself upright; all but cracking my head against the plaster of the smoke-hood by misjudging distance.

Under my gaze, red and orange flickered among the black extinguishing coals.

I said, "You must know, also—we will be dead and dust, either way, before your 'comet.' Each of us, every man, every woman. Here, or as far as Nihon and the New World. We will have died, been buried, rotted away; our bones put into piles in catacombs, then those decayed. Men will have breathed in and breathed out our dust before any of this comes to fruition. We will never know if we are right."

"Yes." His voice was thin.

I turned away from the hearth, facing him. "But if I don't make some attempt to prevent the ills you may predict, then I am responsible for every suffering man. Generations of women treated as beasts. Children born to starve at a few months old. And even *with* your calculations, I cannot prevent it all. I have both knowledge and responsibility—and far too little power."

Robert Fludd brushed down his robes. That did nothing but leave wet smears in the velvet. He met my gaze. "I often think—the Nolan Master ruined the brightest minds of a generation. No man can bear that responsibility that Magister Giordano Bruno gave to us. It belongs to God."

"You, also, do not sleep well."

"No," he said.

Shadows crept in from the ceiling-beams and the gap under the door, the candles sputtering to their end.

"It was the hinge on which all turned," Robert Fludd said, his eyes bright and piercing. "That year, two years past. There will not come another such year. Nor another single such act as James's assassination. There will need to be a million acts, now, over generations; you and I will not see the end of them, Rochefort."

"Perhaps that is no bad thing," I said. "Let those who are the 'Rosicrucians' at that time make their own decisions."

He staggered slightly, walking towards the door to the house.

"Time the destroyer," Fludd added, now blinking repeatedly. "Fleeting time, the vanity of all things. Or Man, self-sufficient, the arbiter of his own destiny, the shaper...."

"You're drunk." I pushed him in the direction of the door; he went complaisantly enough. "Go and sleep it off."

Behind me, I heard the noise of the back door's latch lifting.

The door opened as I turned about.

Gabriel sloped in, a guilty look on his face, and three full, stoppered jugs in his arms.

"Raoul?" He dumped the jugs down on the table, and shot a wary glance at Robert Fludd.

Moved to a more buoyant mood, I smiled at Gabriel. "You might as well sit down. I have explanations to make."

Doctor Robert Fludd, clinging white-faced to the lintel of the door, exclaimed in bemusement, "You're

telling a *servant*?”

“If Gabriel agrees,” I said, “I am telling the next brother of the Rosy Cross.”

Fludd’s mouth gaped open.

Gabriel gave me a look I have recognised, since the Low Countries, as indicating the desirability of a rapid explanation, complete in all details.

Reaching an equilibrium of mind that had long been denied me, I sat down on the bench, and reached to pour wine for Gabriel Santon.

“It will be no reflection on you if you refuse the part,” I said to him. “This will be dangerous, but I believe you have a right to know.”

I paused, putting the jug down.

“And—there will be a fourth one of us—if she will let me bring her home.”

Rochefort, Memoirs

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The pearl-sewn silk sleeve covered her scar.

Any other man, I believe, would have looked first at her face, skilfully augmented with pigments as it was; or at the soft expanse of flesh, covered only by the finest lawn cloth, between her throat and her bodice.

I read in her stance that slight favouring of her left shoulder that any Master of Defence would require she train out of herself on the instant.

The great dark panelled chambers at the Montargis estate were made hot by the press of gallants, courtiers, prelates; ladies of the family and those belonging to visitors; all crowded in among the great stands of candles that shone down on satin and jewels, ruffs, and hats. Under the loud chatter, I heard her voice quite clearly.

“Monsieur *de* Herault,” Dariole said, and held out her naked hand.

The touch of her fingers, even offered with that sarcasm, was welcome to me. I put my lips lightly to them—and found myself all but undone by the scent of her skin.

One of her brothers, at her shoulder, rumbled questioningly, “And you, monsieur, are here because...?”

“Here at Montargis?” I smiled at him. *Ambroise, I think; all her brothers look very alike.* She must take after her mother.

“I have a keen interest in history,” I remarked, urbanely. “Is it not the case that one of your towers, here, is supposed to have held Jeanne the Pucelle, on her way to be tried at Rouen? But then, perhaps you do not approve of warrior women?”

Dariole—"Arcadie," I should say—eyed me with a level and unrelenting stare. Her brother snorted.

She spoke. "I can deal with this."

He gave her the look which a man gives a woman when he has lost a long-fought argument, and turned to lose himself in the press of bodies.

The two of us standing together were not shielded from men, except by the windows at our left hand. The mild afternoon of the second week in November pressed against the glass, the sun not yet gone from the sky.

"Who have you said that I am?" I asked.

"Some man that 'Dariole' knew. Why are you here?" she demanded.

My gaze followed Ambroise—or Blaise, or Ogier; whichever of the brothers he was—and I saw him now speaking to another man, younger, and not possessed of the family features. Dark, with a pale skin, and something of that look about him that women like.

And yet the entertainment is being held here, and not at his family estate.

"That will be your husband, Philippe," I said. And, because I felt reckless enough, followed that by a question. "Have you consummated your marriage with him?"

Any other woman would have gasped, or welled up with tears, or struck me; I expected at least the last of those reactions from Mlle Dariole. Not, perhaps, from Madame Arcadie—who only continued to look at me, with perfect self-possession.

She said, again, "Why *are* you here?"

I closed my eyes very briefly. The noise of the musicians could barely be heard above the provincial chatter of her guests. I might say what I pleased and not be overheard, here, in this moment.

Gazing down at her, and her eyes that had been shadowed by some maid's skilled hand, I smiled.

"What would you expect of me?" I said. "I've come to beg."

Possibly I would have abandoned all if there had been no response from her.

Her eyes flickered, and she stroked the pearl-strung cords that hung from her neck to the waist of her farthingale. Her index finger tapped them, irritably. That made me desire to smile more.

"*Well?*" she demanded.

I raised a brow.

She glared at me. "There are six men in this room who'll issue you a challenge if I slap your face—seven, if you count my husband—"

Restraint failed me; I grinned at her.

Her eyes became slits. "You *know* what I mean!"

"Oh, truly." I made her a small bow, worthy of Fontainebleau for style. "But I did not know you disliked your family so much as to wish them all dead by the same sword...."

She made a tiny sound, like the squeak of a young kitten, that appeared to take her by surprise.

“*Rochefort...*”

The warning note in her voice pleased me, if only because I recognised it as that of Mlle Dariole.

I watched her for a moment or two, as I ceased to smile. Her farthingale was blue silk, under the pearls. Her bodice, cut flat across her breast, served as foundation for the great fragile ruff that curved up behind her head. There were diamonds in the web of lace.

I felt the old terror that I had felt riding here, that was naught to do with whether my disguise would hold against the hostile world. She has not written or otherwise sent word: how can I dare to see her? And when I come not just to offer, but to *demand* something of her?

Between she and I, there can be no secrets.

“As to that,” I said, “I have, first, apologies to make to you.”

She gave me a suspicious look, and moved her body’s stance unguardedly in response; settling back so that she stood with her weight on one hip, and her head cocked very slightly to the side. She folded her arms, like a young man. In farthingale and stomacher, it looked ridiculous.

“Apologies,” she said flatly—paused, and added, “More than one?”

The note of provocation crept back into her tone.

I reached out, soberly, and took her hand again.

“Mademoiselle, I must apologise for two actions of mine, at the least. No, three. Firstly, that I decided that I would not permit you to kill Robert Fludd. It was your right; I made the decision; I am sorry for it.”

She frowned, interrupting. “You think I *should* have killed him?”

“No, mademoiselle. I believe him extremely valuable—for a reason which I shall later fully explain. I should, however, have taken more care to bring you to my opinion, before I decided out of hand that he should live.”

Her face, that I had barely recognised under the rouge and kohl, relaxed into a rueful expression that was all hers. “I dare say I wasn’t in the mood to be argued with.”

My hand tightened on hers. By an effort of will, I loosed it. There may not be many more minutes we may spend in conversation, I thought, registering two more of her brothers now speaking with her husband.

She did indeed have five brothers.

Not one of them liked me.

I said quickly, “I am to apologise also, for choosing M. de Sully’s welfare over yours.”

Her eyes widened. “How—?”

“Fludd had time to predict only crudely; M. de Sully might have killed me—crippled me—” I stopped; began again. “I put myself into that danger, not regarding how you would feel.”

No matter how many people spoke and chattered around us, barely a yard from my back and hers, I heard the silence that issued out from her as she lifted her eyes and looked into mine.

“How *I* would feel.” She hit every word as if it were a challenge: a glove thrown into the face of another man.

“I apologise,” I repeated quickly, before she could say more. She held my gaze. I felt myself loose in sinew and frame, as if I might tremble; such a fear as I have never felt when I use a sword.

“So?” she said.

In the face of that flat tone, it was difficult to get out the words that I intended. I said, nevertheless, “Let me make my third apology.”

Dariole stared up at me, nothing of the demure young woman about her. I had a moment’s hysterically amused contemplation of what her brothers—and her husband—might do if she simply hit me.

My mouth felt entirely dry. “Which is this. I am sorry, mademoiselle, that I have not come here tonight solely out of my love for you.”

Her expression turned into a blank.

I plunged on, running one finger under my falling bands, my doublet collar very much too tight. “I desire your assistance—in a matter to do with M.Fludd’s abilities—your help—”

One look at her face silenced me. I stuttered; abruptly broke out again.

“What am I supposed to do, mademoiselle? *Forget* you’re a duelist second to none—or, second only to myself? Am I to *ignore* your ability with a sword?”

Waspish, she snapped, “God knows you’ve been trying hard enough! And for long enough!”

That is not the true subject of her anger.

I drew in my breath, and made an attempt at recovering dignity. “Mademoiselle. I admit it. You are a—very young—but very accomplished duelist; you can, moreover, pass anywhere. True, you are a woman, and with very little in the way of wit, but you will mature.”

“Yeah. The day after *you* do.” She lifted her chin, glaring. “You want my ‘help.’ Do I look like a duelist?”

Even in skirt and bodice, I could see how every muscle tensed, and how she came alive. And yet...

“No,” I said.

In the farthingale, truth told, with the embroidered toes of her shoes peeping out from under the hem, she appeared a wooden doll. *And this pleases her?* How can it? And yet, it evidently does.

“No,” I repeated. “Listen to me, Dariole. I suggested you come back here, because I desired you to be happy. You are, evidently, happy. And now...if it were me, I would leave. But if *I* did not know I was a fool, Gabriel has hardly been backward in telling me of it—he appears to have strong opinions on my taking decisions for others without informing them.”

The corner of her lip moved.

If I see that smile that is all hers, I shall be robbed of words. I pressed on.

“The fact remains, mademoiselle—*madame*. I come here tonight and, you are happy. Content. You have stayed here. Your husband loves you. Your brothers desire to protect you. I dare say your father will be happy to have his grooms throw me off the estate. Why am I here?”

My voice had become loud, I realised. Dariole gave me an encouragingly demure expression.

“Why *are* you here, messire?”

“I am creating an organisation to use the work of M. Fludd,” I said plainly. “While he and his future pupils appear to work their conjurations for kings, he will in reality work for me. And I desire your help in this.”

She looked at me frigidly. “Because I can use a sword.”

“Yes. No! Yes. Mademoiselle!” I found myself stuttering again. “If I could but speak with you privately, explain—”

Her stance changed, within a heart-beat; as if she had sudden reason to realise how ill it became a woman, and settle to demure femininity again.

She flicked her fan open. “Madame aunt.”

A tall, eagle-nosed woman in black ignored Dariole in favour of me. She swept me with her gaze. “Monsieur! You’ll join the set, won’t you? Arcadie, you also; you neglect your guests.”

Her invitation had far more the tone of an order, I noted. A glance around showed me several miscellaneous brothers about to move forward en masse and correct their relative’s error. The de Montargis de la Roncière brothers, all of whom seemed to be in their early twenties (but surely could not be) had made it clear, these last two hours, that I was not welcome—by every method short of calling me out.

And now, after three months of waiting, I have managed to confirm their every insult of me in her mind.

I made a bow, offered my arm to their sister, and said, “I shall be pleased to dance in madame’s company.”

Dariole snorted under her breath. “Yes, but *I’m* not sure I want to be crippled!”

Instantly I ached from throat to groin. It was all the old vicious, mocking, boy’s tone. For a moment I could not speak, following in the wake of the tall woman to a more spacious room.

I *must* endure it, to speak with her.

Musicians here sounded audibly, at least. A thousand wax candles burned, filling the air with honey-scent. Every last junior member of the noblesse d’*épée* seemed to be packed into the dark panelled room.

“What do you dance?” I managed to return at Dariole, as we were sorted into place, too exposed to potential eavesdroppers for private talk. “The voluta, perhaps?”

In that particular court dance, the gentlemen lift the ladies from the ground, with one hand to their back and one hand to their belly. Or lower.

I added, “Or is that too energetic for your husband?”

Idiot! I raged at myself as she glared.

“It’s entirely likely your husband *will* challenge me, if you slap my face,” I put in quickly. “I hope you bear that in mind.”

Her gaze flashed at me. “I wouldn’t slap you, messire. I might just give you a punch in the mouth.”

The aunt (Cleophine, I now recalled) clapped her hands, summoning the musicians in that moment to play. Sets of men and women began to move, dancing—nothing so modern as the voluta. I gave a hand to Mlle Dariole, wished desperately that I might speak—and the music took us away from each other, silent among the loud chatter of the other dancers.

I had a moment to reflect on how being the tallest man in the room leads me to feel like a Jack-on-stilts while dancing.

Between satin doublets and picadil-supported ruffs I glimpsed her, smiling up at her husband, Philippe, as they passed.

I looked from her face to his, seeing the joy on his unfinished features that made the boy, for the moment, a man.

The pain of the obvious went through me, worse than any sword thrust.

She has, indeed, consummated her marriage.

And why should she not? I thought, when I had my breath again; knowing that I kept my expression bland in front of her guests.

I sent her back here to be happy. That act, if she is now capable, is a happiness for her; how can I regret it?

I am no hypocrite: it was evident to me that I would have put a sword through this Philippe and stretched him dead at her feet, sooner than it be he, rather than me.

Any wise man would have left, then.

I tormented myself with observing how she joked and laughed with her brothers, and spoke with affectionate respect to her father. After all, I thought to myself, do I not still have business to speak of, with her; business that is nothing to do with myself?

I tried, as hard as possible, not to listen to the cynical voice in my head which remarked, *You are, as ever, M. Rochefort, too late.* I felt as if I had been ripped open from heart to groin. While I was waiting for the time to ripen—the time has already passed.

She is happy. There will be others I can recruit.

I did not wait for the music to bring us together—then I must join my hand with hers, and walk behind the dancers to the hall’s end. I let the turn of the pavane bring me close to the chamber-door, and without attracting notice, slipped from the room, and from the house.

The mundane daylight of a November morning does not lend itself to emotional excesses.

I sat at the table of the inn, the weak sun falling through the leaded window, and carved with precision at the point of my quill pen.

If I should depart France now by the way I had entered it, that might leave me open to observation. Riding south-west, travelling by river from Orleans to Nantes, and then taking a ship, might put me sufficiently out of any expected route.

How can I leave without speaking to her?

What am I to write to her, for my farewell?

Dariole, mademoiselle, I love you to the degree that breathing is difficult, and leaving you makes all the years of my life to come appear a wasteland to me?

That amount of self-indulgence will not endear a man to a married woman content with her young husband.

I need your sword, your wit; your knowledge of what has happened at Wookey, at London, in the Japans?

If she is to be no Brother (or Sister) of the Rosy Cross, she cannot safely know for what reason I would need those things.

Outside, the mud of recently passed rain covered the street. The kennel shone, full. As I watched, a man in riding boots turned up to the thigh strode through it, splashing, and ducked into the tavern opposite. Two women with their heads and baskets both cloth-covered walked arm-in-arm, giggling. Their breaths just showed upon the chilling air.

Soon I shall not hear French spoken in the streets; I shall be in London, or perhaps Heidelberg. I look forward to the travelling. Merely, I do not look forward to the leaving of this place.

I will have this last indulgence, I thought, with a wry smile, dipping my quill-point into the ink and scratching at the paper. Which, in any case, I need never send.

I wrote:

These are not things that it is wise for a man in my profession to commit to paper. Still, mademoiselle, I give you this—the knowledge of me that you yet lack: how I lost my place, and came by the lily-flower.

I was born Valentin Raoul St Cyprian Anne-Marie Rochefort de Cossé Brissac. *Rochefort* is at least part of my true name, mademoiselle—my mother, being near her time, was in a coach hurrying home to Château Brissac, but was overcome by labour pains some three or four miles short, in a village called Rochefort. She gave birth to me there in the Church of the Trinity. I suppose she thought that a good enough omen to give me the place's name as part of my own.

There is a reason why I do not offer you the protection and power of a son of a Marshal of France.

You will have heard rumours of the court of the late Third Henri Valois. They are all under-statements. Whatever you have heard is less libertine than the truth.

It may amuse you to know that I was a handsome boy in my early years. No—pretty. I had many opportunities to discover whether I liked best to give or receive...favour. All of Henri's boys did so; it was no less than what was expected of us. It was not that which caused my father to disinherit me and strike me out of history.

I mention it because I suspect you will enjoy the portrait of the young de Cossé Brissac boy on his knees, servicing others of Henri's feline young men. Yes, you will smile at that. I was just the kind of *precieux* that you despised in Paris.

I committed the murder for which I was branded when I was close on twenty.

It still surprises me that it turned out the way it did. Even in the court of Third Henri, there were not many noblemen of twenty whom a court would convict of murder.

The man that I murdered, Etienne de Gombeau, was my closest friend and sometime lover. We had been golden boys, all of us.

You will understand that this did not except us from the usual rules of honour.

Honour has no logic to it. We all of us, sons of the nobility, lived by petty theft because our fathers kept us short of money—and yet a gambling debt was considered sacred! Women were to be remorselessly wooed; but if they succumbed and lost *their* honour...Mademoiselle Dariole, in the light of that, you may consider us deserving of everything we got.

Personal honour—the honour of physical courage in the duel—was as strict. However many edicts the King made against duelling, it was then as it is now: every man felt himself compelled to ignore the prohibition. You yourself will conceivably laugh, given your liking for the sword, at the idea of the law forbidding it.

What happened is quickly told. My friend Etienne, for reasons best known to himself (but that I suspect to include sheer stupidity), decided to cheat me at cards one evening. We played in one of the court salons. I detected him, and shook the marked cards out of his sleeve in the view of all men.

In the course of this, I—well, I did not strike him; I shook him for being a fool and pushed him away, the heel of my hand to his chest. God He knows I would have *given* Etienne the money! But *asking* me for money would have been dishonourable.

There was an amount of furore: they parted us. By the rules of honour, we had both unalterable cause to kill the other—I, because he had been proved a cheat; he, because I had “struck” him. As I calmed, I said I would forgo my right to call him out; he might apologise for the cards and that would be the end of the matter.

Etienne, of course, had a dozen foolish young men yelping in his ear about the code duello: that no man may apologise for a blow, it is not sufficient. He said he would fight. I went to him privately that night to argue sense into him.

When young men have their pride and courage called into question, common sense and friendship take second place. He ended by saying, stiffly, that he would apologise on the ground the following morning, if I would follow the requirements of the code.

And yes, mademoiselle: it was then as it is now. A blow is something for which no verbal apology can be given. If a man comes penitent to the field, he must come prepared to kneel down and beg pardon of the injured party. And he must bring with him a cane, to be used on his own back—as a man beats a servant.

I have only seen such an occurrence once: the man was thrashed and afterwards shunned for cowardice.

If it happened now...I would simply go abroad for a year or two. But I am Rochefort, and there is little that has not been thrown in my face, to my complete disregard of it. The de Cossé Brissac boy...he had

a spotless record of courage, and a fear of public scorn: in short, he had a sense of honour.

He also loved his friend Etienne, but Etienne would not be implored to see sense that night.

I thought of going to the ground, fighting, skewering him somewhere relatively safe. But Etienne...his stubbornness had always been a familiar joke amongst us. He would not give up at first blood, or second. I knew that.

I met Etienne the following dawn, with half the court there to see us. That also was foolish, the King having sworn to hang the next duellists he caught.

Mademoiselle, I am a proud man. You know that. I was no less so as a boy; more, perhaps. Conceive of how I felt when I tell you that I took a cane to the ground with me.

I did what was required. I got down on both my knees in the wet grass, and I humbly begged his pardon for striking him. And I offered him the cane, and begged him to use it on my own back.

Sometimes we do not like our friends very much, but I did not want Etienne dead! So I humbled myself. I suppose, to tell you all the truth, I thought that he might be content with a token touch of the cane to my shoulders.

He refused to take the cane.

He said it was not a gentleman's weapon.

As soon as I knelt down, it had been silent enough to hear the beginning of bird song. Now, a great cheer went up from the court gentlemen there. My own seconds pulled me back up onto my feet.

I was shocked beyond belief—I have always had too high a concept of my own dignity, but to be fair, mademoiselle, honour teaches us to rate it no less. To have sacrificed my dignity, my name, my reputation, and *still* to have to fight him? And after he had begun by cheating *me*?

He was a good swordsman. I was incomparably better. I took him with my blade clear through his heart—you will know the thrust. He was dead before he had finished falling to the ground.

I was arrested by the King's marshals. Because I had killed my man in a duel, I was convicted of murder. Because I had knelt down on the duelling ground and begged to be caned, my father disowned me. The Sieur de Brissac expunged all records of the birth of his oldest son.

Either someone of influence spoke up, or, more likely, the magistrates still feared the de Brissac family. My sentence to be hanged was changed to branding. They put the lily-flower on my shoulder.

The initial verdict was just, because I killed the boy when I could so easily have let him live.

Two years ago I would no more have told you this than I would have given you a loaded pistol and invited you to point it at my head—

The last of the ink scratched out onto the paper.

Looking down, I saw the quill carved down to nothing, its split point splayed and feathered by use.

No, I cannot write the rest of it. I cannot.

Sitting back, I flexed my hand and wrist, aching with the tension that flowed through my body. The light from the window had grown grey, I realised, clouds coming up again from the west. I rose and reached a

taper down to the fire, lighting candles in the noon-tide, careless of the expense.

That done, I stood looking down at the papers for a moment or two—swept them up, and, holding each by the corner, and one by one, slowly fed each page to the nearer of the candles, and dropped the ash down to be ground into the floorboards under my boot.

So it ends.

I have business with Fludd, with Gabriel; with James Stuart and the Queen Regent, and whomsoever otherwise comes to my attention.

The spark of encouragement and fortitude that appeared in my mind at that thought, I cherished.

Saburo, Caterina, Cecil: gone. M. de Sully: gone as far as I am concerned. Men do this: pass out of our lives.

But others will enter.

And work is a sovereign cure for the melancholy—especially when it is as puerile a green-stick melancholy as a man might expect in a girl of fifteen, not a man over forty. Work is of use to a man. I have long known this.

Paying my bill, and saddling my hired mount, I rode out of Montargis, cast about to see what road might lead me to the south-west—and, despite everything, turned the nag's head towards that estate long owned by the de la Roncière family.

Idiot. Moron. Fool.

Yes, and the rest, I thought.

A lesson which doubtless any of Mademoiselle's brothers will be happy to drive home, if I provoke them beyond what Bruno's Formulae allow.

It passed through my mind as I rode to the borders of the de la Roncière estate, making a quiet entry, that I doubted any of her brothers had the intelligence to work out that even a "hardened killer" (a comment brother Ambroise had permitted me to over-hear, the previous evening) or a "foul mercenary spy" (brother Ogier's version), might find it awkward to kill the brothers of the woman he was in love with.

It occurred to me, also, that I had gone to the last night's festivities at the family château with all the even-mindedness of a twenty-year-old gallant embarking on his first serious affair—his heart on his sleeve, and his pride in his pocket. If I had not been twice twenty, with considerable experience in concealing my emotions, every man and woman present would have known it.

How, then, have I managed to leave Mademoiselle Dariole under so false an impression?

Even riding, I had only to think of the fluid expert motion with which she uses a rapier to find myself uncomfortable in the saddle. Even with the swelling curves of her breasts pinned down by the tight stomacher of last night's gown, she had set my prick to feeling a familiar discomfort. And her hands in mine had been warm, but not soft—the calluses do not go in a few months.

I shook my head, riding up to the stables behind the château. It was that noon hour when grooms are

absent, round at the kitchens, drinking the dregs of their master's wine while they can get away with it, before the family's late rising.

Must I abandon the thought of a Rosicrucian sister completely? Shall I be able to come here again?

In a year, perhaps, to see their first child?

It cut me like a knife.

I cannot give her that.

Dismounting and entering the stables, I stumbled over something in the meagre lantern-light; kicked it, swore, and held it up to the grey daylight flooding in from the entrance.

A bundle of cloth.

Twine tied it roughly. Linen and silk together—the finest translucent linen. And, looking closer, I saw a deep azure silk.

I dropped the cloth, straightened up; every nerve taut to screaming pitch, my hand on my rapier hilt. *Clothes bundled up so, it cannot have been an abduction—!*

She came out of the shadows at the end of the barn, leading a mount with the reins over her arm, and a bundle on her shoulder.

She wore a grey velvet doublet and Venetian breeches. Neither garment particularly fitted her.

“Rochefort?”

She stopped, dead, and hastily hitched her dun mount to a wall-hook; watching me every second, her fingers fumbling.

“Dariole,” I said.

“I don't much like Ambroise's taste in clothes, but he's nearest my size. Didn't *you* tell me, anything criminal's always less suspicious at noon than at midnight?”

I startled. “Criminal?”

“I'm running away.” A slow, broad grin spread over her face. “Messire Rochefort—I'm always meeting you in stables!”

She ran forward and threw her arms around me, and whooped.

I stood stock-still, her arms around my chest, and my own arms held out to the side so that I shouldn't touch her.

“Dariole, we must talk, we need—”

I made as if to embrace her, snatched my hands away—swore under my breath, and closed my arms tightly about her body, pressing her to me and burying my face in her hair.

Her muffled voice protested. “You're—suffocating—me!”

Instantly, I loosened my grip. I lifted my head, and gazed down at her, her flushed face, her smile so wide that it showed the one gap in her white teeth.

“Messire.” She held my gaze. “I can’t stay here.”

“But you looked happy. Happy!” I shook my head in complete bewilderment. “Why? How?”

She kept her grip tight about me. The familiarity in the fit of belly and breast and thigh made me choke.

“I can’t stay here,” she repeated emphatically. “I thought I could. I thought I could take *this* off with the breeches.”

By *this*, I saw she meant the rapier and dagger belted on her, that I had noticed no more than to adjust my embrace to allow for it.

“That isn’t me.” She nodded towards the house. “No more than it’s for Moll Frith, or Lady Arbella, or, or even that Lanier woman. She was a bitch and a whore but I *understand* her.”

“I wish I understood you!” I ought to stop embracing this woman in public, I thought—or what might be public as soon as the grooms came back. “Your brothers will kill me!”

“I’d like to see them try,” Dariole said, with genuine scorn, and I couldn’t prevent it: I flushed, both proud and embarrassed.

“You can’t be what you aren’t,” she said quietly. “It’ll kill me, messire. I don’t care if you don’t want to come with me—I’m leaving. I’ll write to them but I won’t come back here.”

“What...” I swallowed, and began again, lifting one hand so that I could smooth her hair back with my fingers. “What makes you suppose that I don’t want you, mademoiselle?”

She pushed herself more tightly against me, to which my body responded. I followed the line of her lips with my finger.

“I want you,” I said hopelessly. “Stupid bitch though you are, you know it.”

“‘Stupid bitch’?”

“Don’t make a joke of it. I can’t tie you to someone twice your age.”

“More than twice.”

“*Dariole!*”

“I’m going away,” she said. The familiar stubborn set of her mouth did not amaze me. “Messire, if you want me, you should say so. If you want me to help you, you should say that, too. I’m not going to put you at sword’s point. You have to decide for yourself.”

I sighed. For a moment I rested my lips on her hair again. “Am I so open a book to you?”

“No. I can’t work out why you keep telling me to go away.”

Aghast, I put her back from me a hand-span, so that I could see her face. Water brimmed on the lower lids of her eyes.

“Is *that* what I seem to be saying to you?”

“‘Go away,’ ‘find a young man,’ ‘you’re a silly little girl, stay with your husband, you’re not good enough for a grown man’—”

I slid down, awkwardly, my arms around her. The earthen floor of the stables was cold under my knees. I gripped her tightly around the thighs, and momentarily buried my face against her belly.

She moved within my arms; I think in a shrug.

“Weren’t you listening, messire? I can’t *be* a woman. It’s killing me by inches. This is what I am: I have to be what I am. I don’t know whether you want me or not!”

With a sigh that shuddered all through me, I met her gaze. “Mademoiselle—I need to beg.”

“What is it *this* time?”

“I beg for a second chance.” I couldn’t help but grip her body tightly. “I *desire* a second chance. Because I love you.”

I breathed out, finally, with a relaxation of my fingers, knowing I must leave her bruised. “You have, of course, only to say you have no love for me, and I will not mention it again, mademoiselle.”

Her brows went up in familiar disbelief. “Really?”

“No.” I sighed, getting to my feet. “I shall be foolish enough to say it again, you know that.”

She moved her hands to my chest, pressing her body against me, and leaned her chin on her fingers, gazing up at me. In Afric lands they have great cats that lay along branches in a similar manner, to drop on unwary travellers; I daresay with something of the same expression.

“Dariole, I love you to distraction. I have no idea how a liaison between us could work! I’ve tried to find you a life that will make you happy. The boy *loves* you. Philippe. I *know* I am worth nothing. I am a bad man—and...”

She stroked hair back from my face. “Philippe and I would kill each other. Even if—you’re quite right, messire: he does love me. And I’m married to him. But it seems to me I’ve been married to you for far longer.”

She touched me, a smile spreading over her face as her fingers stroked my healed eye. As I gazed down at her, her smile faded.

“Do you like me best in skirts?” she asked. “Or in breeches?”

“There are two answers to that, and neither is the right one. In both,” I confessed. “You’re boy and girl. What’s the use of loving half of you?”

Her face broke out into a great smile.

“There is something I must ask, though I have no right,” I said. “You, mademoiselle. If *you* feel...you say all of love, and pity, and nothing of—need.”

She leaned her forehead against my chest. “When I couldn’t find you. When I thought Sully *had* killed you... When I was looking, and looking, and I almost gave up...*I wanted to die*. You were gone, messire. The thing I *needed* was gone out of the world. I would have given anything to have you back. Even if it was only to tell you, *don’t go, I can’t do this without you now.*”

She leaned her head back, while she stayed within the compass of my arms. I could not speak, looking down at her.

She said, “Messire...I’m not at all brave. It wasn’t until I saw that you *could* love—when I saw how much you love M. de Sully—that I let myself know I loved you. I’m sorry. I should have said.”

I put my hand to her face, too white and strained for tears.

“Dear God,” I said unhappily. “I think you will kill me in a moment, mademoiselle, for allowing myself to dream of what I can’t have—acting as if I am the man who could stay with you—”

“Why not?” Her eyes widened. “You said you love me. It wasn’t a lie. I *know*.”

“Yes, you know.” I looked down into her face. “There is something more that I should have said. Dariole...”

I recounted to her everything that I had written, and destroyed an hour ago, of the death of Etienne.

“That...” Dariole’s eyes shone, clear and puzzled, looking up at me. “Do you still blame yourself? This Etienne—he died of being *stupid*, messire. You do know that?”

I could barely hold back a wry laugh. *This is so much Dariole!*

“In a way, yes.” I shook my head. The warmth of her body, that I felt through the palms of my hands, would leave such a chill when she moved back; I knew it. “But my guilt is not for that.”

“*What*, then?”

Her familiar ability to demand moved me. I welcomed it, astonishingly. *She will allow me no evasion.*

“My guilt,” I said, “is that you are not the first to whom I have knelt and—submitted in that way. When I humiliated myself before Etienne, I discovered that I...responded to it. Loathed it, but responded. I...thought much of it, afterwards. How could I turn my friend’s death into an occasion of corruption? Finally, I made myself put it from my mind; eradicated it.”

Her gaze did not leave mine. “You didn’t.”

“Dariole, I swear I did—”

“Caterina.” She frowned, evidently calling back the Italian woman’s words to her memory. “Caterina said, ‘There are men of violence who make worship of power.’ I didn’t understand, then. ‘Men who go in awe of any man more violent than they are.’ Are you sure that wasn’t you and Sully?”

It took my breath, as hard as the blow of boot or pommel.

“If it was,” I said numbly, “I am even less suited to be in your company than I thought.”

Her body moved under my hands as she shrugged, there in the de la Roncière stables.

“Your friend’s dead, messire. It can’t matter to him what you think now. And if you understand what you want to do—then I don’t suppose it’ll drive you. It’s not like it hurts anyone, messire. Not even you.”

Dariole reached up past my arm, touching her fingers to my cheek. By the chill of her skin, I knew her to be in shock. Her eyes were wide, her pupils dark.

She said, “Do you hate me, because *I* like it?”

I could find nothing bitter in me. “Dariole—no!”

“Well, then. That’s enough.”

A kind of clarity filled me, in the wake of my admission. Courage, perhaps.

There is she, also. I have not forgotten that.

I said, “If *you* should ever desire to—lay down your own dignity, made-moiselle...know this. You can trust me.”

Her eyes caught reflected light from the stable doorway.

Very clearly, she said, “Luke. I *cried*. I *begged* him not to.”

I could see this was the most painful thing that she had ever admitted aloud.

Dariole lifted her chin, looking at me with great directness. “Can you teach me how to do it? Make something of what he did to me?”

A transformation of humiliation to satisfaction. I thought of Etienne: of the simple indignity of penetration.

“I don’t know,” I said. “Dariole...I can try. If it succeeds... If it *doesn’t* succeed, I can attempt anything else you choose. Although abstinence will be difficult.” I paused. “I don’t think I could hurt you.”

The faintest of smiles coloured her voice. “I don’t think I can ‘abstain.’” And then she added, seriously, “No. Thank you.”

This time, when she kissed me, her tears were warm and wet against my face.

“But I am too old,” I said, hoping against hope that she would deny it.

“I know,” Dariole said. “We’re duelists. Duelists don’t make old bones. Nor spies. Messire, we’ll probably both be dead inside two years! What’s the use of thinking about getting old?”

I could only say, quietly, “Mademoiselle...when did you become wise?”

In the tones of Southwark, Dariole said, “You’re an *arse*, Rochefort.”

“Your English is not so much improved that you can adequately insult me.”

“Yeah, *that’s* true!”

“Ah, mademoiselle.” Attempting not to smile, I said, “You do my reputation no good at all! What else have I but reputation?”

She looked me up and down. “Being two yards high and built like a brick outhouse *has* to help.”

That she could make me laugh, at such a moment—and know why such a thing might be necessary—moved me unbearably.

“I may be acting badly, but I cannot be apart from you,” I said. “I risk everything for both of us on the wager that, no matter how happy you are here, I can make you happier. I am old and poor, and will never have the protection of the son of a Marshal of France to offer you, but I cannot do without you! And—perhaps, in the future, I may improve our fortunes.”

She said, “Perhaps...!” but she gripped my hand.

It took a short enough time to mount up and ride off the estate, without public notice of us, that we were a mile down the road before I truly realised it.

“All the same,” Dariole said thoughtfully, looking back from her saddle at me, “I should have made you beg to come with me. On your knees, messire. Properly humbled. Maybe later. You’ll like that. So will I.”

“I perceive I am to live my life in abject subjugation,” I said.

“Only if you ask me very nicely.”

“Abominable brat.”

She grinned.

I returned a smile, and then could not but speak seriously.

“Do you know what I am with you, mademoiselle?”

I saw her deciding not to make a joke of it. She looked at me with clear eyes as I rode up knee to knee with her. “What?”

“Naked—and ashamed—and accepted.”

She hesitated for a moment, clearly thinking.

“Yes, messire. Me too.”

She gave me that small nod and smile that I may see with my eyes closed, or at dark of night, and which I carry always with me.

Untitled

Translator’s Note

This document, although not dictated, I believe to be authored by Mlle de la Roncière. The handwriting is fragile, difficult to read, but determined, the pen’s quill having dug deeply into the surface of the paper. I place it in the late 1680s, when Dariole would have been in her nineties.

The survival of the text, its freedom from burning, perhaps indicates it was always kept safe, and not placed in the box with the other documents until after the abortive attempt made to destroy them.

History survives by such accidents as these; by the chance acts of unknown men.

M. Rochefort lived to a good old age: he was a little over seventy when he died. I was in my mid-forties. I took off my breeches after the funeral and have worn nothing but petticoats since.

A little later, I married again, it being a matter of use to my family, who accepted me back without a

word. My second husband, to our mutual surprise, gave me a child—a daughter. To become a mother was unnerving, and a betrayal. It seems to me that I was someone else, then, for upwards of sixteen years, until she married. I held fashionable salons in Paris and other cities, ostensibly for conversation on science and philosophy, but in fact to cover my association with the other members of the Rosy Cross. In all that time, while I directed them, and had the care of young Arcadie, I neither thought of, nor spoke of, Rochefort and our time together.

No, that is a lie. I swore to myself I would not lie here. Time is short, and I do not have the time for falsehoods. I missed M. Rochefort every day of my life. Thought of him every day. Hurt, like an aching tooth, in my heart. I surveyed the upbringing of my child, and coupled with my married husband, and ordered the affairs of the Rosy Cross, and none of it helped the pain.

I cherished it, in truth. It proved to me that I had once been alive.

The skills I had learned in my forty years, I kept in practise, also, in more domestic fields—it is not difficult, as a matriarch, to control much of the family wealth; as well as the power and position of the family into which my daughter married. This was done coldly, on my part. I am afraid either that she will have been discouraged by my example from doing this, or else that she will take to it also in a cold fashion, when I am gone—not knowing that scheming must be done hot, in the full joy of one's talent, to be worth the doing.

When she had gone to live there, and our families were linked, I occupied some time in mourning for my wedded husband. He died at sixty. People said that I must have loved him more than I showed, so terrible was the grief here. I mourned, of course, for Rochefort, as I had never had the chance to do before. It eased something in me. Although I still grieve, the pain is no longer as sharp as a stone. It is sadness, and worse, in a way—I weep for him, and for me, that we are no longer together.

When my grandchildren began to approach an age of reason, I left off my mourning and began, suddenly, to teach them what I had learned in seventy years.

There are six of them, two girls, four boys. Of the boys, two are worth something. I have hopes for one of the girls. Of course, the others may surprise me. It is too early to despair of any of them.

M. Rochefort was both right and wrong when he said that I would want children. I did not want children. I did not—I can say this only here—did not love my daughter, although I trust I did honourably by her. My grandchildren are loveable, but I would love them were they no blood relation to me at all.

He was wrong. I did not want children. He was right. I only wanted his children.

That I could never have: he was correct that he could not sire a child. That was a relief to me, since a pregnancy would have been a sad interruption to our life together. I always imagined I would hate being with child, and indeed, when I was, I did.

That did not stop me, sometimes, wondering what we might have had. A bright-haired boy, perhaps, with wicked eyes, and a way of charming himself into anything he pleased. A girl with the look of Spain about her: lost, honourable, enviable, loving. I would have loved them, I think—although it would have made me no better a mother, so perhaps it is just as well.

They would have been a substitute to me, and what they would have substituted for was Rochefort's presence after he was dead. And what is the use of that?

It was his wisdom I loved him for, and how he was at once so much older and so much younger than I. He would rock me to sleep in his arms; he would kneel at my feet, imploring me to rescue him. And he

would, simply, look at me—I recall his face, as if I had his portrait, when he merely sat and looked at me, his chin on his hands, slightly smiling.

You are my punishment, he would say, at such times. *I am scourged by you, daily. I should thank God daily, if I did not think that the Devil sent you.*

Grief. He never mentioned that when he swore, sobbing, that we should not be together but he could not leave. That was not one of his reasons. Why should it be? We were both likely to die any time this twelve-month, being duelists. And later, when, apart from service in the Rosy Cross, we gave some assistance to the little Bishop who became the great Cardinal—then, also, we assumed life both cheap and short. Who of us thought, then, *what will the other do when one is gone?*

I thought of killing myself, of course. That is a sin. I spoke in veiled terms to my confessor—a priest not much liked by his local bishop. This was a few months after I had returned, and wore skirts, and was dutiful to my still-living father, a man a year or so older than M. Rochefort. To the priest, I said, “If a person loved so much that they could not endure to be without the other, and that other was dead, would they not be right in following them?”

The priest, who before then I had not much noticed, said, “If you intended to die, Madame Arcadie, you would have stayed in Paris, in breeches, and died on some young idiot’s sword-point—would you not?”

That rocked me. I knelt in the confessional, thinking dazedly how odd it felt to be addressed as *Arcadie*. And he was right. Of course he was right. Although I would not have found a man capable of killing me in a duel unless I fought to lose.

“What am I to do, then?” I whispered, at the age of forty-six.

The priest, who looked nothing more than a meek boy in daylight, spoke in the shadows of the church.

“You have been a man. Why not try being a woman, madame?”

And, when I remained silent, stunned, he added, “Why not? There is nothing else that men do that you have not done, except father a child and a dynasty, and that is beyond even Mlle Dariole. If you intend to stay alive with your grief, you might as well. God may have surprises for you yet.”

Some short time after that, I married, and took with me to my husband’s home my private confessor, thereby saving the young man from a disturbing quarrel with his bishop. It is true I regarded him with some wariness, ever after. I am not accustomed to be spoken to in that manner. After a little reflection, I smiled. *I have become M. Rochefort*, I thought. *Who also was not accustomed to be spoken to in such an impertinent manner, but who dearly loved it. And who knew wisdom when he heard it.*

If neither child nor dynasty, the Rose Cross might stand as my monument, I decided, if so stony a word can be applied to so formless an organisation.

Shortly after that, Chance surprised me with a pregnancy.

I am sorry now that young Arcadie was only a means of bringing about my grandchildren. If Rochefort were here, he would have told me to do better by her. But we cannot control where the heart goes, only do what is honourable if there is no affection there.

I am an old woman. I am not sorry I lived this long. I miss him every day, still. There is nothing to be done about that. A proverb of the Spanish says, *Take what you want, and pay for it.*

If I believed in God and a life afterwards as my little priest does, I would hope to find myself young again

in it. In good health of mind and body. And—vanity being what it is—with all my old skills.

And I allow myself to imagine sometimes that it is so. For hours at a time, sitting by this latticed window, prayer book in my lap, looking out at the gardens which I have planted, in small, in the fashion of the gardens of the Luxembourg. For hours, I make believe that there *is* an afterlife, and that M. Rochefort and I meet there, in a garden. While my children believe me at my prayers, I stare out of the window and imagine I am in carnal intercourse out of doors with the man I love.

My second husband was a man pleased to have mistresses, and a wife who wanted him for procreation and no more, and who was otherwise a faithful friend to him. I was fond of my husband. I was *fond* of my dogs. No man has disturbed me since Rochefort went, unless it is that sexless priest, so much my junior.

I allow myself to hope, wickedly, that I disturb him; that something rises under that cassock when he hears me whisper in the dark of the carnal sins of the young M. Dariole. I doubt it. Men of age are distinguished. Women of age are disgusting. I shrug. If I knew I would have grown this old, I would have tried harder to die young.

I am old. M. Fludd is long dead, a year or two before that civil revolt he desired to stave off, and from which Caterina foresaw such liberty arising. I did visit Fludd, on pretence of journeys to my English relatives, while we were about the business of the Rosy Cross; and if I was never at ease with the man, I could at least tolerate him. He was a colleague of M. Rochefort; a friend to him, in his way. And if we could speak of nothing else, he and I, we could speak of Messire Rochefort. We could speak of him.

Still, now, I am in no hurry to die. When the light of self goes out, there will be no man nor woman left who remembers Valentin Rochefort as I do.

My hands hurt. I will take down my sword from the wall. I will sit holding it. I will look out from this high place, down at the dusty road that leads to Paris, and I will remember him.

Afterword—Author’s Note

When it comes to the question of historical accuracy, I can do no better than to quote Charlotte Lennox, the first translator of the *Memoirs* of the Duc de Sully into English, when she writes in 1755:

One would imagine, that upon a fact so public and so recent as the assassination of Henry IV, there would be found a perfect conformity in the histories and memoirs of the time; yet many of the contemporary writers do not agree either as to the number of persons who were in the coach with this prince when he was assassinated, the wounds he received, nor many other circumstances no less essential.

If those original witnesses are no more reliable than witnesses to the average car accident, and even M. de Sully can present us with a non-existent “Wednesday May 17th 1610” for the date of Henri’s death—a mere paragraph after he refers to a “Monday May 17th,” which isn’t it either—then I think Rochefort’s small errors of memory can be forgiven. Even during the fortnight’s interrogation of Ravaillac before his execution, the record shows that the attorney-general, president, and counsellors persistently get the day of Henri’s death wrong.

Where Rochefort isn’t in “perfect conformity” with history as we know it, I’ve silently amended some of his errors, and left untouched those that are impossible to sort out.

I've also left alone his habit of concealing certain French (and other) families under obvious pseudonyms. While I could make a guess at which families are encrypted this way—it's probably more tactful not to.

Keen students of historical records will also be aware of differences between Rochefort's *Memoirs* and other contemporary sources. Where these difficulties cannot be resolved, I give the benefit of the doubt to Rochefort, who, although he may be mistaken, I take always to have been as honest as possible, even if it is a less naive honesty than that displayed in the *Memoirs* of his master.

Hic Jacet

(*what became of them*)

Shadows we are, and like shadows depart

—*sundial, Pump Court, Middle Temple*

The Bishop of Luçon, ARMAND-JEAN DU PLESSIS , returned from his exile in 1614, after being elected as member to the States-General. There he attracted the attention of Marie de Medici and became her protégé. She appointed him to her council of state, and his fortunes rose and fell over the next few years with her, and with Concini.

After Concini was assassinated, du Plessis transferred his power base to the young king Louis XIII, and was responsible for at least one of Marie de Medici's periods of exile. In 1622 he was made cardinal, and was de facto ruler of France (and King Louis) from the mid-1620s onward. Born in 1585, Cardinal Richelieu died in 1642, only a year after Sully.

MAXIMILIEN DE BETHUNE , BARON ROSNY , DUC DE SULLY (1560–1641), spent the thirty years after King Henri's death writing his *Memoirs*. In his old age, he continued to wear the fashions of his youth, and small children chased after him in the street. He kept peacocks on his estate, whose noise upset his neighbors, but—being, by then, very deaf—this did not bother Sully in the slightest. The *Memoirs* are both touching and entertaining, if not always (one suspects) in the way that Monsieur the Duc intended.

JAMES I / VI did not die until 1625, but he was never the same man after the loss of ROBERT CECIL . He succeeded in keeping Britain out of the Thirty Years' War by a policy of lending every assistance short of actual help—something that did not go down well with the “war party” at court, but they had no convincing leader in the years after PRINCE HENRY died of typhoid fever.

James's cousin ARBELLA STUART , having married William Seymour, was kept at various locations under “house arrest” until 4 June 1611, when she tried—dressed in men's clothes, and with the help of one “Markham”—to escape from England with her husband. Seymour escaped from his confinement in the Tower, safely reaching the continent, but he made enough of a cat's ear of it that Arbella was recaptured alone in the Straits of Dover, and brought back to the Tower, where she eventually went mad and died in 1615.

William Seymour later reconciled with James I, married again, and became the Duke of Somerset at the

Restoration of Charles II.

James's son CHARLES STUART was executed on 30 January 1648 (1649 by the Gregorian Calendar), his disastrous autocratic rule having given rise to the English Civil War, and the following American and French revolutions, through the political philosophies that opposed him.

The PUTNEY DEBATES came to a violent end two years before, in 1647. What it was that the men of the army debated is stated fairly at the beginning, by one Colonel Rainborow:

I think that the poorest he that is in England has a life to live as the greatest he; and therefore truly, Sir, I think it's clear, that every man that is to live under a Government ought first by his own consent to put himself under that Government; and I do think that the poorest man in England is not at all bound in a strict sense to that Government that he has not had a voice to put himself under.

Universal suffrage was not to arrive in England—and into the life, also, of the poorest she—until nearly three centuries later, in 1918.

It is recorded of DOCTOR ROBERT FLUDD that he never left England again, and that he lived on Coleman Street, close by the headquarters of the Masons Company in Cripplegate, until he died in 1637, at the age of sixty-three. It is not recorded that he ever married.

His works include the *Apologia Compendenaria Fraternitatem de Rosae Cruce* (*A Compendious Apology for the Fraternity of the Rosy Cross*), and the monumental two-volume *Utriusque Cosmi Historia* (*History of the Macrocosm and History of the Microcosm*); the latter published by the firm of De Bry in the Palatinate. This German publishing house produced many books connected with the mainstream of Hermetic Rosicrucian philosophy—a philosophy which perhaps had its most concrete experiment in Bohemia in 1619–20, under King Frederick and his wife, Elizabeth Stuart, daughter of James I. It failed catastrophically, and began the Thirty Years' War.

After their brief appearance in print from 1610 to the 1620s, the BROTHERS OF THE ROSY CROSS became apocryphal. Rumours of links to the Masons, the Templars, the Acception, and to almost every other secret society known to European history have since attached themselves to the name of Rosicrucian.

More mundanely, Rosicrucian thought, largely via Sir Francis Bacon's *New Atlantis* and the Royal Society, invigorates the Intellectual and Scientific Revolutions of the later seventeenth century in England, which ultimately bring about the Industrial Revolution.

HENRY PERCY, 9TH EARL OF NORTHUMBERLAND, the "Wizard Earl," was sentenced to life imprisonment in the Tower of London after his involvement in the Gunpowder Plot (1605). He stayed imprisoned there until 1621. After this, he lived in retirement on his estate in Petworth, still forbidden to travel more than thirty miles from his home. He died in 1631—on November 5th.

Until his death in 1621, THOMAS HARIOT lived in Syon House, supported by the Earl of Northumberland, while he worked on his observations of sunspots, invention of navigational instruments, and algebra. He wrote the first book on the English colonisation of the Americas, the *Brief and True Report of the new-found land of Virginia* (1588). Like Marlowe, he was an atheist. Had he published his findings, his reputation might have rivalled Galileo's. (See *Siderius Nuncius*, 1610).

John Aubrey notes that, while the Earl was in the Tower, "to HUES (who wrote *On the Use of Globes*) and to MR . WARNER , he gave an annuity of but sixty pounds per annum. [...] They had a table at the Earl's expense, and the earl himself had them to converse with, singly or together." (*Brief Lives*)

AEMILIA LANIER died in 1654, at the age of 84, having been kept out of the sheerest poverty by her son, a musician to Charles I, and (eventually) a Crown pension. She thereafter sank into obscurity. If she wrote again, it was not under her own name, and she survives in history only as the author of "Salve Deus Rex Judaeorum"—and as the supposed "Dark Lady" of Shakespeare's sonnets.

Of the PLAY titles mentioned in Henslowe's account books for The Rose Theatre, perhaps one-third survive as texts. The other two-thirds are lost to us, all except their titles, and they include the most prized work of dramatists such as John Webster. One of the titles mentioned is *The Viper and Her Brood*, to whom no author is ascribed. Webster's plays, like Marlowe's, and Shakespeare's, were the trash of history; and where they have not gone to line pie dishes, it's pure lucky accident.

No records remain of Elena Zorzi/Suor Caterina, but the WITCH OF WOOKEY is currently reputed still to inhabit Wookey Hole caves. The paper mill continues to exist, and up until a few years ago still made paper commercially.

GABRIEL SANTON , according to a faint but decipherable marginal note in the *Memoirs*, eventually married the landlady of his local tavern, and lived to a ripe old age, fathering children into his eighties.

The samurai armor sent as a gift from the SHOGUN TOKUGAWA IEYASU to "King" Maurice at The Hague, in 1612, can be seen in Paris, having been forcibly removed there at some time in the 1790s.

HIDETADA sent two armors to James I/VI, c.1614; both made by Ieyasu's personal armorer, Iwai Yozaemon, in Nara. Or rather, there not being sufficient time to make dedicated new armors for James before the ship departed, they were appropriated from another customer, whose *mon* they still bear. Both armors have been displayed in the Tower of London. Now that the Tower has, after 900 years, ceased to be an armory, one remains there, and the other is in the new Royal Armouries building in Leeds.

After the SAKOKU ("Closed Country") Edict of AD 1636, Japan remained closed to foreigners until the advent of the American Commodore Matthew Perry and his gunships in AD 1853.

As yet, no data exists on the location of a relevant comet.

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