

*Old History*

February 1558. St James's Palace, London.

One for sorrow: Mary Tudor, a magpie queen – dress black, face chill white, pearls hanging in her hair like teardrops – stands in the pose of a woman with child, her right palm flat across her swollen belly. She knows that what she carries is dead, if ever a baby at all.

'This cannot be true.'

On the polished table lies a single parchment, a summary by her private secretary of ten reports from different corners of the realm. A courtier lurks in the darkness, faceless, a smudge of lace and velvet. The palace has the atmosphere of a morgue.

'I have seen the reports myself, your Majesty.'

'You think them cause for celebration?'

'*English* boys . . . *English* girls. We are blessed with a golden generation.'

'All born within days of each other – you do not think that a matter for concern?'

'Some say it is a matter for wonder, your Majesty.'

'They are the Devil's spawn.'

Unnatural creatures, she thinks, sent to mock her barren state and sap her faith, their gifts in science, philosophy, alchemy and mathematics grotesquely developed for minds so young. *Prodigies* – such an ugly word. She glances down the unfamiliar names: seven boys, three girls.

'Place them where they can do no harm,' she adds.

'Your Majesty.'

'Find us an unforgiving island and maroon them there. They may not be taught or cosseted.'

‘Your Majesty.’

The courtier withdraws. He knows the queen is dying; he knows from the ladies of the Privy Chamber that the pregnancy is false. He must find a sanctuary where these children can learn and mature beyond the jealous royal gaze. He will talk to Sir Robert Oxenbridge, a man of the world and Constable of the Tower of London, where the gifted children are presently held.

He scuttles down the dim corridors like a rat after cheese.

Sir Robert watches the children playing on the grass near their billet in the Lanthorne Tower, and then surveys the strange miscellany of objects gathered from their rooms – *abaci*, sketches of fantastical machines, diagrams of celestial movement, books beyond the understanding of most of his adult prisoners, let alone these twelve-year-olds, and two wooden discs joined by an axle wound around with string.

The Yeoman Warder picks up this last object. ‘Designed by one of the girls. It’s a merry conceit, but requires much practice.’ He raises his wrist and lowers it in a languid movement and the conjoined discs miraculously climb and sink, higher each time, until they touch his fingers.

Sir Robert tries, but under his inexpert guidance the wooden wheels jiggle at the end of the string and stubbornly decline to rise. He is nonetheless captivated.

‘But there is this,’ adds the Yeoman Warder, holding out a board, on which are pinned the bodies of two bats, slit open to reveal their vital organs. Threads and tiny labels crisscross the corpses.

‘Not pretty, but then, the path of medical advancement rarely is,’ replies Sir Robert, without complete conviction.

‘He is different, Master Malise. Remember, one serpent in the Garden was enough.’

The Yeoman Warder points to the lawn below and Sir Robert sees the difference – the boy stands aloof, not from shyness but a natural arrogance.

He recalls the queen’s opinion that they are the Devil’s spawn, but the playful inventiveness of the discs-on-a-string decides him, and the thought that when the old queen passes, the new dispensation will not favour banishing talent on superstitious grounds. Sir Robert turns his mind to an old friend, Sir Henry Grassal, a kindly widower. He owns a manor house in one of England’s more secluded valleys and has the wealth, learning, time and inclination to provide the needed refuge and, no less important, the education.

As befits a veteran soldier, he plots a strategy. Even a sick queen has many eyes and ears.

April 1558. A wooded country lane.

It is early morning on an obscure tributary of the main highway. A covered wagon drawn by a single horse of no distinction, appears, and stops. A ladder is lowered. Mud-stained urchins emerge, seven boys, three girls, and huddle on the roadway for warmth as broken sunlight knifes through the canopy. Each child clasps a silver penny in the hand bearing the faces of the queen and her foreign king and a lordly motto: *PZMDG Rosa sine spina – Philip and Mary by the grace of God a rose without a thorn.*

A second wagon appears, very different to the first. The slats on the side are polished to a shine, the wheels fortified with iron rims, the harnesses of finest leather tether four horses, not one. The wagon halts on the opposite side of the clearing and once again steps are lowered to deliver ten children – but these are mirror-opposites with clean complexions and clothes cut to fit. Like two teams from different worlds, haphazardly drawn together in the

same game, they eye each other across the glade. Sir Robert points at one cart and then at the other, urging each group to cross. The children understand the instruction and its immediate purpose, although none can fathom the deeper reason for the switch.

This is not a mission for strangers. The carter fought with Sir Robert Oxenbridge in France and trusts his former captain in all things, but he has never heard children speak this way, exchanging complex chains of numbers and shapes with foreign names, even discussing the arrangement of the heavens. He crosses himself, uncertain whether his new charges are cursed or blessed.

Sir Robert, riding alongside, notes the gesture and its ambiguity. He still judges the children virtuous, save for the boy with the surgical interests, Master Malise – such joyless eyes.

They descend from the valley rim and Oxenbridge points far below. A single plume hangs in the air.

‘Rich man’s smoke,’ he says, knowing the difference from a campfire, ‘from the tallest chimney at Rotherweird Manor – our destination.’

He smiles at the carter. Had there ever been a gentler act of treason?

**JANUARY**

*First Interview – The Woman*

‘The usual terms?’

Her irregular employer rarely deigned to answer questions directly. His slender fingers drummed the tabletop. ‘Longer and more remote than usual.’

‘Time is no problem,’ replied the actress. ‘They don’t write for women my age any more.’

He still repelled her – that unnatural white bloom to the skin, the merciless eyes – but there were compensations, and not only the money. She had stayed on a yacht, better described as a floating mansion, in the South China Sea, a chalet in the Dolomites and a *palazzo* in Florence, all his properties, and she had heard talk of others. She picked up his second qualification.

‘You said “remote”?’

‘Very – but in England.’ She would have registered disappointment, but for the intensity of his reply and the surprising notion that England could boast anywhere truly remote. ‘You’re discreet. You impress the locals. That is all.’

The actress smiled. Impressing came naturally to her. ‘The same role, same costumes?’

‘Of course.’

Here the interview would normally end, but she could not resist the burning question.

‘Where in England?’

‘Rotherweird.’

She failed to suppress a look of surprise. ‘But they let nobody in. They’re apart, they’re different.’

‘I appear to be an exception.’

‘Your money is the exception.’

‘True – period glaziers, wood restorers and plasterers come expensive. Prepare to be lady of an Elizabethan manor house.’ He stood up before continuing; *no more questions*, the gesture said. ‘One detail – can you play maternal?’

‘Play maternal’ – he had such an unsettling way of putting things. She nodded, knowing her beauty did not touch him. The dynamic between them had always been wholly transactional.

His cold left hand clasped hers – the wrist birdlike, the grip like iron. ‘Done then,’ he said, handing over a cheque by way of advance – a colossal sum for playing in public a wife he had never had.

*Second Interview – The Boy*

The boy stood outside Vauxhall Station facing the bridge across an array of traffic lanes, pedestrian lights and bus stops. It was bitterly cold and still dark at 6.20 in the morning. He would be on time. He fingered the switchblade in his pocket. If the meet turned out to be some kind of pervert, he would pay.

Ignoring the underpass, he vaulted the railings instead. A young suit stumbled towards the station, looking the worse for wear. Noting the bulge in his jacket pocket, he toyed with taking him, but decided against. He was off his patch, and alone.

The hand-drawn map directed him to the riverside flats west of the bridge with the instruction ‘Press P’ at the point of arrival. He peered up – posh, real posh. The boy feared that ‘P’ meant parking, having no intention of getting into a stranger’s car, but this ‘P’ sat on top of the row of silver buttons. Anxiety turned to excitement. He smelled opportunity. Someone rich was looking his way. The world might label him a victim of his background, but he was not a victim of anyone or anything; he was himself, a force, going places. But the tag did have its uses: here was another fool, determined to cure him.

He pressed the button and a smooth voice spoke from the grille: ‘Go to the lift. Press “P” again’.

The door clicked open. Where the boy came from, lifts were rare and never worked when you found them. They were places for meets and dealing and graffiti. This lift had a carpet which swallowed your shoes, and cut-glass mirrors. The ascent was silent, its movement undetectable as the numbers beside the door flared and faded.

The boy walked into a lobby and gawped at a stunning view, sallow light staining the river as the city began to stir. There were more cars now, and the occasional bicycle. Above

the table in front of him hung a picture of the same river in evening light with a small brass plate – *Monet 1901*. Beneath it a bronze frog stared straight ahead.

The boy was right to be apprehensive. He had been watched. The tall man bent over the telescope had fair, almost albino skin, close-cropped silver hair and a high forehead. The lines in his face were fine, as if age had been kept at bay by some rarefied treatment. His hands were long, almost skeletal, the fingernails manicured. His Indian-style jacket, dark trousers and open-necked silk shirt mirrored the easy elegance of his penthouse flat. The boy did not know it, but he had chosen the art and furniture himself; he frowned on wealthy men who used advisors for taste.

He polished the telescope lens, replaced the cap and turned to the internal cameras. The boy was crude, but build and face held promise. He pressed the internal intercom: ‘Bring him in – and remove the knife.’

The boy was disarmed by a young man with a minimum of fuss; he knew when not to mix it up. He was ushered into an office with computers standing in ranks on a glass table on one side of the room. Mixed with the modern were artefacts and pictures which meant nothing to him, except that they screamed ‘money’. His host sprang from an armchair and the boy revised his expectations: this was no do-gooder. The lips had a heartless curl to them.

Unsettled, he sought to assert himself. ‘What am I ’ere for?’ He was used to staring people out – barristers, magistrates, child psychiatrists, social workers, policemen, rivals on his patch – but he evaded these remorseless eyes. Worse, the man did not speak. The boy was used to dealing with people who came to the point – twenty quid, two kilos, guilty or not guilty, who to cut; business talk.

When it did emerge, the voice was as firm as the handshake. ‘A drink, perhaps?’

‘I’m not ’ere for a drink.’

‘Coffee for me,’ said the old man, ‘medium sweet. And macaroons for our friend – with nothing to drink.’ The assistant left the room. ‘I appreciate your coming,’ continued the man.

‘My coming for what?’

‘Do sit down.’

The boy did so, noticing that each chair arm ended in a predatory animal’s head.

The man searched his face before offering a hint of a smile, apparently satisfied. ‘What are you here for? A fair question. Call it a role more than a task.’

The boy hated smart talk. His nostrils twitched at the mild oily fragrance to the old man’s hair.

‘You play a part – understand?’

‘I dunno what you’re on about.’

The man held up a list of the boy’s convictions – Court, date, offence and sentence. ‘Impersonation, forgery, obtaining money by deception . . .’ The list covered several pages – an unedifying mix of dishonesty and violence.

The boy played the victim card. ‘Things have been ’ard. ’ad no chance, did I?’

‘You had plenty of chances. You just got caught.’

Now the boy knew he was here to be used, not cured. ‘Whaddya want, then?’

‘I have lost something rare and valuable. You need only know it was taken from me long ago.’

‘Then you gotta pay.’

‘I haven’t *got* to do anything.’

The assistant entered with a tray and the fragrance of fresh baked macaroons permeated the room. The boy grabbed one. His host followed, picking up his with a slow, easy elegance.

‘If I get no money—’ interrupted the boy, his mouth half full.

The old man sipped his coffee, quite unhurried. ‘You reject my terms before you’ve heard them?’

The boy bit his lip. ‘’ow much then?’ he asked.

‘Enough for a son of mine.’

*Son of mine!* An expletive died in the boy’s throat. Perhaps, after all . . .

‘’ow much is that?’

‘Think thousands.’

A posh phrase came to him: *son and heir*. ‘You got other kids?’

‘My wife and I are, regrettably, not blessed.’

So he wanted a son – but *why* choose him? ‘What about my probation officer?’

‘The adoption papers are ready. You have only to sign.’

‘All this to find – what?’

The old man ignored the question. ‘You will be transformed – new name, new clothes, new voice.’

From his host saying nothing of substance, the conversation was now moving alarmingly fast. ‘What if I refuse?’

‘Make that choice and you’ll find out.’

‘We’d be staying ’ere?’

‘For a month or two, while we polish you up, then to a country town. You’ve never been to the country. Experience is a form of power, Rodney.’

‘*Rodney?*’

‘“Rodney” suits him, don’t you think?’ the old man said to the assistant, adding, ‘With work.’

‘Yes, indeed, Sir Veronal,’ the assistant agreed.

*Sir*, Sir Veronal – the boy had never met a ‘sir’ before, nor indeed a ‘Veronal’.

‘Why are you doing this?’ asked the boy.

‘I’m a philanthropist,’ explained Sir Veronal. ‘I give.’

*Not without taking*, thought the boy.

‘And when I make generous offers, I like an answer.’

The offer was a no-brainer, but the boy’s desire to win ran deep. ‘You *might* be on, if you tell me what I’m looking for.’

The lines on Sir Veronal’s face fleetingly looked like scars. ‘It’s something you’ll always have, even when it’s gone. Mine was stolen.’ Sir Veronal rose to his feet. ‘Naturally, there are conditions. Violence is usually an admission of failure. As they say on the medicine bottle: use only as instructed. And remember, I hire you to *listen*: in school, in the street, wherever.’

‘School—?’

‘Children know more than adults think, but they lack discretion.’ Sir Veronal smiled; *discretion* was too rich a word for the boy in his present state. ‘Meaning, when to keep their mouths shut. You must become adept at worming your way in.’

A beautiful woman glided into the room, tall, middle-aged, with marble-white skin and dark hair held back by a golden slide. Her eyes had a striking tint of violet, and she had a way of standing as if she had practised the pose for maximum elegance.

She spoke quietly, but with a penetrating clarity. ‘Welcome home, Rodney.’

‘Lady Imogen,’ explained Sir Veronal.

Rodney held out a tentative hand as Sir Veronal allowed himself another smile. The unruly colt was broken.

‘We want an English boy of breeding, style without ostentation. First we clothe you properly. Then we start on that voice.’

The boy nodded obligingly. His benefactors were clearly mad, and there for the taking.

*Play along, he said to himself, just play along.*