



--a fanfiction by Grace Francis--

<http://www.jurious.co.uk/>

*For **grace_ran_lee** & for **rushysgirl**, who dared to challenge me!
I'm also indebted to **Geoffrey Rush**, my inadvertent Muse and inspiration*



| | |
|--------------------------|----|
| Disclaimer & Notes | 3 |
| Part I | 5 |
| Part II | 12 |
| Part III | 28 |
| Part IV | 44 |
| Part V | 68 |

Disclaimer & Notes

This is unashamed historical nonsense *based* on a film (*Elizabeth*, 1998) which is itself *loosely based* on history. Please no flames, no gripes, no priggishness – it was a bit of fun, and should remain so (and is intended particularly for those discriminating Rushies who really appreciated Geoffrey Rush in the role of the Queen’s spymaster). I’m also making not a penny from this, so please don’t sue me if I’ve somehow infringed copyright. :-)



Influence for this story came from all over the shop – from the original *Elizabeth* film, of course; from some stuff Geoffrey Rush has said in interviews regarding *The Golden Age*; from the Walsingham book by Robert Hutchinson (and various other historical texts); from an old *Discworld* fanfiction my friend “Mercator” wrote; from the novelisation of the first *Elizabeth* film by Tom McGregor, and also from my own sordid little mind. (There might have been other subconscious links, but I’m not even going to try and think what they might have been!)

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Walsie Trivia

Queen Elizabeth I and Sir Francis Walsingham were related through Walsingham's stepfather, Sir John Carey, who was brother-in-law to Anne Boleyn's sister, Mary. (This at least meant they weren't strictly related by blood, or else some might call this story incestuous on top of everything else!)



**Inconcessus Fructus* = “forbidden fruit”

*“Oh what a tangled web we weave
when first we practice to deceive.”*

Sir Walter Scott (from “Marmion”)



Part I

Inside the stone walls of the palace, the candles burned away whilst the dark gloom of night set in. Elizabeth could see that, outside in the heavens, all the stars were out in their full glory, twinkling down upon the world of men with their ubiquitous hauteur; and, just for a moment, she felt as though she was one of them, something both untouchable and divine – for had she not just elevated herself above the realm of the mortal man by representing herself as a Virgin Queen, someone both great and godly?

At least that was the illusion.

Now, in the privacy of her chambers, her ladies having attended her, she was reduced to her mortal self once again. The white face paint was gone, the red wig removed, the huge elaborate dress stripped away; the goddess who had revealed herself at Court had retired until another day. And though the transformation and the sacrifice had indeed been harsh, Elizabeth found that she had no more tears to shed on the matter. She was ‘made of stone’, and it was merely a small feeling of hollowness, deep within, that reminded her she was still human.

She turned from the window which looked out onto the starry skies and then walked back into the midst of her private chamber, a grand room filled with all manner of articles, including her books, her extensive wardrobe, and her bed. Attired in her nightgown, she stood behind the wooden panels of the ornate screen which divided her room into two, the portion in which she stood being for dressing, whilst the rest was intended for sleep

and, when the rarity occurred, recreation. Here, standing before a full length mirror, she looked upon her reflection, and saw but a sorry likeness of herself: the cropped hair, the pallid flesh, the thoroughly cheerless expression... It was all most pitiful.

Suddenly, however, she was jolted from her reverie by a slight shift in the darkness behind her. Her eyes had caught a small flicker of movement beyond her reflection, and, expecting nothing but the worse, she wheeled about and looked around herself wildly. Who would possibly dare to invade her space at this hour, and keep to the shadows? Their intentions could not possibly be good.

But rather than shout for help, she merely gathered her courage, ignoring the hammering of her heart against her ribcage, and said, "Who goes there?" Her tone was slightly tremulous, and, remembering she was dressed in little but a shift, she quickly made to draw the material tightly about herself, shivering in the cool air, and wondering in horror under whose gaze she must be cowering.

There was at first no answer and her eyes passed ever the more fearfully between the candelabras which littered the room, but their glow did little to comfort her, only made the shadows around the chamber far too deep to be penetrated by the naked eye.

Fortunately, she was not to fear, for the darkness finally stirred and a familiar man in black stepped forth from the gloom.

Elizabeth's fear turned to relief, and then swiftly to outrage. "Sir Francis!" she exclaimed. "You quite scared the life from me! What do you mean by coming to my chambers at such an hour? And keeping to the shadows, at that?"

Sir Francis Walsingham, middle-aged, bearded and of middling stature, bowed to her, his long cloak sweeping the floor, before he then straightened up and looked his Queen in the eyes. His piercing blue gaze, as always, managed to give Elizabeth the impression that

he had cut open her psyche and was studying the secrets of her soul; like a surgeon, he peeled away the flesh to discover the dark mysteries concealed therein.

“Forgive me, Your Majesty,” he replied in his steady, mellifluous tone, “I had to see you.”

That was certainly not a reply Elizabeth had expected and she knew it must show on her face, for Sir Francis graced her with one of his fine, little smiles, and she then couldn't help but smile in return, for it was simply amazing how Walsingham's entire person was transformed by the slight curl of his lips. It left her in no doubt that here was a man more than capable of seducing even the most reticent of individuals. She had heard more than enough rumours about the man's exploits, of course, about his terrifying ability to draw whomever he pleased into his web of deception before he took their lives; and worse, she knew many of the tales were true. Yet, despite all of this, she did not fear him. He was her Moor, her most loyal subject, and some how she knew that he answered only to her.

Walsingham saw that she was at ease and took a step closer to her, bringing himself fully into the light, whereupon the shadows disappeared from his features.

Elizabeth did not move, but looked carefully at his face, and found it was as void as ever from clues pertaining to his state of mind. She also realised, in turn, that he was studying her visage, and taking in the blatant reality of her brutally hacked locks, her pale complexion, and her steely eyes.

He then took her by surprise once again and raised his hand to her head, running it over her hair, before letting his knuckles glide down across her cheek then back to his side.

“I had no idea,” he said in an apologetic tone, “that Your Majesty would take my words so far.”

Elizabeth could only continue to stare into his eyes, mesmerised by his touch and his voice, and she quite forgot to push him away for his insolence. Instead, she let him be, and realisation soon dawned that he was sorry for the changes he felt he had forced her to make to herself. *'They must be able to touch the divine,'* he had said, *'Here on earth...'*

“Is this not what you meant me to do?” she challenged him. “Have I not some semblance of control now? Of respect? Am I not divine?” She turned from him and paced away. He did not follow.

“Aye, Madam,” he said from where he stood. “But it pains me to have had to sanction such sacrifice.”

She glared out into the dark corners of the room, but still didn't deign to look at him. “But it was a necessary sacrifice, was it not, Sir Francis?”

Now he stepped closer. She didn't hear him move, but when he next spoke, he sounded much closer than before.

“Yes, Madam,” he said, echoing his former speeches as he added, “To reign supreme.”

Elizabeth turned her head to the side a little. “Then why the regret, sir?”

“I harbour no regrets, Majesty,” Walsingham assured her, walking round to stand before her so that she now faced him. “It is simply concern for your person. For it is my duty to protect you.”

“From all things...?” she tested, teasingly.

His lips quirked and he bowed his head.

“It is strange, Sir Francis, that I don’t fear you, is it not? Or storm and rage at the rude gentleman who enters unannounced into my private chambers?”

“Aye, Madam, it is strange indeed.”

She graced him with another friendly smile then reached her hand up to the side of his face, stroking his skin for the first time and feeling the rough texture of his beard.

He didn’t flinch; he merely stared straight back at her, his face, as ever, an unreadable mask.

“My Moor,” Elizabeth mused. “My truly loyal servant. Why are men like you so rare?”

He was full of charm and courtesy when he replied, “T’is a mystery, Your Majesty.”

“I know you’ve killed. I know you’ve tortured. And I know it was all done for my people, and for my state, and perhaps even for me.”

There was an almost imperceptible nod of his head. Yes, for her, his Protestant Queen.

“Why such sacrifice of your body and soul, Sir Francis?” she queried.

Sacrifice. The lying, the deceit, the espionage; the entrapment of victims through the lure of sex, the financing of his spies out of his own pocket, and the committing of murder under cover of night? Yes, he had sacrificed a lot for his Queen and country. His reputation spoke of the terrifying lengths he was willing to go to protect his country, and he was widely feared because of it. However, his thoroughly urbane appearance and courteous manner still led some to disbelieve such fanciful nonsense. Little did they realise this was perhaps the spymaster’s intent.

“I do not flinch from committing sins necessary for safeguarding the state, and Your Majesty’s person,” Walsingham replied in a textbook-like fashion, “for harm to either would be the greater sin.”

Elizabeth’s next smile was filled with true gratitude for, despite the dark and sordid nature of Walsingham’s work, such true selflessness was hard to come by, and she often found herself wondering at her good fortune. “What would I do without you, my Moor?” she asked, hand still on his face. Impulse dictated that she should kiss him, for he had the most beautiful eyes and a smile which was heavenly; yet she knew it would be wrong, and that she should try to cast such capricious human whims aside.

Walsingham, however, seemed to have read her mind, for he took her hand from his cheek and whispered, “Take this as a gift, my Queen, and think no more on it,” before stooping to her level and pressing his lips against hers.

Elizabeth closed her eyes and her hands sought out his robes, where she clutched onto him tightly as he plundered her mouth with a kiss that left her breathless, demonstrating quite clearly why his aptitude as a seducer was so great.

The sensation was wonderful, but it could not last, and he soon pulled away. Elizabeth could then do nought but turn from him, burdened by a sudden feeling of guilt and foolishness. Why these feelings weren’t directed at the perpetrator, in the form of anger, she could not say.

“Forgive me, Madam,” her Moor then apologised. “That was inappropriate.”

His unerring steadiness restored the balance of their relationship, and Elizabeth found herself beaming at him, back in full control.

“Inappropriate, yes,” she finally concurred, “but not unwelcome.”

His eyes sparkled a little at that and he returned the smile. “It was a gift, Majesty,” he reminded her. “It would be dangerous to ask for anything more.”

She nodded. “Of course. I know.”

His rough hand caressed her cheek for but a moment, before he said, “Take care, my Queen,” pressed a quick kiss to her brow, and was gone, melting back away into the shadows from whence he had come...



“I protest that my soul is free from all malice. God is my witness that as a private person, I have done nothing unworthy of an honest man and as Secretary of State, nothing unbefitting my duty.”

– **Sir Francis Walsingham** at the trial of Mary Queen of Scots, 1586



Part II

Walsingham lived in a fine house on Seething Lane in the parish of St. Olave, which was, quite conveniently, only a few hundred yards away from the Tower of London, keeping the spymaster close to the heart of things at all times. (He had naturally borne this in mind when purchasing the property.) There were often several of the spymaster’s entourage of secretaries and intelligencers based at the home, which he used as an unofficial headquarters for the accumulation and deciphering of his network’s collected information. This thus set Walsingham’s house apart from those of many other councillors, for it had the atmosphere of a government office rather than that of a the warm, comfortable home, which one would surely prefer after hours toiling away for the Queen at her palaces.

The truth was Walsingham never went home – not really. Even if he was at one of his countryside lodgings, his mind was forever engaged with some matter of state. Many people wondered if he ever went to sleep at all.

Despite the fact that Walsingham’s Seething Lane property was not an official place of government work, everything there ran admirably well – perhaps more so than the real thing! – but with the master of the house being Walsingham, one could not imagine it being otherwise.

The air was crisp this Thursday morning as the spymaster stepped into his home. He set his cap and cloak aside before he began to walk up the wooden stairway to his study on the first floor. He had one particular room which he used as his escape from the rest of the house, a personal bubble, filled with many of his books, countless pieces of parchment, and, hung on the wall, curiously, a painting of his two hare-coursing hounds.

Walsingham's eyes rested briefly on the image as he entered the chamber and he pondered on how long it had been since he had last returned to his country estate and gone hunting with his dogs? Too long, perhaps – but he could not possibly even consider returning when he was so needed by the state. And his Queen.

He slipped into the seat behind his desk and, setting a pile of cipher-filled papers aside, sat back and pondered on what he had done. He was not thinking of his widely circulated espionage network, or his torture and methodical destruction of Papist insurgents, of course – he was thinking of his single kiss with the Queen.

It had been a bold move, to kiss the Queen, and he wasn't even sure now what had possessed him to do so; he was a man of rationale and aloofness, controlling his emotions and actions to such an extent that he was not inhibited by conscience when it came to racking a Catholic priest who had been harbouring ill-tidings from the continent, or taking a woman to bed in order to kill her when she came for him. He was a hardened assassin, well versed in every manner of foul deed and methodical trickery, and yet none of this gave rise to an explanation for his actions.

He rubbed his chin in thought, fingers kneading at the coarse hair of his beard. He cared for the young Queen, he could not deny that, and their journey together, through the early hardships of her reign, had given them both a tacit understanding with the other, sealing the bonds of their friendship for, what he hoped, would be many years to come. But had his partiality to this young lady boiled over into a stronger affection? Had their life-

threatening jaunt against Catholic extremists and treacherous subjects brought them closer in more ways than one?

He picked up a feathered quill that lay dormant on his desk and began to run his fingers up and down the soft, downy feathers along its spine. He could not altogether say that he did not hold Elizabeth in some regard, for he did; he respected her strength of character, and her recent sacrifice of identity had touched him deeper than he imagined was possible - she had become an icon, just as he had advised her to do - and yet it did not sit well with him at all. She had elevated herself above the realm of humanity, but the cost to her person might ultimately be too great for her to bear.

“But she knows this,” he muttered, dipping the point of his quill into the nearest ink well and, pulling a spare piece of parchment to him, began to put together a series of images and signs; he was designing a new set of ciphers through which he could communicate with his agents. It did not do well to rely on one set of symbols for long, after all.

His pen produced a crescent moon to begin with, which he then crossed through with a line, before pausing to ponder on the next shape to use.

He dipped the tip of his pen again, held it above the paper and paused to think; but he was unable to focus, and could only look up and stare into space.

“What have I done?” he murmured.

The ink dripped onto the paper. The sound it made was loud in the stagnant silence of the room.

Sir Francis set the quill back into the pot and left it sitting there whilst he sat back another time and heaved a deep sigh. He had kissed the Queen, given her a token of his affections, given in to that look of want in her eyes, that desire, because, deep down, he had wanted it, too. Now he had put them both in a situation that he could not easily steer

them out of; and for the man who had been said to govern the “noble ship” that was her Majesty against shipwreck, he would seem to have led them both into a spinning maelstrom from whence they would not escape unscathed. To look at the Queen with the eyes and bestow upon her the smile which he knew drove many women and men to desire him was one thing; to actively place a kiss on her lips another. What must she think of him...?

The fact remained that he didn't know what she thought, and to *not* know something unsettled Francis Walsingham greatly, for he was the spymaster who made it his job to know everything.

If nothing else, it seemed like he had just committed a huge act of hypocrisy. Telling Elizabeth to make herself into a “Virgin Queen” one moment and then seemingly tempt her to sacrifice her honour to him the next was hardly a smart move. He knew she was no virgin, and that there had been some minor indiscretions with her lover Robert Dudley, but that didn't mean any man should ever have the right to her in that way any more; she couldn't afford to let them. She had chosen not to.

And neither he nor the Queen could afford to seek solace in one another. It would be impossible, and lead them both to ruin.

There was suddenly a knock at his door and Francis looked up to see the drawn face of another Francis, Master Milles, one of his private secretaries, peer into the room.

“Good morning, your honour,” Milles said. “We have received intelligence from an Edward Burnham. The letter has been decoded. Phelippes made short work of it.”

“I would expect him to since he wrote the code,” Walsingham dryly replied, before extending his hand and taking the deciphered document from him.

“Thank you,” he added as he sat back and read what Edward Burnham, one of his France-based servants, had to report this time. He hoped the news was not too grave for, after the debacle they had just surfaced from with the Duke of Norfolk, he doubted the Queen would be keen to act on any more findings which indicated treachery or made allusions to an uprising. It wouldn’t be long when the next threat cropped up, for it was the way of the world; you cut off one of the hydra’s heads and two more sprang up in its place! He just prayed they would be given time to breath before it happened.

He soon found himself needing to read and re-read a sentence before he got its meaning, though, and he frowned. It wasn’t like him to stumble over words! It was as if he was unable to maintain his concentration...

“Sir?”

Interrupted, Walsingham glanced up again and saw that Milles remained hovering in the doorway. The secretary looked slightly concerned.

“Yes?” Walsingham asked.

“Are you well?” the man enquired. “You seem a little... preoccupied.”

The spymaster started - did it really show? Things must be weighing heavily upon him if the change in his person was so evident. He was glad that, at least, he could say he was not sick, for he was intermittently blessed with bouts of bad health, and this was obviously the concern at the forefront of Milles’ mind; the *‘oh no, he’s ill again’* state of affairs.

“No, I am very well,” he thus rallied smartly, “But I gather that I appear more preoccupied to you than usual?” He fixed the other Francis with a firm stare, not to frighten him, but just to ensure that he got the truth.

Milles held Walsingham's gaze and paused to give himself time to weigh up the question, and carefully consider his answer, for one did not waste their breath on thoughtless replies to a person of Walsingham's intellect and acuity. The spymaster would sift through every syllable you uttered just to make sure he knew your honest answer, sometimes finding the truth in the words you failed to say rather than the ones you did...

"No sir," he said at last, "You do not seem more preoccupied than usual, just a little irked, as if you are stuck behind one obstacle and cannot get passed it. Do you understand my meaning?"

A silly thing to add – of course Walsingham understood! – but Sir Francis just smiled, his eyes glinting at Milles since he was most pleased by the overall sharpness of the man's response. "You are very perceptive, Master Milles," he thus said. "But the matter is a personal one. Nothing in our network is amiss. Please do not concern yourself with it."

Milles nodded and knew better than to pry any further. "Very well, your honour," he said, before he disappeared into the corridor and left Walsingham alone with his thoughts.

Sir Francis tried again to scan the letter that Milles had presented to him, and found happily that, as he reached the bottom, nothing was contained therein requiring immediate attention; certainly action was necessary, but not urgently. He thus put the letter down and regressed once more to his previous train of thought: his rash romantic move on the Queen.

It made no sense now, but acts of impulse rarely did. He wondered if he might have ruined his relationship with the Queen forever, or merely taken it to another more dangerous level. He also wondered if he dare finish what he had started.

There was another knock at the door, more urgent, and another of Walsingham's secretaries – one Lawrence Tomson – tumbled in. The man bowed his head then

proffered his hand toward his master, a letter contained therein. “More information from Scotland, your honour, further to the investigation of Alexander Hamilton,” he said.

Walsingham immediately got to his feet and took the note. Alexander Hamilton had been unfortunate enough to warrant being personally interrogated by Sir Francis in recent weeks, under suspicion of circulating messages to the supporters of Mary Queen of Scots. This lady looked set to be the focus of future Catholic schemes against the Queen and state, a woman who Sir Francis had no hesitation in calling “that bosom serpent”, much to the council’s chagrin.

“What news?” he asked as he speedily read the letter.

“It seems that Hamilton’s denial is not an end to things,” Tomson replied. “We have now traced the trail of Mary of Scots’ letters to a Master Henry Cockyn.”

“Cockyn?” Walsingham perused the letter’s content, looking for Cockyn’s name. “A bookseller?”

Tomson nodded. “Aye, your honour.”

The ensuing silence was heavy, weighted by significance.

Walsingham read the letter through once more before he locked eyes with Tomson.

“Arrest him. Immediately.”

Tomson bowed out, pulling the door closed behind him, and Walsingham brooded over whether or not it would now be an appropriate time to speak to the Queen on this matter. He felt that it would be unwise, not merely because the Queen was still reeling from the conspiracy built up around her cousin Norfolk, but because of the indiscretion that had now occurred in the once stable relationship that he and the young monarch shared.

And yet it was his duty as her servant and advisor to keep her up to date on affairs. It would not do to keep this secret for long.

He gave the painting of his dogs another quick glance before he tidied his desk, arranged his stack of papers, and was on his way to the Queen's present residence of Richmond Palace.



Richmond Palace was ten miles or so out of London and resided on the Thames. It was thus best accessible via water, the roads across the country being, at the best of times, muddy and ill maintained. River travel was, however, slow, and Walsingham had no desire for a leisurely cruise when he had news to impart, be it urgent or no. He thus saddled a horse and was gone from the centre of the capital before the hour struck nine.

The morning air was fresh and the sky clear, which meant that visibility was very good, though the atmosphere was also very cold, and it made both the breath of the spy master and his horse appear in small clouds before their faces. But it was an exhilarating journey for Sir Francis, nevertheless, being something of a brief hiatus from his onerous duties of state. For once, his body was allowed precedence over his mind, and the thrill of speed and freedom momentarily overtook him, and made him feel immortal.

The spymaster passed a very few people on the way, and saw none of them for long enough to register their faces. He doubted that any of them would know him in return, either, for even if they knew his name, hardly any would know his face.

He rode his horse hard out of London and followed the Thames towards the west, the river guiding him on to that splendid testament of Henry VII's reign – Richmond Palace. It was built on the old location of Sheen Palace, which had unfortunately burnt down the previous century, and had also been the home of Elizabeth's father, Henry VIII, until he

had acquired Wolsey's Hampton Court and opted to live there instead. The palace had since been the residence of the unfortunate Anne of Cleves as well, Henry VIII's unloved fourth wife, and was now a favourite haunt of Henry's daughter, Elizabeth.

Walsingham could not fault Elizabeth's decision to reside here so often – the grounds were beautiful, with plenty of opportunities for hunting, which the Queen and her entourage thoroughly enjoyed, and the palace itself was magnificent, blessed with multitudes of windows, gracious domed towers, and an expensive lead roof.

The spymaster did not slow his pace as he hurtled through the gates of the palace, and only when he was but a foot away from the doors did he finally give his horse some respite and pulled its reins to an abrupt halt.

The horse reared and whinnied before it settled again, and Walsingham patted the beast's flank as he dismounted to calm it, before he left the animal with the stable-hands and walked quickly on ahead. He was recognised by the guards and accepted swiftly into Richmond's halls, where he removed his travel cloak, hung it in the crook of his arm, and rushed up the sweeping stairway ahead.

He continued on down myriads of beautifully decorated halls on the next floor, eyes set forward at all times, until he arrived at the Queen's apartments and, with a loud knock, waited patiently outside the door. He knew she was here, in this chamber, though he couldn't explain how he knew. It was just one his little abilities, to simply *know* these things some times.

A few seconds later, a young lady opened the door and her eyes looked Sir Francis up-and-down. She seemed to ponder on him for a while, taking particular note of his eyes, before she asked, "Yes, sir?"

“Your honour,” he corrected her with a hint of hauteur, just because it pleased him to see the irritation in her face. There was no need for the amendment in truth; he just felt that if he had a right to be called “your honour”, he may as well use – or abuse – that right.

The girl’s face did indeed wrinkle at his attitude, but she knew she had not the authority to wrangle with the gentry. “Apologies, your honour,” she returned a little tetchily.

Sir Francis, satisfied, decided to grace her with one of his smiles to appease her. “Sir Francis Walsingham, to see Her Majesty,” he said with a bow of his head.

Walsingham’s smile was of the most infectious kind, it would seem, for the lady seemed instantly satisfied that he was, in all senses, a gentleman. She even gave him a small smile in return, before she retreated into the chamber to announce the arrival of a gentleman visitor to her Queen.

Sir Francis waited and, after a few murmured conversations and a shuffle about of people, the young lady returned, opened the door wide, and ushered Sir Francis in. “This way, your honour,” she said, this time with a curtsy.

Walsingham nodded to her. “Thank you,” he said, hoping that his smile hadn’t promised more to the young lady than he had intended.

As he walked into the room – a large antechamber to the Queen’s bedroom, he presumed – he looked around to see the Queen’s ladies in waiting arranged in a neat circle, sat upon cushions on the floor with their embroidery on their laps, and, at the centre of the huddle, perched upon a fine chair, was Elizabeth herself. Her short hair was concealed beneath an elaborate red wig, and her body was clothed in the finest of gowns, which seemed to shimmer in the sunlight in a dazzling array of blues and greens. No one could deny that she made a striking Queen.

Elizabeth's steely eyes met the spymaster's and she betrayed nothing to him in her face – something he could only admire her for very much. She was very good at masking her innermost feelings.

“Ladies, leave us,” she then said in a voice which commanded authority.

And the ladies did, laying their embroidery aside before curtsying to their royal mistress and filing out of the room.

The last one closed the door with a gentle click behind her and Elizabeth was then left alone, once again, with her spymaster.

They stared at one another for some time before Walsingham bowed his head and said, “Your Majesty, forgive my intrusion.”

“You are forgiven,” she said blandly. “May I ask as to the occasion?”

Walsingham had to hide a smile as he drew himself back up to his full height; how impersonal they were being, how cold and detached. As if nothing had ever happened between them.

And maybe it hadn't, really.

Sir Francis stepped forward and withdrew the note from within his coat, then offered it to his Queen. He saw her eyes looking down at his boots and he gave them a glance in turn, seeing that they were a little mud-spattered.

“Pardon, Majesty,” he said quickly. “I rode here hard.”

She cocked a sarcastic brow at him. “Clearly, Sir Francis.”

He stifled his chuckle another time and simply handed over the document for her perusal.

“I hope that this was worth your troubles, my lord,” she mused, unfolding the paper and reading it quickly.

“It is not urgent, Your Majesty,” he rallied. “But the implications might be.”

He saw the look the Queen gave him over the paper, the glare which dared him to take another step. “This man Cockyn has been apprehended?” she queried.

Walsingham nodded. “Yes, Your Majesty.”

This seemed to pacify Elizabeth at once. She folded the letter back up and handed it back to the man. “Then what need had you to attend on me, sir?” she asked. “I see no urgency in the matter.”

The spymaster carefully plucked the paper from her hand and stared into her eyes for some time; he could sense the challenge hidden beneath her words, the Queen asking him whether he had ridden thus far on a mere pretence just so he could see her again. It was a crafty little insinuation, a jibe at his strength of character, his person, and his feelings. But perhaps it was also an ill-conceived move on her part, for it implied that, maybe, she was as haunted by their mindless embrace as he was...

“On the contrary, Your Majesty,” he continued regardless. “I see all manner of urgency in the matter. Do you not comprehend the dangers that this small intrigue presents? This Cockyn is but one of many informants and messengers employed by the Queen of Scots and her train of Catholic supporters. This man has been apprehended and I will do my best to cut off the tap at its source, but I cannot guarantee that this is the end of it. You are still in danger, Your Highness. Norfolk was but one branch of the tree of conspiracy.”

She waved a hand at him and rose to her feet in a huff. “Oh, Sir Francis, enough of this for one week! Have I not just escaped with my life from your *last* conspiracy?”

Walsingham let his brow rise. “*My* conspiracy, madam?” he rejoined. “I hope Your Majesty does not wish to implicate me in plots against her?”

“You know perfectly well what I meant, sir – show me some of that intellect for which you are so renowned!”

He dipped his head in acquiescence. “But your Highness would still do well not to let your guard slip.”

“And you would do well to hold your tongue. Can I not escape for a sojourn at Richmond for a few days without seeing your face?”

Walsingham stared at her and blinked slowly. She was still as capricious as a child when she chose to be, and as stubborn as a mule. “I was employed to look after Your Majesty’s interests by Lord Burghley. And I mean to continue to do so, even in his absence. And against your goodwill, if I must.”

He saw the look of fire in her eyes, the flash of Tudor spirit, the wonder at his impudence. He knew that he angered her, and yet, at the same time, he intrigued her, and he could tell that she wasn’t sure whether she should encourage or dissuade such behaviour on his part.

“Then you are a fool, Sir Francis,” she said at last, “for should you not listen to your Queen’s council above your own? To that of your ‘anointed sovereign’?”

His brow contracted slightly. “Do not test me, Madam,” he snapped without an ounce of hesitation.

She continued to look at him with an expression that bordered between conceit and wrath. “Test you, sir? Are you not testing me? You seem to be ordering me what to do.”

He did not shrink from these veiled threats, or the promise of one of her tantrums – he merely remained composed and contemplated his next move, setting out the conversation ahead of him on a metaphorical chess board, with all the pieces appropriately arranged, so that he could decide whether to take her reckless pawn with his knight or block it with one of his own.

In the end, he opted for the latter, which was perhaps the wisest solution, and did not speak at all. He did, however, give his Queen a clear indication that he wasn’t backing down and looked at her with what could only be called silent self-possession.

Elizabeth glared at him in return until she seemed to feel that they had arrived at something of a civil stand-off, and so, in an attempt to disperse with such unpleasantness, turned back to Walsingham with a little laugh, and said, “Oh, how serious you are, Sir Francis! Come, enough of this...” And she extended her hand toward him, expecting him to bow and kiss her ring in mannerly capitulation.

But Walsingham wasn’t in the mood to be merry, and did nothing of the sort. “Someone on the council has to be serious, Your Highness,” he retorted, “Especially when those who should be engaged in a similar state of seriousness deign to engage themselves elsewhere with frivolity, humour and impertinence.”

Elizabeth’s face went rigid, her eyes blazing at him, but Walsingham did not flinch. He was not afraid of her fury, but he braced himself to be slapped, or even to have her slipper thrown at him, which had occurred on one occasion before, since her expression promised swift retribution; but in the end, she did nothing. She simply glared, fists clenched, and whole body tense, shaking, ready to explode with a wrath she had inherited from both her royal father and infamous mother. “Oh how close to the edge you wander,

Sir Francis,” she growled, her lips remaining so taut that her words were barely comprehensible.

“Aye, Madam,” he quickly replied, not missing a beat. “But will you push me over, or pull me back to safety?”

Elizabeth’s eyes narrowed and Walsingham knew that she was again wondering at his courage and foolishness. He was also aware that trifling with princes was not a crime many received the privilege of living long, healthy lives from.

“How dare you, sir?” she asked.

Sir Francis smiled, wrong-footing her. “Because it is my duty to protect Your Majesty,” he said softly.

“Against all things?” she artfully countered, not for the first time.

His smile lingered, dazzling as ever, as were his eyes. “Yes, Madam,” he said, and bowed his head in a well-accepted defeat, pleased with the results of his sly manipulation.

As he predicted, this show of acquiescence immediately brought Elizabeth down from the pinnacle of her rage, and she was soon back in the realm of reason, where she often dwelled most happily. She heaved a deep sigh and turned away from him, pacing about the chamber as if she were thoroughly exhausted and exasperated by their dispute.

“It is no use, Sir Francis,” she eventually whispered, stood staring out over the grounds from the far window. “I cannot stop thinking about it.”

The statement, if overhead, would have set tongues wagging, though the subject to which she referred could be one of a thousand things.

“Thinking about it, madam?” Walsingham enquired, though he in fact already knew what the issue was.

A sad, wistful smile broke forth across the Queen’s lips and, running her finger tips over the window sill, she sighed and slowly turned back to face him. There was something like envy in her eyes, a gloomy envy, as if she wished she could be as composed as he was about what was surreptitiously happening between them. “I need to talk to you,” she confessed, but so quietly that Sir Francis had to listen carefully to hear her words.

His face remained impassive, as if it meant nothing. But it of course meant everything.

Some might ask why she needed to talk with him elsewhere, at another time, when she was talking to him quite happily right now, but these walls had ears; and for what she wished to discuss with him, other times and places might prove far more proficient for the enterprise...

“At any particular hour, my Queen?” he asked in turn.

She nodded, telling him that any time was fine, but having to turn her eyes down in shame at the same moment, as if this was a betrayal in some way or another.

Sir Francis stood there for a while longer before, with a deep bow, he excused himself from her room, and left her to the company of her ladies once again.



*“Meet me after dark again and I’ll hold you
I want nothing more than to see you there
And maybe tonight, we’ll fly so far away
We’ll be lost before the dawn*

*If only night can hold you where I can see you, my love
Then let me never ever wake again
And maybe tonight, we’ll fly so far away
We’ll be lost before the dawn*

*Somehow I know that we can’t wake again from this dream
it’s not real, but it’s ours*

*Maybe tonight, we’ll fly so far away
We’ll be lost before the dawn”*

--Evanescence, “Before the Dawn”



Part III

Elizabeth had been given no answer as to when her enigmatic spider would seek her out, though she realised there were very few moments he could actually look to speak with her in both confidence and safety. She thus knew that he must come at a time when he could avoid her ladies, as well as the guards, the courtiers, and every other cat, rat, mouse and dog that lived in and frequented these wretched halls.

She didn't sleep that night once her ladies had left her in peace, and her wide eyes sought out the glossy orb of the moon in the ensuing hours as that heavenly body made her journey across the sky, sending her white rays sneaking through the gaps in the bed curtains and swimming over the coverlets.

As the hours drew on, Elizabeth listened carefully to the sounds of the palace, her ears straining to the point that, through the silence, she quite imagined that she could hear things, her mind playing tricks on her and fabricating echoes to fill the nothingness.

What was the hour, she pondered at length? Two o' clock? Three? She knew not, and she didn't quite know why she felt the need to stay awake, either. Walsingham had said nothing to indicate that he might come to her this night, at such an uncivilised hour, after all...

And yet, she knew that he had to. There was no other time. He would come tonight.

She must have begun to drift off to sleep for, all of a sudden, she stirred from a half-slumber and jumped in fright as her eyes set upon her Moor! He was sat by her side on the thick quilt, his crystal eyes boring into hers through the darkness, and his form outlined by the white moonlight. He seemed to still be dressed in black, but without the full formality of his usual wardrobe, attired more like an assassin than an advisor; which didn't settle Elizabeth in the slightest.

"Why did you wish to see me, Your Highness?" he asked quietly.

He had spoken softly so that no one but she had a hope of hearing, yet it had been in such a manner that Elizabeth could have laughed. It was as if they were fully dressed in the council chamber and nothing was amiss!

“Oh, Sir Francis, you puzzle me so!” she murmured, stifling a chuckle by raising a bare wrist to her lips to halt her merriment in its tracks. “You speak to me as you would do during the light of day.”

She detected one of his characteristic little smiles in return, though it was but fleeting. It was of course most dangerous for them both to be here together, alone in her bedchamber, though the consequences, if they were caught, would be far worse for him, she had no doubt. Elizabeth thus took a cautionary look to the side before turning back to him, just to make sure that all was quiet and still.

And then she just stared at him, tongue-tied. How to now begin...?

“My Lady...?” Sir Francis pushed on, seeking to get promptly to the issue at hand.

She sighed and sat up so that she was on the same level as he was, and then set her sheets round her waist before looking him in the eyes. She half expected his gaze to wander, for his male eyes to seek out her thinly covered bosom, to look at her properly in her loose chemise, which so contrasted to the strict, formal dress that she paraded in throughout the day; but he did not. He was too well trained, too disciplined and strong for that. (He had also had opportunity for that before, of course, when he had hidden in the dark corners of her chamber, before choosing to reveal himself and bestow upon her that fateful little kiss...)

“Sir Francis,” she said at last, now all seriousness. “I cannot forget it...”

Walsingham blinked and leant his head to the side a little, but he said nothing in return. Elizabeth was certain beyond doubt that he knew exactly what she was talking about, and yet it irked her that he was able to keep any signs of this veiled. He was so proficient in playing the part of a man that revealed nothing, his ignorance proving so convincing, that she found herself beginning to wonder whether or not her memories of the moment were

in fact real, or if the whole scene had been manufactured in her head. But she knew it had all been true...

“Do not look at me with such sincere unawareness, I entreat you,” she begged at length, “You make me wish to doubt myself.”

Walsingham shifted, and Elizabeth suddenly realised how casual his posture was, how relaxed he almost seemed, as if this were but one of the few instances that, completely out of the sight of others, this man came alive. She also brooded over whether this was how he had been with Mary of Guise, for he was attractive like this, and it would have been too easy to want to fall into his net.

“I apologise, Madam,” Sir Francis replied, his voice as mesmerising as ever. “I am careful to keep any memories which could do my person harm locked away in the back of my mind.”

Elizabeth looked upon him with envy as she replied, “I wish I had the same faculty, but it seems to be far out of my reach.”

Sir Francis leant towards her quickly, surprising the young Queen, and Elizabeth felt her breath catch in her throat, her heart palpitating rapidly; it was as if she were again a young girl with a silly crush...

“I beg you to try harder, Madam,” the spymaster implored, “for you are proficient at the art of suppression, but the slightest vacillation to anyone other than myself could, I fear, do you great harm.”

She frowned at him. “You think so?”

“I cannot be certain. But it is better to be too cautious, is it not?”

She nodded slowly, Sir Francis proving to as ever be both her advisor and guide. She secretly wished he could be more... and subsequently chastised herself for the thought.

Suddenly, she noticed that his eyes were darting about the chamber, his head held high yet motionless, as though he was listening for a noise which could indicate trouble was at hand, and implicate them both. Elizabeth consequently felt her heart race, but this time it was in fear – had her spymaster heard someone coming?

“What is it?” she asked, striving to hear something in the silence, and wondered when she could hear nothing if his capacity for hearing was somehow beyond her own.

Walsingham said not a word, almost seeming not to have heard her, until he at last turned his head back in her direction and smiled. “No, nothing,” he murmured. “A mouse, I dare say.”

Elizabeth beamed, relieved despite herself. “Ah, a small eavesdropper off to tell the cats of this treachery.”

Sir Francis looked for a moment confused, and gazed upon her strangely. “Treachery, Your Highness?”

“Yes,” she replied, “I suppose if a guard broke into this room now, what would he think of your being here?”

She was surprised when he made a small chuckle. He sat back, one hand on the bed to support his weight, the other resting on his thigh. “Ah, well they would think I am but another suitor of Her Majesty’s heart, seeking a romantic liaison with her under cover of night.”

Elizabeth flushed. She couldn’t help it. “Sir Francis, you do speak with such boldness on occasion.”

“I do, Madam, but it is the truth. I suppose lustful advances might be treachery in the eyes of some, but not of the kind that, I pray, would require my beheading, or burning?” He raised a brow, as if to ask, playfully, if this might be the case.

Again, Elizabeth was reduced to a smile. “Of course not,” she sighed, “I doubt that the hawks who sit on my council would suspect you of being capable of such advances. There is more chance that they would cast you off as an assassin rather than a lover. Look at your attire, sir! All darkness and gloom, and fit for a potential killer.”

“Nay, Madam,” he was quick to respond, “simply fit for a killer. My potential has already been proven in the matter.”

Elizabeth felt her stomach drop and her body flood with coldness, for he was right – he *was* a murderer; and well she knew it. “Of course,” she murmured solemnly. “It is my error.”

She could tell that he had detected her unease for he looked set to get up and leave. “If Your Majesty would prefer me to attend upon her at some other time...?”

“No!” she replied a tad too loudly, leaving them both paused with baited breath and listening for movement in the antechamber or adjacent rooms. Fortunately, there was none. They had not been heard.

“No,” Elizabeth at last breathed, her tone much more gentle. “I shall speak with you on the matter now, for it is the only truly safe time.”

Sir Francis made a wry smirk, dispelling the discomfiture of the previous moment as quickly as it had come. “Ah, but we are never truly safe, Your Highness.”

And well Elizabeth knew it.

“But we are safer now from intrusion and interruption than at any other instance, are we not?” she posed.

“Yes and no,” was her spymaster’s enigmatic response.

She smiled another time, but was concerned by her increasing feelings of affection for this man. She also felt that it was because of these tangled emotions that she had not yet got to the point in this exchange. She feared that she was presenting herself very ineffectively, making herself out to be as naïve and silly a girl as she had been when this magnificent man had first taken her under his wing. Perhaps she hadn’t learned so much since then, after all?

“Sir Francis, I am plagued by unwanted feelings and sensations!” she said quickly, endeavouring to delve into the matter as swiftly and bluntly as possible. “I am most ill at ease and I cannot forget what has now passed between us.” She gave him an earnest look. “You know to what I refer?”

His features did not budge, yet still he said, “Yes, Madam.”

She sighed, exasperated by his infernal detachment, and was half tempted to shake him vigorously until he reacted as she wished. “Sir Francis, *please*, show me some humanity!”

“I cannot, Madam. I fear it is too dangerous at present.”

She stared at him again, gaping with disbelief. “Dangerous? For whom? You or I?”

“Us both.”

Elizabeth could not answer, yet the look on his face made her wonder what he implied. It was he who had originally opened this proverbial can of worms, yet he now refused to delve any further into it. Did he think it safer to shut the lid and never look upon it again? This begged the question of why he had thus committed the act to begin with. Why did he show such reticence now when he had shown such assurance giving her the kiss? Was it possible that he was as shaken by his muddled emotions as she...?

“And this is all you will say on the matter?” she asked quietly.

His face hardly moved and yet the eyes regarded her more gravely than before and she felt a tremor run down her spine as she was once more acutely aware of the foul deeds those eyes and witnessed, most caused by the man’s own hands.

“What would you have me do? Or say?” he replied, with a little more gravity. “I told you it was a gift, that it could be nothing more. That it would be dangerous.”

“But I cannot forget it, or the feelings it has roused within me!” she rallied, before she realised how close she was leant towards him, and how low the gaping neck of her nightgown seemed to have fallen. She quickly sat back and recomposed herself, watching him all the time like the fawn watches the hunter, as if she suspected her Moor might do something unpredictable.

He was disinclined to do anything other than sit there and talk to her, though, and finally revealed some evidence of his humanity when he asked, “And what is it that you feel, Your Majesty, if I may be so bold...?”

Elizabeth wasn’t sure what was going through Walsingham’s head, nor was she sure she wanted to know, but she half hoped that it was the same kind of ravaged uncertainty that had beleaguered her for the days and hours since their kiss. “I feel drawn to you,” she confessed. “Like you have given me the taste of the forbidden fruit to which it is inevitable I should crave more. I feel...”

“Lust,” he stated plainly.

It wasn't said unkindly, but Elizabeth felt put out by it all the same. “And you don't?” she challenged.

His eyes flashed onto her. “Do you not comprehend the dangers?” he circumvented.

She slowly nodded. “Of course. I am not unintelligent, and you know better than most the sins I once committed with dear Robert.”

He brought a knee up onto the bed and leant on it. “Yes, and I did not – and *do* not – judge you for it. We all have the right to personal pleasures, should we so wish.”

She felt a blush creep up her neck again, amazed by the candour with which he treated such subjects, despite the rumours she had heard of his sexual deviance during the course of his duty.

“And so we come to the issue,” she said plainly. “Was your gift a pleasure for you, or for me? Or for us both?”

“It was a gift. Nothing more.”

“Nothing more? Its repercussions are still with me, sir! How dare you make such presumptions?”

“My Lady,” he said plainly, giving her a mirthless grin. “I am not comfortable with the direction this conversation is taking. I refuse to do anything which might further put your honour at risk.”

“What honour, sir? You know I have little left.”

He set his jaw, feeling his control slipping. “The Virgin Queen may be but a falsehood, a metaphor,” he stressed. “But I would *not* wish to make you a whore.”

But it took much to douse the fire of a Tudor’s tongue. “Though you seem content to make yourself a whoremonger,” she retorted.

An astute jibe! Walsingham’s blue eyes flashed at her; “Aye, Madam,” he swiftly parried, “but not for my pleasure. For my country.”

“And for your Queen?”

The question was baited, he knew it, could see where this was going, but knew not now how to stop. “Yes, for my Queen.”

Her smile was that of a temptress, a she-devil; it was confirmation that she was truly her mother’s daughter and that, had she been in the same position as Anne Boleyn, she might have been just as efficient at drawing men into her web. “I have heard it on good authority,” she teased, “that Mary of Guise died happy.”

Walsingham clenched his fists involuntarily and could feel his teeth gritting against one another. Why was this happening to him? This wasn’t right. She was provoking him, he knew it, yet he was for some reason happy to oblige her and follow her trail.

Well, he could play with fire, too.

“And what else did you hear?” he goaded in return, throwing her a shamelessly come-hither grin.

And the young Queen responded to him, leaning towards him and supporting her weight on her hands whilst her face hovered but a short distance from his. “I heard she was

found with a smile on her face,” she whispered through curled lips, “And a glow still in her eyes.”

“Aye,” Walsingham ground out throatily in return. “She was a happy woman when she died. What more could a Queen Regent have asked for?”

Elizabeth cocked a brow, “Indeed,” she countered, “What more could she have asked for?”

She leant back from him a little then, and Francis wasn’t sure whether or not the movement was voluntary; but either way, it still enticed him to lean toward her in return, a predator being lured by his prey. Or was it vice versa? It was hard to tell who was leading this dance.

He gave Elizabeth a grin, but it was laced with ambiguity, and neither he nor the Queen, he ventured, knew quite what was brewing in his mind. It was a foggy place at present, confused, yet full of restless energy that could be unleashed should only the right leverage be applied.

He reached out, flexed his dextrous fingers and ran them lightly over the skin of her arm. He felt her tremble, sensed her uncertainty, and yet she had put him up to this. He suddenly had a savage desire to put her back in her place. Something had shifted in the balance of their relationship, and the atmosphere between them felt unnaturally disconcerting.

“Did you know,” Walsingham said in an unerringly conversational manner, throwing his young protégée off, “that Mary of Guise named her first son Francis?”

“Did she?” Elizabeth replied. “How quaint. I presume you were not the boy’s true father?”

Walsingham's lips drew back into another grin, his teeth exposed through parted lips, followed by a chuckle which didn't quite leave his throat. Her comment had been intended to sting, he was sure, yet he only responded with a laugh which was neither wholly bitter nor very amused. "No, I was not. He was conceived and born in France."

Elizabeth's wits were still quick. "Where you have been living, sir," she shot back.

His eyes locked on hers. "But not at the time. Alas, I was but a boy."

For some reason, this notion – the thought of her Moor as a child – seemed to distract Elizabeth, and she faltered, perhaps trying to imagine what the youthful Walsingham had looked like. When the notion finally passed, the Queen, having come to the conclusion that the mature man before her was far better now than he had been in his raw state, asked, "So Mary was your senior?"

Walsingham's grin remained. "Aye, Madam."

The Queen challenged him with her eyes next. "You like older women, then, do you?"

He chuckled once more, but the laugh was dark and sordid this time; it was meant to get beneath Elizabeth's inexperience and touch the sensitive nerves below. And it succeeded, for she vacillated, the confident smile leaving her face as reality sunk in, and she remembered with whom she was playing games. Her eyes looked the man up and down, and it hit her, as though for the first time, that he was very dangerous. She had always known it, of course, yet it was as if, having taunted him into life, having peeled back the shell to look at aspects of the creature beneath, she only now truly understood the gravity of the situation. Their being discovered by palace staff all of a sudden was not such a frightening prospect; perhaps the man looming before her was the true thing to be frightened of?

“I’ll have women or men,” Francis rattled on, deliberately seeking to unhinge her, “Young or old. It matters not. It is but a means to an end. It is just business.”

Elizabeth swallowed, heavily – she could not prevent it – and watched as her spymaster’s eyes closely followed the movement of her throat; she almost expected him to seize her neck and bite hard into her porcelain skin, breaking the sensitive flesh...

She closed her eyes, casting the notion aside, but feeling herself shake nevertheless.

“So you will plunder their bodies?” she continued, trying to regain some form of dominance in this match, “You will take Queen Regents and meagre boys to your bed, but not... but not...”

She opened her eyes again but fell silent under the intensity of his gaze, for she had never seen him look like that before; his cold eyes were so stony and intense, and his expression hovered disturbingly between the extremes of wantonness and stability.

“It is a means to an end,” he repeated rigidly, before he then leant even closer to her, holding his head slightly higher than hers so that he could look down into her eyes and breathe over her face. “And what end, pray tell, would I have to achieve through bedding you?”

Elizabeth held his stare. He was frightening, but she was a Queen; she could stand up to this!

And yet here, alone in her bedchamber, she wasn’t really a Queen at all. She was but a woman, and an infinitely less experienced one in the games that Sir Francis played. Here he held the advantage, he held the power, and, God help her, she liked it. To not have to take charge for once, to not have that responsibility... it was, ironically, almost liberating.

Thus, fuelled by this invigorating sense of freedom, which was not really freedom at all, she angled her chin up toward him and replied breathlessly, “Oh, Francis, have you no imagination...?”

Elizabeth saw it, the flash of desire in his eyes, combined with the shock at such a riposte! It made her smile because, in that tiny instant, she knew that he wanted her. It was a strange feeling to know this, yet it confirmed that perhaps she was not a silly young woman with a mere crush after all, and that perhaps she was actually attractive for herself, and not merely because she was a Queen. Possibly the greatest revelation of all, though, was that, despite Walsingham being a man who had all but desensitised himself to sex and desire through his own selfless missions as an assassin and seducer, it was *she* who had been the one to rekindle the fire in his heart. It was almost a mark of pride.

“What is it that I lack, my Moor?” she then challenged him as his tense silence lingered. “What do your regents and youths have that I do not?”

Sir Francis’ chest heaved as he took a deep breath before he finally said, in a tone which was surprisingly close to his normal, measured one, “What you lack, Madam, is a necessity to be killed.”

He was still on edge – Elizabeth could tell by the way his pupils were constricted, and by how rigid his body was as he held himself there, inclined towards her – and she smiled at him, breathing lightly over his face, before she murmured, “Perhaps it would not be such a bad thing to be killed by you.”

Walsingham felt his eyes widen in the fraction of a second that followed, but, as he squeezed them shut, he was unwittingly sent reeling back into the memories of his audience with Mary of Guise. He recalled that lady’s sharp eyes, her false smile, her honey-coated words... they all flashed through his mind, as if they were all somehow relevant to this moment.

That French woman had mistrusted him as much as he had her, and they had both thought they could win the insidious battle that lay ahead. Oh, how he recalled her glowing face, so confident about being victorious, thinking that she could outwit England's infamous spymaster! She, like so many others, had been too short-sighted and too conceited for her own good.

He remembered the evening they had supped together, the way her eyes had studied him and pondered secretly over whether he was worth the trouble, worth taking to bed. And so he had used the smile, and talked the talk, and watched her feminine fingers slide up and down her table knife as she anticipated stroking a significant part of his body in the same manner. Yes, she had thought him worth the risk; she had been happy to have him in her bed for a night, before she did away with him in the morn. It would have been a shame to waste his talents, after all.

But there had never been another dawn for Mary of Guise. Walsingham had certainly let her have her way with him that night, let her pleasure him as he had pleased her, and they had each pushed the other to further heights of lust, making love like savage animals because, deep down, they had both known it was all false; the Queen Regent's bedchamber had simply been another form of battlefield, with England once more pitting her wits against Scotland. Mary simply hadn't counted on England's champion being one so inherently disciplined that he could do away with her before she'd even come down from the heights of her orgasm...

Francis opened his eyes abruptly at the thought, whilst the image of the smile he had left upon Mary's face, even in death, remained imprinted on his mind's eyes. He had killed a Queen Regent. It had not been difficult. And now he had a genuine Queen at his mercy, a young, brash woman who was determined to pull his every lever, and to lock her proverbial horns with his in a heated stand-off... but to what ends?

Because she wants you.

The answer came unbidden to Walsingham's mind, but was it correct? Or was it the answer he wanted to hear? He felt his heart race, his respiratory system working at double the pace, his body fuelling itself with a heated passion that he had not felt for any person for many years; and, again, images of Mary, naked beneath him, came back to him; the way she arched her head back, her mouth open as she had cried out his name just before he had taken her life...

The image then clashed with the present, and Elizabeth's face became superimposed upon the Scottish regent's. Walsingham's anger and restraint colliding within his head like clouds in a thunderstorm, and he heard himself growl deeply, could feel his desire coiling round in the pit of his stomach and bringing a rising hardness into his crotch.

'Perhaps it would not be such a bad thing to be killed by you' she had said. Well, she had stoked the fire. If she wanted to be killed, then so be it.



"Subtextually I think [Walsingham's] deeply in love with the Queen" -
Geoffrey Rush in an Italian interview (on "Junkets" and/or "Coming Soon
Television"), October 2007



Part IV

Elizabeth knew she should not have been surprised by the alacrity of Walsingham's response, and yet she could not prevent herself from being startled as his hands flew at her like talons and grasped her tightly around her arms. He then drove her backwards and pinned her down helplessly on the bed. She opened her mouth to cry out, but before even a small noise could escape her mouth, Walsingham's lips came crashing down on hers with a bruising force and he sucked the very air from her lungs.

Oh, how he groaned, the vibration resounding in his throat whilst he kissed her, and he then pressed himself over her body, angling his hips deep into the juncture of her thighs.

No force could stop Elizabeth this time from rapidly breaking his aggressive kiss and angling her head back to cry out – whether in panic or ecstasy, she could hardly tell – but no sooner had she made the sound than she felt a sharp nip at her earlobe. She recoiled, before swinging a hand instinctively at the perpetrator – Walsingham.

He caught her hand before it even touched his face, which was quite remarkable considering the fact his eyes had never left hers. "You must not utter a sound, madam..." he said in a dark, measured tone, "lest you wish to bring the whole household down upon us."

Elizabeth watched him again, wide-eyed, breathing heavily, her mind swinging between toppling in fear or rising in desire; there was a flicker of something in her Moor's eyes again, an unnerving sign of volatility, and she wondered how best to play her cards.

Recognising her irresolution, Sir Francis allowed a steady, unsettling smile to spread across his features and he reinforced the precariousness of the situation by gently moving his hips against hers.

Elizabeth bit back her response this time, but felt her body shudder nevertheless, and inadvertently, she pushed her hips back up to meet his, striving instinctually to join with him.

He quietly laughed and relaxed his hold on her arms, moving one hand up to her face, where he stroked the pale skin of her cheek before sliding a thumb over her mouth. He traced the contours of her lips and watched how, with the slightest pressure, he could drive the blood from beneath her skin and temporarily alter the tincture of her complexion.

“Not a single gasp, a single cry, must escape your mouth,” he whispered in a quiet, husky tone, pressing his thumb down harder so that it slipped through the cleft of her lips and rubbed against her teeth. He grinned wickedly as she then opened her mouth and bit down on his nail, this small gesture sensual enough to draw another moan from his person and propel more blood to his crotch. He started to then slide his thumb into her mouth before drawing it out a little, repeating the action over and over and coercing her lips, tongue and teeth into an erotic dance with him; he was mesmerised by her, intoxicated, and amazed. It seemed that, even in a princess, these things were written into the primal fabric of one's being, ready to rise to the surface at a moment's notice. She was a woman like any other, and how it pained him to have to know that she would soon be forced to forgo that.

She bit down rather too hard on his thumb then and he hissed, striking out in swift retaliation by plunging his head beneath the curve of her jaw and biting lightly into her neck.

Elizabeth gasped another time, wishing so desperately to bawl her delight out into the rafters, but he clamped his hand over her mouth before she even had a chance. She had no time to think of how else to exert her pleasure, though, and thus ended up biting hard into his flesh.

Walsingham barked out, wrenching his hand from the Queen's mouth before fixing her with a challenging glare. The look she gave him in return made him feel twice as humiliated by his lapse, though, for her eyes were overflowing with pride and satisfaction – he had made a noise where she hadn't! She was again on top, the proverbial Queen even now.

His body tensed. This was not how it should be...

With a sinister growl, he tore his doublet from his body, pulled his shirt over his head, and then launched himself upon Elizabeth, grinding his hips over hers, so possessed by a wild state that it would have been no surprise for her to have thrown him off.

And yet, she didn't, because curiosity and yearning overrode the fear.

“Let me remind you, *Elizabeth*,” he hissed, “that you are no Queen here!”

He saw the flicker of tenacity in her eyes, her spirit beginning to rally itself, and she writhed and struggled beneath him. He was too strong, though, and her efforts came to nothing. She then had to ponder over her next course of action: should she scream and implicate them both, or simply resign herself to trust him?

She ultimately chose the latter, Sir Francis recognising the signs of her ultimate surrender into his power, and he lowered his head again to her throat, kissing her at the point where her pulse throbbed rapidly. Oh, how she quaked...

“*Here*, in the bedchamber, madam,” he murmured silkily, “you are a woman.” His fingers began to draw circles on her cheek, before skittering down her neck and finally coming to rest across the top of her chest. “And right now, you are a woman with a man in her bedchamber, and the *bedchamber*, madam” -here he pressed his arousal against her- “is the one place where you cannot help but submit to a man, for he must invade your body and your person. As a Virgin Queen and female ruler, you cannot allow this to happen – you must be superior, and supreme.”

He had chosen his words carefully, aiming to rouse a strong reaction in her for his intentional bigotry, and when she indeed opened her mouth to protest, he simply brought his lips down roughly over hers and stopped her in her tracks. He pushed his tongue through her teeth and tried to draw hers out to join his, his lips sliding over hers, and wiry beard creating an interesting friction with the smooth flesh of her mouth.

Elizabeth didn't care that he meant to drown out her voice, nor suddenly did it seem important to argue – she simply pulled him closer and drank her fill of him, his animalistic aggression infecting her system and reigniting a flame in her chest which consumed her person.

Whilst she took full advantage of him, Francis began to undo the string which bound the top of her nightgown, his expert fingers completing the task with no difficulty. She soon drew back to watch him, her breast heaving in anticipation, and Walsingham found himself wondering suddenly how Dudley had treated her in this situation.

This small notion sent a jolt of unfamiliar envy darting through his veins, for he knew that if he were to leave this room satisfied that he had done his duty, he would have to eradicate every last trace of Dudley-the-lover from Elizabeth's mind; that man was all

that Elizabeth would be able to compare him to, and he was determined not to be bested...

He met her eyes as he dropped the string of her gown, and the neck of it widened, revealing a hint of the porcelain perfection of her chest to him. From what he could see, she was beautiful, yet he could perceive from her body language, even if her face strained not to show it, that she was not wholly confident about baring her naked skin to him. Her eyes were shining with hesitancy, for, above other things, she knew how vastly his experience in the bedchamber outweighed her own; he had had a wealth of lovers, each of which he might weigh her up against, after all, and it would not do for a Queen to come out at the bottom of the pile...

Walsingham chuckled at these thoughts – he jealous of her one lover, she fearing ill comparison with the myriads of his – and extended a hand toward her, tilting her chin up into the air.

“Raise your head, madam, and be proud,” he whispered, “for you are beautiful.”

She gave him a wry look as if he were only saying such to please her, and yet she knew him better than that; he wouldn't coat his words in sugar and force her to swallow them. He was brutally honest, and if he said she was beautiful, she ought then to believe him.

“Thank you,” she murmured.

He threw her a charming grin for good measure, and Elizabeth had to look away. That mere glance had caused a flutter of butterflies to come alive in her stomach, and she was, for some reason, overwhelmingly abashed by this. She had not the time to dwell on the matter, though, for Sir Francis suddenly slid his fingers beneath the open hem of her gown and ran them over the curve of one of her breasts, before taking it in his hand and squeezing it.

She closed her eyes and felt a sigh strive to rise from her lips – but no, she could not make a sound! So she clamped her jaw tightly shut and suppressed it, which brought out a proud albeit mischievous grin on Sir Francis' face. Here was a tutor most proud of his apt pupil!

But it would seem that Walsingham meant to push her to the limit, for he then swiftly reached for one of her hands and sucked each finger into his mouth in turn, conjuring another hearty response from the young woman. She lifted her hips toward his another time, and he pressed against her in return, beginning to experiment moving with her, and revelling in the thrill of it.

“You appear to know the rhythm of this dance already,” he noted with a devilish snicker, “though I wager your Robert didn't teach you the steps particularly well.”

The Queen's eyes flared at this insult – oh, couldn't she see he was manipulating her again? – so in punishment he simply thrust harder against her, knowing that she would not be able to help but make a noise this time.

And, true enough, the poor woman groaned out loud. She would be punished accordingly...

Walsingham knew he should have been ashamed of his cruelty, but shame was a luxury he could not always afford, and before Elizabeth could even comprehend her lapse, he had jumped onto his feet, hauled her up with him, and then spun her around so that she was stood with her back facing him. And then, in one sharp movement, he tore her gown completely from her body!

Elizabeth gasped as she heard – and felt – the short, sharp rip of her chemise as her spymaster wrenched it from her form, leaving her stood naked in the void. The severe prick of the cold atmosphere quickly settled around her and she sought quickly to cover her bare flesh with her hands, for both privacy and warmth – but Walsingham reached

round and grasped her wrists before she had chance, preventing her from shielding herself.

“Are you ashamed of your person?” he muttered into her ear as he drew her back against his body, her shoulders resting against his bare chest, and her buttocks just below his crotch.

She turned her head away from him, feeling his breath trickling down the side of her neck, and not now sure she liked it. “No...” she said shortly.

He laughed and slowly turned her back round to face him. “Good, for you have no reason to be.”

The Queen was regarding him – not for the first time – like a young animal might regard a wolf, watching this carnivore ogle her and delay going in for the kill. Walsingham was thoroughly capricious, a protective lover one minute, a possessed brute the next, and she naturally beheld him with suspicion, with fear, and even with an inkling of resentment; and yet, still, there was curiosity there, as well as admiration and hope. Deep down she knew that he did not plan to harm her.

As she brooded on this, she took the opportunity to examine her spymaster more closely, tracing the angular lines of his shoulders, the smooth and relatively hairless expanse of his chest, and of course the rise in his breeches. He was very different to Robert, older and more mature, and much thinner than his clothes made him out to be, though surprisingly strong, despite his slight frame. It was in his eyes that lay the greatest of lures; within those penetrating orbs she could see a world of mystery and intrigue, of deception and treachery, and of intelligence and cunning. It was this more than anything else that made him thoroughly attractive, even though she would be the first to confess that, physically, he was no god...

But Elizabeth did not want a god in her bed – she wanted a man.

Walsingham, in the meantime, studied her in return, scanning her every curve and dimple, and delighting in the way the moonlight played against her fine skin. He particularly loved the way she stood there, slightly apprehensive, with one knee resting against the other, her hands hovering uncertainly about her person, as if unsure whether to cover her nakedness or simply let him gaze upon her freely. He paused at the harsh, short cut of her hair again, though, for it stood out more obviously than everything else, and he couldn't prevent himself from reaching a hand out to pat the cropped mess.

“Such beauty wasted...” he muttered.

Her eyes flashed at him. “On your advice.”

His blue gaze locked with hers, and he saw her resolution building, the power behind her gaze challenging him with an intensity so typical of her family line. He didn't reprimand her for speaking this time – he simply held her eyes with his, waiting to see if her look would soften. But it did not; she was growing cold and hard, like stone.

And yet he saw the slight movement of her pupils, watched how her eyes could not help but draw back to feast on his person. It was there that he saw the reflection of her inexperience, and the need to be given as much of him as she could have, for hereafter she would absolve from ever having a man again and indeed become as cold as the rocks in the palace walls. It was his duty to see to it that, even if she wasn't sure she wanted what he offered, he gave it to her anyway, for this would be the last time she submitted to a man.

Following this train of thought, Walsingham slowly stooped to her level and kissed her again, but tenderly, with none of the fervour he had shown before.

Elizabeth was reticent at first, perhaps still angry and shocked at his behaviour thus far (particularly as regarded the torn nightgown now discarded at her feet), but all these

gripes were soon soaked up by the feelings which he managed to ignite so strongly within her with the basic movement of his lips. Her hands soon sought his shoulders as she tried to raise herself up to his level, fingers clutching on to the firm muscle beneath his skin.

He then stepped as close to her as he could get and took one of her hands from his shoulder and caressed it in his hand, rubbing and stroking her skin, and running his long fingers between and around each of hers, before slowly guiding her hand lower and lower until he could place it over the protuberance of his erection.

She balked a little at this, struggling not to look down, knowing full well that he was testing her another time. She thus stared hard into his eyes and tried to discern his intent from there.

Walsingham held her gaze and moved her hand against him, guiding her slowly up and down the bulge of his arousal until she began to comprehend and do as he desired. He released her at this point and left her to experiment on him, feeling his body respond to primal instinct and his hips start to move toward her every time she stroked him.

She was sharper than he imagined, for she soon began to push harder against him, pressing the heel of her hand against the tip of his erection, before drawing it back down his shaft. He allowed himself the luxury of a breathless groan; despite her inexperience, she had initiative, and it was an arrant aphrodisiac. All that remained was for him to drop his breeches, and take her...

And yet he knew if he dropped his breeches she would be unsure again. He would not be the first man she had seen naked, but he would surely be the first she had actively pleased.

He thrust again against Elizabeth's hand, harder this time, before grasping her wrist and pulling her hand away from his crotch. Deciding to throw caution to the wind, he quickly undid his breeches and dropped them to the floor, before he pulled her against him so that

he could get a feel for her naked in his arms and lying against his own bare flesh. His erection pressed against her belly now, and a desperate sigh rolled shamelessly from his lips as he embraced her. Elizabeth was young and beautiful, and maybe that formed part of his desire, but that wasn't the whole of it; their affinity, their trust, their friendship, their unquestionable bond... that was what made it all feel so much truer, and so much more correct.

It wasn't correct in the slightest, of course – Walsingham dare not think of the many rules he was breaking – but for tonight, and just tonight, they would be a man and a woman, not a Queen and a spymaster.

Elizabeth's fingers moved to touch him another time, to grasp his hardened shaft and feel his blood-fuelled desire without the barrier of his clothing. He helped her along, placing his hand over hers and encouraging her to close her fingers round his member, before guiding her in how to caress him, slowly moving her hand up and down his length. The bursts of lust this ignited within him were beyond words. To see this woman, this almighty young monarch, naked and vulnerable and caressing his erection was almost too much to bear.

He began to thrust towards her, and he felt her tighten her grip as she learnt the game quickly, and he moved his hands to curl in the short locks of her hair whilst he arched his neck back and raised his head to the heavens, hissing through gritted teeth as he moved with more and more force against her.

He knew she was smiling now, he could sense it; she was proud of this apparent show of power over him, resulting in her sneering, "I thought you said this is where a man dominates a woman, Sir Francis, not where a woman brings a man to his knees."

Something within Walsingham, which had been hanging on precariously by a thread, snapped and the beast stirred within. In a flash, he took her by the arms and drove her up

against a wall with a heavy thud. She yelped, but he ignored her; it would be better if he caused her pain.

“I told you to be quiet!” he snarled under his breath, pressing his nose against hers and regarding her with tight, constricted pupils. He was close to taking her there and then; part of him wanted to do so, to show her, thick and fast, how a man invaded a woman’s core and made her his own. It would certainly give his Queen sure reason to fear this ever happening again.

He kissed her on the neck, nipping at her skin with his teeth, aiming to leave marks on her pale flesh. Let her ladies raise eyebrows and ask questions if they must – this would certainly test their discretion, and he would make sure that those who could not hold their tongues lost the ability to speak thereafter.

He heard Elizabeth gasp and cry as he inflicted these painful bites all across her skin, but every time she did so, he only bit down harder. If she wanted to bring someone in on them, then so be it; they would share the disgrace. She would learn this lesson, if it was the last thing he ever made her do. “Be silent!” he ordered her time and again, continuing to cause her pain until she became mute. And by the time she had forced herself to bite down on her lip and stifle her cries, there were myriads of red marks all over her neck and shoulders...

“Well done,” Walsingham breathed at length, rewarding her efforts by returning her to her bed. He laid her down first on top of the blankets before he stretched out beside her and began to explore her body more thoroughly, trailing fiery kisses over her pert breasts, down her stomach, over her belly button, and down onto her thighs, each warranting lengthy attention.

Elizabeth relaxed a little more at this, and yet still the frenzied side of her spymaster frightened her – without the restraint, he was unpredictable, and she had no idea what to expect from him.

Sir Francis stopped as he finished caressing his Queen's calves and then considered whether or not he wanted to investigate the very core of her womanhood, for he was certain Dudley had never dallied around and thought to give her pleasure just for herself; Lord Robert was the self-centred type of egoist who looked after his own interests, whilst he, Sir Francis Walsingham, had learnt to pleasure others because, in his line of work, it was the easiest way to bring them down.

And for those he truly held in affection, it pleased him to do so.

And so he threw his young Queen a sultry smile and ran his fingers up the inside of her thigh until he reached her womanly centre and then began to stroke her slowly. She reacted as he had hoped, closing her eyes and sighing in pleasure, so he slunk a finger inside of her, knowing she would not be able to help but gasp. To save her the trouble of remaining silent, he quickly slithered up her body and enveloped her mouth in a kiss, swallowing the breath she expelled as he caressed her.

He was gentle at first, merely making light strokes of her desire-wetted innards whilst he lingered at her mouth and indulged himself, getting to know every tiny detail of her soft lips, and rediscovering the wonder of an honest kiss. Soon he opted to become more forceful, though, and pushed a second finger into her core, feeling how her body reacted to him in return, and delighting in it.

When their mouths finally parted and he, at the same moment, withdrew his fingers from her, they both looked at each other with desire-clouded eyes, and Sir Francis felt once more unnerved by the feelings that his Queen was inspiring within him; and not just the bouts of hysterical madness, but the warmth and adoration, too. This was not how it should be, yet how could he stop himself from feeling what his soul wanted to feel?

“I think I'm in love with you.”

He didn't realise he had said the words until it was too late and he was astounded by them; had he really meant to say that? Why hadn't he stopped himself?

He wasn't sure what Elizabeth's face said in response; he thought it might be shock, for Sir Francis Walsingham did not love. He *pretended* to love sometimes, and led people to believe he might have some form of human emotions deep within him somewhere, but he most certainly did not fall in love. He could not allow himself such a luxury.

Whatever she felt, Elizabeth leant slowly up toward him and looked at him carefully, her fingers lifting to stroke the side of his face, tracing the lines of his brow, before slinking into the curls of his hair and caressing them. She then pressed her lips against his and gave him an affection-filled, albeit clumsy, kiss, which Walsingham languidly followed through with, teaching her how best to move her mouth against his, and how to play her tongue with his own. He loved the taste of her, the feel of her, her rawness, her naivety, her fear, her assertiveness... He *did* love her. Maybe he had loved her from the moment he had first set eyes on her, through the red haze of a curtain...?

And maybe Elizabeth felt something deeper than mere desire, too. As she revelled in the glorious sensation of his lips and tongue, engaged in an erotic dance with her own, she felt that there had always been something about Francis Walsingham, something different to the qualities which every other man possessed. It was something palpable, and yet indefinable...

She too remembered the moment she had first laid eyes on him, back at her Coronation Ball, when a chance glance through the thin, scarlet curtain, hanging across the hall, had revealed her Moor to her. It was almost as if there had, even then, been a bond between them, an inexplicable chain of energy which had, at that precise moment, drawn their eyes together.

When her gaze had first connected with his, the whole room, all the noise and bustle of the dance and celebrations, had momentarily faded into insignificance whilst her

attentions had been taken up by this ethereal individual, gliding across the room, arms folded and cold eyes set on her person. Little had she known then that this mysterious stranger would be the one to take her by the hand and guide her through the rocky beginnings of her reign.

Perhaps the moment had only lasted a fraction of a second, but the weight of its significance, in retrospect of what had now come to pass, only caused to unsettle her; she had known nothing about him then, and still knew very little now, even as she held him naked in her arms; but she knew that he would never be a true threat to her, because he loved her, and it was his duty to protect her.

Her eyes were still locked with his when she noticed his pupils harden, and felt his body tense. He then plunged forward and she felt him lodge his erect member inside of her.

Elizabeth closed her eyes and cried out, throwing her head back whilst her hands clutched convulsively at Francis' back. There was no pain from the invasion of her womanhood, only pleasure, but the sensations it caused within her were markedly different to those which Robert had incited. The mere thought of being so intimately joined with her spymaster, his member so full and hard because of her, made her feel overwhelmingly attractive and womanly; and, spurred on by such knowledge, her channel contracted around him.

He made a throaty growl, seeming to almost be overwhelmed by the feelings she was instigating in his person, but managed to hold himself aloft, towering above her like a predator over his prey. He couldn't keep still for long, though, as the primal urge sparked within him, and he began to do as all males do – strive to plant his seed deep within her womb.

The real challenge then presented itself to both of them – and that was how to remain silent when this felt so good? Would it really matter?

Part of Elizabeth didn't want to care. She wanted to forget the need to be secretive and let the rest of the world be damned if they found out. And yet, even now, she knew her Moor wouldn't be pleased if she failed him, for she would ultimately be failing herself – and she had no inclination to do so.

Francis seemed to somewhat sense her concerns, for he leant down and took part of the burden off her shoulders by locking his mouth over hers, swallowing all her groans and gasps in rapid succession whilst he pumped harder and harder into her.

Ironically, though, it was he who next ended up biting down on his own tongue to conceal an euphoric groan. The feeling of his Queen's inner walls contracting about him, whilst she held him firmly within her womanhood, was too much to bear, not because he wasn't used to it, but because a lady whom he truly worshipped was making him feel this way, and he ended up burying his head in the crook of Elizabeth's neck for a moment, needing to collect himself before he lost control too soon.

Elizabeth stroked the back of his head as he took this brief lull, doing her best to conceal another content smirk, for was this not evidence enough that she had as much power over him as he over her? And to have such power was wonderful.

Walsingham soon rose back up on his hands and plunged on, wishing he could immerse himself in this woman forever. He reached back to draw one of her thighs up beside his waist, trying to shift her so that her body was angled in such a way so as to allow him to drive himself deeper inside of her. He seemed to get a result for Elizabeth soon began to writhe in rapture beneath him, struggling desperately once more against making a sound as she tried to aspire to his strict standards.

And how it nearly pushed him over the edge to see her do so! He wanted to call out her name and make love to her raucously and brashly, without fear. But alas, that was a dream; it could never be so.

He quickly reached for her other leg, to bring it up on the other side of his body, but she cottoned on and raised it round his waist without his assistance, locking him in her hold and crossing her ankles behind him as he strove to sink himself deeper and deeper into her core. His breaths were coming thick and fast now, as were hers, and he realised that he could not even remember the last time he had truly made love to a woman – not simply slept with them, but *made love* to them. It must have been many years...

He closed his eyes as he felt his member squeezed within her again; she was a tight fit, he couldn't deny it, perhaps from inexperience more than anything else, yet it was somehow better this way, and he couldn't help but emit a gasp – and then he hissed as he felt a sharp pain on his back. He realised that his Queen was digging her fingernails into his skin, enough to draw blood, and he looked down on her, eyebrow quirking at her bold assault.

In return, she mouthed 'be quiet' to him, and how he grinned at her! Fiery vixen; now who was leading who?

The pain, however, somehow served to spur him on, and soon he couldn't stop himself – he needed release, an end to this insatiable lust, and he could do nought but drive himself more firmly into her flesh as he felt his proverbial coil wind up tighter and tighter, begging to be snapped.

And yet how to keep her silent? How could he bring her to the edge and expect her not to scream out his name? Part of him wanted that, just so that he knew she was well aware of which man it was who had brought her to orgasm; but he could not allow it. He just had to hope that she would think of a solution to this problem, for he was beyond able to help her now.

Elizabeth could also feel that wonderful sensation building up within her, of nearing the peak of ecstasy and waiting for the floodgates to open so that she could be enveloped in the glorious waves of fulfilment. The experience was made perhaps even more satisfying

by the fact she knew full well that she had brought her spymaster to this point; and it was not often that one could boast of having moved Francis Walsingham to anything.

It was perhaps due to this that Elizabeth was determined to see Francis' face when he came. She wanted to look into his eyes and remember what it was she had managed to drive him to. But as she clawed at his back to draw herself up close to him, she lost all sense of restraint; she was hovering over the precipice, close to her breaking point, and she wanted to yell and let herself go! And yet, no, she must not speak... but how to stop it?

There was no time to think, no time to act rationally, so she thus resorted to the only course of action open to her – and bit down hard into Francis' shoulder!

This feral act sent Walsingham over the edge, and, with a bark of pain mixed with pleasure, he spilled himself inside of her, gritting his teeth together as he strained not to speak, his every nerve ending on fire, his love and hunger for this woman beyond articulation. The Queen's orgasm was sparked in turn, and she rode out the waves of it with him, rocking her body against his as he poured himself into her in several heavy thrusts.

At last exhausted, Elizabeth came back down to earth and removed her teeth from Francis' shoulder, just as he, now fully spent, collapsed into her arms. They then just lay there panting and holding on to each other, their bodies brimmed with sweat and their hearts pounding, but their souls at last content.

It was only after this brief respite that proper sensation seemed to return to Sir Francis, and he hissed, now feeling the sharp sting of broken skin on his shoulder. He rose up on his elbows and turned his eyes to gaze upon the damage his Queen had wrought, and saw a circular mark embedded within his flesh, a row of little incisions exacted by her teeth, each of which was now welling with fresh, red blood.

Elizabeth saw it too, and her eyes sought out her Moor's. She hadn't a clue of what to say, and Francis could see that she looked rather horrified by what, in the heat of the moment, she had been possessed to do.

He said nothing at first, but ultimately could do nought but grin. "Well done, madam," he whispered. "You made not a sound."

She smiled back, albeit sheepishly, the tension of the moment shattered. "I had no intention of –"

Francis cut her words short by dipping his head toward hers and giving her a long, lazy kiss, forcing her to lie back and relax. He then parted from her and rolled onto his back, cringing at the pain in his shoulder as fresh air accessed the open wound and made it throb. He could feel a trickle of blood dribble down onto the coverlets below, which meant that he would at least have the sheets to despatch of tonight, if nothing – or rather, no one – else. What a scar it would leave, though! A true lover's mark. He was proud of bearing such a thing, though it would certainly raise awkward questions in the bedchamber in future...

He cast this thought quickly aside; now was not the time for it. "Are you cured now, madam?" he asked his Queen, but in such a way that it made Elizabeth laugh, and he arched a brow at her humour, but couldn't prevent himself from smirking in return; he had no inclination to keep her silent any longer. She was just so beautiful at this moment, her face so alive, her cheeks red in the afterglow of their lovemaking, and her eyes alight with joy. He wished he could have her like this every night, wished they had not been so unfortunate as to have been born in different spheres of life, on different levels of society, destined to never be allowed to be together in anything other than the businesses of Queen and court. There was so much he could teach her, so much she might teach him...

And yet she brought out the devil in him as well; he was quite astonished now by his previous fierceness, unsure as to what it was that had driven him, in several instances, so

far off the edge. The answer was of course simple, and lying next to his person; and yet how could one woman cause so much strife and unbalance in his carefully controlled soul? Why had all his barriers of discipline and restraint dropped so suddenly and with so little resistance on his part?

'Because you are a man who wanted a woman', his conscience sneered. And it was right. How the mighty had fallen...

He couldn't resist leaning over to kiss her again, his lips gliding across her face, pressing lightly over her eyelids, down the bridge of her nose, and lingering at her lips. He then drew away and looked into her eyes, feeling a surge of regret at the fact that he knew he had overstayed his welcome. He was reluctant to go, but he had to leave before it was too late.

"I must leave," he whispered, "I have lingered too long."

Before Elizabeth could protest, he slid quickly off the bed and started to look around for his clothes.

He knew she would follow him, and he felt her arms around his body before he'd even found his shirt. He turned to face her and they were kissing again before he could even think about it; it just felt so right, so natural. Perhaps his Queen was better at playing this game than he had previously thought...?

They broke apart and stood there, unsure of where to take this. Francis felt Elizabeth's hand in his hair another time before she implored, "Please don't go."

He leant his head against hers and swallowed hard, trying to find an excuse to remain; yet he knew it was impossible. "Forgive me, but I can not stay."

But Elizabeth's hands reached up to frame his face, and she stroked his beard, seeking desperately to keep him here. "My father took many mistresses. Why can I not take a lover in turn? Why is it so wrong?"

Walsingham smiled faintly and slid a hand down to her abdomen and laid it there as if in protection. "Because, madam, sooner or later you would bear the fruits of such a union."

She gave him such a glare then that he nearly recoiled. "And what of it?" she snapped. "I might even now carry your child."

The very thought made Francis feel sick with fear – not for himself, but for her and the country. He was certain he could not bear such a burden, to have knowingly sired a bastard on his precious monarch. The guilt and regret would kill him. "I pray I have not done your Majesty such grievous harm."

Her face was proud and self-assured as she then challenged him with, "But would it not be God's will, sir?"

He looked carefully into her eyes, seeing she was trying to trip him up, playing her games with him just as he was wont to do with her. "Perhaps," he resolved, "if there be a God at all."

She gave him a light slap on the shoulder, a short but sharp warning for him to hold his tongue. "Blasphemy, sir!" she said.

He didn't recoil nor rise to argue – it was his opinion and he would not hide it from her. "Indeed, madam. Shall you cut off my head for it?"

She smirked at him, but the gesture still urged caution. Her Moor was at the boundary of her tolerance and he would be best, even after what had transpired, not to step across it.

“It would be such a shame to lose so intelligent and fine a head. Maybe I would cut off something else.”

He smiled brightly. “Ah, your Majesty would do me great injury.”

“Yes. What use would you be to us then?”

“I would have to be content to remain at home, writing letters. I would fight with the pen rather than my sword.”

She arched a brow at his innuendo, and then lightly tickled him under the chin, feeling more affection for him now than ever. “Stay a while longer,” she asked. “It would please me to have you by my side until morn.”

Walsingham sighed, caught between truly wanting to remain and knowing full well how dangerous it would be to tarry. He knew that her experiences with Lord Robert must have always resulted in the man leaving as soon as he had spent himself, eager to be away so that he might not be caught in bed with his monarch. For him, her Moor, to now appear to be acting in the same manner must appear quite shameful. Would it hurt to take a risk, especially if this be the only chance he might ever get to be so intimate with her...?

“Francis,” Elizabeth implored, looking into his eyes. “I’m not asking you. I’m ordering you.”

Well, that was succinct. She was a Queen again, he her humble servant. He looked into her face and, despite the stony resolve, saw that her eyes were filled with both joy and sorrow. He owed her this...

“This can never happen again, Majesty,” he reminded her. “You understand this?”

She nodded, holding his face with her hands and running a hand once more through his curling hair. “Of course.”

He nodded and then turned his lips into one of her palms, kissing her skin. “Then I will stay a while longer, if it is indeed your Majesty’s pleasure.”

“It is,” she smiled.

Walsingham could see that she was a little miserable to see him slowly begin to revert to his traditional mode of servant and spymaster, but still, he was hers for a little longer.

He consequently followed her back to her bed and climbed in by her side, holding her in his arms and letting her cushion herself against his chest. It felt good to be loved so honestly for once, and to have made love out of love. It pained him, however, to know that this would never happen again...

“Virginity carries a high price, my lady,” he murmured to her as he stroked her short hair. “It will be a valuable card for you to play in games with European princes.”

She smiled weakly at that. “I know. You have taught me that already.”

“Ah. Then my use has expired...?”

She laughed quietly. “Oh I’ll always have a use for you, my Moor,” she smiled, leaning upwards and placing a light kiss on the tip of his nose. “You’ll be by my side until you die.”

He smiled. “I’m glad to hear it. Now... sleep.”

She heaved a deep sigh. “Oh, I dare not, for I know you will be gone before the dawn.”

“Yes,” he agreed, “but at least sleep soundly in the knowledge that you have had me throughout the night.”

“And lived to see the morn...?”

He chuckled quietly. “Aye, madam. That, too.”

When Elizabeth next opened her eyes, though, the sun was streaming in through a gap in the curtains and she realised, with a jolt of her heart, that she had fallen asleep. She shot up and looked about herself wildly. Walsingham was no where to be seen.

The next thing she noticed was how tidy the bed was, completely unruffled and showing no signs as to having borne the burden of a copulating couple. Plus the blood she knew Francis had shed on her sheets was gone... how could he possibly have changed them without her knowing? And she was dressed again, in a nightgown practically the same as the one she had lost last night!

Elizabeth peered over the edge of the bed and looked across the floor. There was no sign of the torn gown, or of any of Francis’ clothing. It was quite as if nothing had happened...

She swallowed, her mind half wondering if the whole thing had indeed been fabricated by her imagination. Walsingham had an aptitude for making her doubt herself on occasion, and she quickly needed some confirmation, apart from her own memories, that she had not been dreaming.

Slipping off the mattress, she walked across the cold floor to her mirror, and then stood before it, studying her reflection. Her short hair was a mess, and her face a little pale, perhaps from the shock of such normality greeting her eyes, but otherwise she looked just as she always did.

But wait...

She squinted into the mirror, saw a blemish on the skin at the neck of her gown and pushed the hem down over her shoulder. And there was a mark, a red sore where her Moor and nipped at her! And then there was another next to it and another after that! And as the shock evaporated, she realised she could feel them, too, slight twinges of pain all over her skin.

Despite the discomfort, she beamed, caressing the marks with her fingers as if they were precious little trophies – and in a way they were, living testament to a night which she would not soon forget, and which she knew she could never have again.

“Amantes sunt amentes¹,” she murmured, for once believing every word of it.



¹ “lovers are lunatics”

“I cannot tell you in what manner you can escape out of his snares. If you yield, you give up your religion; if you decline his offers, you inevitably incur the peril of death”

– **William Weston** to **Anthony Babington**, speaking of **Sir Francis Walsingham**, 1586



Part V

Sir Francis Walsingham was not seen so often at court in the months following his secret liaison at Richmond. This was not because he was particularly avoiding the Queen, but because he was absurdly busy. The plots and insidious communications of Mary Stuart’s following continued to plague him and, in some cases, elude him altogether. Meanwhile, plain and simple letters from the laity continued to drop onto his desk, asking him for favours and advice at a time when he really could have done without them.

But he was an honourable soul and every piece of correspondence which fell onto his desk – be it about the actions of the Spanish ambassador in the French court, or a plea from a desperate cobbler who needed counsel on how to settle his debts – was answered to the best of his ability.

Five months passed, six, and Walsingham saw his Queen very little. Even when he did see her, he wore his mask and made no mention or slight hint toward anything that had transpired between them.

Elizabeth, in turn, strove to return the façade, but found it infinitely more difficult; she couldn’t look into his eyes and easily forget the way the desire had flashed in his pupils, or fail to remember the way he had looked naked in her arms. It was perhaps because of

this that Walsingham only came to see her when absolutely necessary; but as her newly appointed secretary of state, he could hardly avoid regular rendezvous with her. And thus the challenge continued unabated, the need for them both to (as Walsingham had said in the bedchamber) remain silent.

There had been at least one obvious amendment in palace life following the incident – and that was in the line-up of Elizabeth’s ladies. Unsurprisingly, some of the Queen’s retinue had not been able to keep their tongues from wagging, having discovered evidence – in the form of the sea of red marks all over her shoulders – that their monarch had taken another lover to bed, but one to which, unlike Lord Robert, they had not been made privy to. Sir Francis had thus had to see to it that their voices were stifled. He hadn’t killed any of them, but he had made sure that their disgrace was so great as to remove the chance of their ever returning to court, or of their word being reliable thereafter.

Walsingham could tell from the way the Queen now looked at him that she disapproved heartily of his methods; but he also knew that she understood there was no other way to keep her safe. The loss of a few of her gossiping ladies was the sacrifice she had to make for the night he had given her.

The scar on Walsingham’s shoulder, meanwhile, remained hidden beneath his doublet and starch collar where it could not illicit suspicion or tittle-tattle. In fact, no one else had yet laid eyes on it, except for the one woman to which, in the eyes of God (or so it was said), Sir Francis was truly bound; for Sir Francis Walsingham, like every other man at court, and indeed the social strata, was now married, and had been since not long after his return to the country.

His wife’s name was Ursula. She had been a widow before he had chosen her, and he had selected her out of rationale rather than out of love. Even so, he could not deny his fondness for the woman or for her occasionally stern temper and interfering manner. He

admittedly quite enjoyed playing the part of submissive, dutiful husband when, in his brief periods at home, this seemed called for. It was quite refreshing.

Ursula, however, was not a stupid woman. She had seen the wound on her husband's shoulder not long after it had been inflicted and, though she had held her tongue, she had known from exactly whence such a mark must have come. She was wise enough not to question Francis about that, or about any other matter from the 'professional' sphere of his life, however. Never did she ask him whereabouts his duty took him, nor did she pry into what it was he did whilst he was on his dubious errands. She was, of course, curious about it all, yet she knew it would be very dangerous to meddle in his affairs, for intuition told her that he concealed some dark and perhaps terrible secrets deep in the well of his soul, secrets that were perhaps best left undiscovered.

Ursula was also well aware that Francis did not truly love her, but she knew that he did at least hold her in high regard, with both great respect and much affection. She was more than content with this since it was as much as any wife could ask for in an era where unions were about money and political alliances, so she was thus pleased to be able to announce to him, in the months following their marriage, that she was with child.

Upon hearing the news, Francis had given his wife a warm smile, followed by an affectionate embrace, and had said that he was very pleased – and Ursula truly believed him, for not often did she see the light in his eyes which she had seen then. But alas, even this was not enough to keep him home. He was gone back to court, and back to work, within the hour, his entire life revolving around the country and his Queen.



By the time Sir Francis reached Whitehall Palace, his mind was turned to matters other than his wife's pregnancy. And yet it seemed that, amongst footmen and maids, the news

had spread fast, for as he stepped into the Queen's audience chamber, he knew from Elizabeth's face that she was very angry with him. This could not be mere coincidence.

He bowed his head in greeting as he always did, a stack of papers cradled under one arm, and then stepped toward her, opening his mouth to speak. But Elizabeth quickly raised her hand, stopping him from uttering even a word. She then turned to her ladies and said, in a clipped voice, "Leave us."

Walsingham sighed deeply. He had not the time for this.

His eyes moved to watch each of the Queen's ladies file out of the room, some of them catching his eye as they walked passed. He acknowledged every one which did so with an imperceptible nod, for they were the ones under his wing. Not that the Queen knew he had agents even here. He was certain she would be horrified if she was aware of the true, sweeping extent of his network...

As the heavy wooden doors of the chamber were closed behind the last of the ladies, the taut silence of the room stretched out between the Queen and her spymaster, and their games began anew.

"Your Majesty," Francis quickly began, wasting no time, "I must insist we move on to the urgent matter of—"

But Elizabeth raised her hand at him once more, cutting his diatribe short.

He heaved another sigh and dropped his stack of papers onto the nearby table, giving her a stern glare in the process. He was matched perfectly by the Queen's gaze, his well-trained monarch demonstrating that she was now something greater than the mere mortal he could not help but be. She had learnt well.

“Sir Francis, it has been too long,” she said when she felt she had let the tension linger long enough and that all control was hers. “I have heard that you have been ill.”

“I have, madam, amongst other things.”

He immediately wished he hadn't said that. He could see that Elizabeth was already seeking to turn his words against him.

“You must be proud,” she said in one of her heavy, measured tones.

Walsingham raised his head, maintaining his self-assured stance; he didn't need to ask to what she referred. “Aye, madam,” he replied, “I am.”

Silence again ensued, and Francis continued to hold her gaze as she in turn held his, each daring the other to blink. The Queen then got to her feet, stepping down from her dais, and stalked towards him.

“Sir Francis Walsingham,” she said to herself, tapping her lip with a finger, “Spymaster, seducer, assassin, murderer, whoremonger, snake, demon, devil... and dutiful husband and father?” She scoffed coldly, circling his person. “It is ridiculous.”

“How so, Majesty?” he dared to question.

This earned him a fierce flash from her eyes and she stopped in front of him, before taking him by complete surprise (circumstances he was not in the least bit pleased about) and whipping the back of her hand up across his face!

The ensuing slap resounded loudly through the chamber, echoing off the stone walls, and Walsingham recoiled, putting a hand to his countenance. The sting of her strike was sharp and brazen, and there was blood on his hand when he pulled it away, one of her

rings having cut a groove into his cheek. He glared at her, but held his tongue, knowing he had not the authority to challenge her any longer.

“You cur,” she growled. “Ungrateful, two-faced rake!”

“Madam, *please*,” he implored in as controlled a manner as possible.

“Please? You think I have no justification for this?” She slapped him again over the head, this time knocking his cap to the floor.

He silently withstood the attack, holding his ground, and merely continued to stare at her.

“Madam, *I beg you*,” he tried once more. “Remember who you are!”

The Queen laughed frenziedly, “And why don’t you remember who *you* are, sir?” She moved erratically, pacing like a mad dog. “You seem to have quite forgotten exactly who you are!”

“Nay, Your Highness, I know my place only too well. I am Your Majesty’s servant and secretary of state, and a gentleman who has the obligation – not the choice, madam, the *obligation* – to marry.”

Francis saw Elizabeth reach for her foot and he promptly turned his head to the side as she flung her shoe at him. It struck him squarely in the chest, though did not cause him much pain.

When he turned back, Elizabeth was staring at him and breathing heavily. It would seem she was already exhausted, her eyes glassy with anger and regret. “Why, Francis?” she asked him. “*Why?*”

He threw caution to the wind and walked over to her, before he drew her into his arms and held her. He knew he shouldn't, that he was going against his own practice by doing so, but he could think of no other remedy to her mania.

"Because I must," he whispered to her.

She wiped her eyes as she settled against his chest, lulled into a more rationale stupor by the steady beat of his heart. "But you're *mine*," she said.

He rubbed her back slowly and felt his brow contract – she felt he was hers, did she?

"You know that is not true, Majesty."

"Of course I know," she tersely professed, reverting to her more typical humour as she pulled away and started to pace again. "But it does not mean I cannot wish it."

He smiled, albeit half-heartedly; there was something else there, too, a streak of jealousy, barely discernible. No one would have a chance of noticing it, unless they were as astute as he was.

"You also wish it had been yours, don't you?" he asked.

She stopped and regarded him with surprise. "'Wish it had been mine'?" she echoed.

"Wish *what* had been mine?"

He scooped his cap up from the floor, as well as her waylaid shoe, and stepped in her direction. "The child," he said, handing the shoe to her.

She took the article from his hand and slipped it back onto her foot. "No I don't," she asserted.

“Ah, but you do,” he insisted with a grin, turning his cap over and over in his hands.
“You cannot disguise your envy from me.”

She frowned. “I am married to England, sir.”

“Yes, yes, but you remain a woman, possessing the same desires and needs as every other, be they pauper or princess. At the end of every day, when the sun goes down, the Virgin Queen leaves you to be yourself again – leaves you to be Elizabeth – and in those lonely hours, you bemoan the sacrifice you have made, and maybe even wish that Sir Francis had been unlucky enough to give you a child.”

She raised a brow, impressed and irritated at the same time by his uncanny ability to know all and everything. “Which one of my ladies is under your wing, sir?”

He grinned. “That, madam, would be telling.”

She smirked at him, but she could not sustain such good humour, and it soon faded into bitterness. “You said you loved me. Did you lie to me?”

“No.”

She arched a brow at him. “No?”

“No.”

“Then from whence has this child of yours sprung?”

“From my sleeping with my wife, as is wont to happen.”

“And you wish me to believe that you do not love her?”

“I *do* love her, but not in the way I love you. I harbour a great affection for my wife and would do nothing to harm her.” He slipped his cap back on as he added, “But you seem to forget that I can take even those I hate with all my heart to bed. It is not difficult for me to seem to love everyone.”

This was enough to unhinge Elizabeth; her spymaster was, as always, a riddle wrapped in an enigma, and a frightening one at that; and yet she would rather hate for him to be anything less. “If that be the case, then how do I know that the love you showed me was sincere?”

“You don’t.”

“And your wife? Does she know how ‘sincere’ your love is?”

“She believes that she does.” He threw Elizabeth a quick smile. “My wife and I might not be passionately in love, but we are content, Majesty.”

The Queen looked his person up and down. Despite his little smile, she felt troubled again. What if her spymaster had duped her all along...? When did the lies stop and the truth begin? “I don’t believe you lied to me,” she said, though was unable to sound wholly convinced. “I... trust my instincts on that.”

He beamed another time, most pleasantly, his face appearing suddenly amenable and very attractive. “You are wise to do so, madam. Listen to your instincts above your heart. They do you more credit.”

“And if my instincts tell me to take you to my bed again?”

He continued to look at her, his face set with that slight smile which flattered so many at court, and with which he often sowed the seeds of his deception and intrigue. After careful thought, he at last replied. “Your father tore apart the religious world as the

people knew it for the love of a woman. Can you not stand even half as much hardship when the same kind of desire flames up in your heart? Must you have what you want so easily, without effort or sacrifice? Or can you not simply be stronger than your father and withstand the want altogether? Can you not do that? Are you incapable?"

Elizabeth was surprised by his choice of subject, but could not deny that he had a point; and yet she felt angry at him for his logic, not only for its truth, but because the religious upheaval to which he referred had been done for her very mother.

And she, Elizabeth Tudor, had been the product of that liaison, the baby her mother and father had so desperately wished to be a boy.

"I am fated to forever sacrifice my pleasure for my people," she countered. "Do not lecture me on that matter, *sir*. And I certainly have no desire to break apart anyone's religious beliefs in pursuit of you."

Walsingham's eyes sparkled and he managed to dissolve the tension of the moment by saying nonchalantly, "I am relieved to hear it, Majesty."

Elizabeth tried desperately not to smile for she had not finished with him yet. "In fact, do not even flatter yourself to think that I may wish to squander my time in seeking you out! I have much more important things to do with my time."

"Naturally."

Again, she struggled against the laughter. "But I must remind you that it is from your initial gift that this dilemma has stemmed."

Surprisingly, Sir Francis looked further heartened by this. "Ah, so this is all to be my fault? I apologise and ask for your forgiveness." He then bowed his head, and Elizabeth gave in to her mirth, laughing quietly.

“Oh, my dear Moor,” she whispered, “I have such an affection for you, it pains me. Why did you have to be so kind as to bestow your gift upon me?”

Walsingham moved closer to her. “Had I known the trouble it was to cause Your Highness, I should never have imparted such a gift to you.”

“But what a loss that would have been,” she lamented in turn, “for I should never have known what it was that I missed.”

He smirked. “That, Your Highness, would have been the point,”

The sparkle in his eyes made Elizabeth realise that she was flirting with him and that he was enjoying it. Wretched man, why did he have to be so charismatic and alluring? How she wished things could be less complicated...

“But it has happened now,” she sighed, “and the time cannot be reclaimed. We cannot go back and do things differently.”

“Alas how easy life would be if we had such an ability.”

“Alas, indeed...”

Silence descended and a realm of temptation opened up before them once more, a great yawning chasm into which it would be so easy to fall.

Elizabeth allowed her eyes to trace the contours of Walsingham’s body, her gaze travelling slowly down his face, over his chest, and to his legs. There was a growing glow inside of her, a fire of want that licked at her consciousness and threatened to erase her rationale, for rather than quenching her thirst, her single night with her mentor only seemed to have spurred it on; as was human nature, she had taken one bite of the apple,

and now wanted more. Walsingham's presence did very little but stoke that desperate flame.

"Sir Francis," she whispered, forcing her line of sight down to the floor lest she lose control. "What has happened to us?"

"Us, madam?"

She peered up at him, giving him a wry look. "Oh, so diplomatic, even after all that has happened! He has been in my bedchamber and ravished my person and yet still he is *diplomatic!*"

Sir Francis wasn't quite so amused by her mockery. "Keep your voice down, madam!" he growled.

She laughed, daring to defy him. "Oh, to think that a few months ago we were but Queen and advisor." Then her smile faded and she made a disheartened sigh. "Why has it come to this?"

"To what, madam? We have done nothing."

Elizabeth gave him another dry glance, not altogether happy with his feigned ignorance, more so because it was unnervingly convincing. "A bond has grown between us, has it not? Tell me if I am in error, but you *must* hold some level of affection for me since you saw fit to--."

"Yes, yes," he said, cutting her short, most unhappy by the flippancy with which she treated the issue. "We have a firm understanding, Your Highness; intangible but there, and it is only natural that, having been through so much together, we hold each other in some affection."

Elizabeth allowed herself another small chuckle and she shook her head. “Sir Francis, you continue to elude the issue by such well-practiced talk! Maybe if I am plain with you, you will be plain with me. I confess now that I have thought of little other than you for the past few months.” She then gave him a significant look as she added, “Which ranks you very highly indeed, aware as you are of the issues which continually plague my mind.”

She saw that his eyes remained on her, unmoving, his blue irises as intense as ever, and she hated that he did not answer her. She heaved a deep sigh – this was going no where; just when she thought that the ice of Walsingham’s character had been broken, her spymaster again presented her with a picture of an inscrutable and unreadable man whose true feelings and affections were buried so deep inside that she had no chance of seeing through the window of his soul. Had she dreamed that he had said he loved her? Had she perhaps even dreamed the whole thing? Had he sought her out and made passionate love to her at all?

“They say that you are dangerous, Francis,” Elizabeth whispered, “and I know full well that you are indeed a dangerous man, so perhaps it is foolish of me to trust you to the extent that I do. But I *do* trust you, and I admire you, and maybe I...”

She faltered; would it be wise to say it?

Walsingham just blinked slowly, as if her words failed to process, or simply did not impress him, and he shattered her idealistic tenor by saying, “Nothing happened, Majesty. Nothing ever happened, and nothing more ever will.”

“But --”

“It can never happen again,” he brusquely snarled, trying to force the message across. He then dropped his voice as he added, looking at her hard, “Madam, please! I am trying to protect you!”

She stared straight back, holding his gaze, daring him to tell her she was just a weak and feeble woman, daring him to say that her heart ruled her head; but of course he said nothing of the sort.

“I know,” she steadily replied. “And I thank you for it.”

He looked behind himself and, hearing no sounds to suggest that anyone would come through the door soon, walked as close to the Queen as he could get and dropped to one knee before her.

“I have said it once, Elizabeth. I cannot say it again.”

She looked down on him and placed her hand on his head, running her fingers over his cap and then through some of the curling locks of his hair. She felt a terrible pang of regret within her at the knowledge that she could never have him in her bed again. To think that she could not even risk treating him with affection lest the court erupt in rumours...

She pulled her hand quickly away and tried to cast all this aside, for it was making her feel most uncomfortable, and even a little depressed. “To business now, sir,” she said. “What other dire news have you brought me today?”

Sir Francis ignored the slight jibe and, rising back to his feet, returned to his stack of papers. He there pulled one sheet out and said as he perused it, “It’s that bosom serpent, madam. She continues in her plots and murmurings against your person.”

Elizabeth returned to her seat and slumped into it, putting a hand to her temples as she did so. “Oh, stop referring to Mary Stuart as such,” she sighed, “it quite embarrasses the council.”

Walsingham gave her a significant glance. “Good.”

She pretended not to hear him. “Will I hear of nothing but this woman until either she or myself is gone?”

Walsingham wasted no time in saying, “I dare say so, madam.”

Elizabeth paused for a moment until a cruel little smile fashioned itself upon her face. “You seem eager to be rid of Mary Stuart, Sir Francis,” she said. “Are you not tempted to do the same to the daughter as you did to the mother?”

Surprisingly, Walsingham’s face hardened, and the stare he gave her was so fierce as to almost frighten her. He remained calm, though, as he replied, “No, madam. We are beyond that course of action now. It would serve us no justice to be so discreet this time.”

Elizabeth scoffed. “Discreet? You left Mary of Guise dead and naked in her bed! The whole court was filled with rumours of the devil behind it... and the so-called ‘witch’ who had put him up to it.”

“Ah, but listen to what you say, Majesty,” he countered, moving towards her whilst speaking in his calmest, most authoritative of tones, “The court was filled with *rumours*. And that was all they amounted to – idle talk. There was no proof. But to kill Mary Stuart in the same way would be neither wise nor particularly beneficial.”

“You know I will not openly put a Queen to death.”

His expression turned slightly resentful at that. “Even if she eventually plots your downfall? For if she and her supporters continue in their current vein, that will happen.”

Elizabeth glared at him another time. Walsingham's tone was becoming sharper, his eyes more resolved, and she felt that, suddenly, there was a breach in their relationship, a tear in the fabric which had thus far held them, however tenuously, together.

"I fear here is where we shall always differ, my Moor," she murmured. "If you ever coerce me into sanctioning such a terrible course of action, then you shall have done well indeed."

Francis didn't even bother to attempt to discuss the matter further; he could see it was to be no use. Not only was the child that grew in his wife's womb an obstacle holding him and his Queen apart, but she clearly had no intention of listening to his ramblings on the matter of Mary of Scots any further. He thus began to collect his stack of papers and readied himself to leave, resolving in silence to continue to work on the matter back in his shadowy world of conspiracy. He was well aware that, just as Elizabeth said, he would be hard pressed to bring her to support his case, but he was not one to give up easily; even if ultimately it was the death of him.

"I shall continue on in hope, then, madam," he said at length, "for I aim to continue to protect you."

She nodded. "Yes, yes, 'against all things'. I know." She then gave him a smile, a small one of thanks, and of continuing respect and love for him. "Now go... I'm sure your country, if not your wife, begs your attendance."

He tipped his head to her, clutching his papers under one arm, and turned to go.

"Sir Francis!"

He stopped and looked back at her, eyes following her form as she now walked across the flagstones toward him.

“Yes, Your Highness?” he enquired as she reached his person.

She quickly placed her hands on his shoulders and raised herself up onto her feet, kissing him on the cheek over the spot where she had struck him, erasing the blood from the wound in the process.

He closed his eyes for a brief moment, but did not let her see, and soon the moment was over, and she drew back again.

“It wouldn’t do for you to leave the room with such a mark,” she said.

Walsingham’s eyes held hers once more. “Thank you, Majesty.”

She slowly nodded. “And thank you in return.”

His brow quirked. “Whatever for?”

“For being my true and honest Moor.” She caressed his shoulder for a second, and then let her hand drop. “I forbid you to ever change.”

His eyes shined at her. “Alas, change cannot be helped – *omnia mutantur nos et mutamur in illis*² – but I shall do my best not to disappoint Your Highness, if you endeavour in turn to remain up on your pedestal, as a Virgin Queen.”

She half smiled at him. “Of course. Would you expect anything less of King Henry’s daughter?”

“No, I wouldn’t.” He then gave her a quick wink, said, “*Fac fortia et patere*³,” turned, and was gone.

² “all things change, and we change with them”

³ “do brave deeds and endure”

~THE END~



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“I saw you through the curtain...” poem © G. Francis 2006.

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