



Protector

~a Walsibeth ficlet by **Jurious**~



NB: This story is set during *The Golden Age* and is also intended to be seen in the same “canon” as my Walsibeth fic “Inconcessus Fructus”. (It’s not necessary to have read “Incon-”, but just be aware that, in this fanfic, the events of that story have taken place.)

The song that was particularly inspirational for this story was “Gorecki” by Lamb (which was introduced to me by *Torchwood*, of all things! It was on the end of one of the episodes in series 1 and I’ve loved it ever since). I think it suits the Walsingham/Elizabeth relationship really well, particularly in their later years. It’s sweet yet sad. Go listen to it whilst you read. :)



The sound of Elizabeth's laughter could be heard from quite a distance, intermingled with the pounding of hooves and Raleigh's voice. The Queen and her pirate-favourite were clearly enjoying themselves as they raced across the fields on their dark horses, a fact which was noted by the small party of nobles and courtiers which watched them from a nearby copse of trees. Francis Walsingham was amongst them, and he set his gaze firmly upon the couple, regarding them with the utmost censure. Despite the gay chatter of those around him and the glorious weather, with sun rays showering down all across the countryside, Walsingham's mood was sombre. He was not in the slightest bit amused by the display his monarch was making and he intended to let Elizabeth know about it as soon as she returned from her puerile frolic.

Walsingham's wife had lately been pestering him to speak to the Queen and to ask her to allow him to retire from politics and the court, but he had refused to. "*I can't leave the court yet, Ursula,*" he had insisted, "*She needs me*". And it was due to silly little episodes like this that he was convinced he was correct! She needed someone to tell her when to stop; someone to tell her when she was wrong. No one else was eager for such a task, and so Francis volunteered to keep himself employed in the position. Since William Cecil, his old friend and mentor, had been cast down from favour, Walsingham had shouldered this burden, and it had chipped away at his edges and worn down his person over the many years that had since passed.

The job had been so much easier when the Queen had been young and naïve; she had been just as stubborn as she was now in maturity, of course, but she had, at least, also been more impressionable. She had listened to and taken onboard his advice back then; and though it was he who had urged her to become an icon, and to take on the heavy mantle and responsibility of being a divine female ruler, he had hoped that she would never have thought herself so far above the rest of her people that she felt she could govern alone, without advice or guidance. That had been her father's mistake.

Times like this proved that perhaps he had been wrong to think such, and that she was more like her father than he had hoped; maybe she believed that she no longer needed her

long-serving spymaster. Perhaps part of it was also because he compared unfavourably to the new generation of young and athletic men which she now chose to surround herself with. Perhaps she was growing vain.

Walsingham swallowed but kept his eyes riveted on Elizabeth as she came closer on her galloping horse. Even if the Queen felt that he was no longer necessary, he was determined to remind her that he, at least, was not ready to retire just yet.

The Queen finally came charging into the shady copse from out of the bright sunlight, followed closely by the rugged seafarer, Walter Raleigh, and they both steadied their laboured horses whilst sharing further amiable laughs. Raleigh was the first to dismount before he played the part of gallant gentleman and helped the Queen down from her steed. Walsingham watched them, but paid particularly attention to Elizabeth, setting his eyes on her, unblinkingly. He knew that she knew he was watching her; his gaze carried a particular weight which she had been strangely attuned to ever since they had first set eyes on one another, through a red curtain at her coronation ball. But this time his gaze was decidedly less pleasant in nature; it was cold, disapproving, and harsh. And Walsingham could tell from her unsteady walk and raised chin that she was attempting to remind everyone – but particularly him – of her authority. She was clearly very angry with him for daring to have an opinion on what she did with her leisure time.

Elizabeth had once asked him if she was to be made of stone, and to be touched by nothing. “*Aye, madam,*” he had replied, “*to reign supreme.*” Perhaps she had forgotten that.



Walsingham kept purposefully close to the Queen on the way back to Whitehall Palace. He knew that she disapproved and found his presence irritating for she didn't look at him once, and persisted in giving him the cold shoulder. Her chatter and

laughter gave away her state of mind, though, for, rather than sounding relaxed and at ease, her voice came across as faux, and was interwoven with an unpleasant strand of tension. Walsingham wondered if the Queen might strike him when she was at last alone with only him and her ladies. It would not be the first time.

At last, the Queen and her entourage entered the familiar corridors of the palace, and the nobles began to disperse. Raleigh gallantly excused himself with a low bow, and once everyone but Walsingham and the ladies-in-waiting had gone, the Queen entered her privy chambers. Her shoulders were rigid and her face taut, and as soon as Bess, the last of the ladies, had stepped over the threshold and closed the door, Elizabeth turned on Francis and whipped her hand across his cheek.

The slap echoed around the walls and Sir Francis closed his eyes, feeling his skin tingle before it filled with a warm, stinging sensation. He was hardly surprised. “Why does your Majesty strike me?” he asked, a little impertinently, as he opened his eyes again. “I have said nothing.”

Elizabeth’s expression was ugly; Francis could see her teeth between her parted lips, as if she were preparing to lunge at his throat and tear out his windpipe. “You may have uttered not a word, sir,” she growled. “But your eyes and posture said more than I care to acknowledge. How dare you act so insolently? You do not own me, nor do I have to answer to you!”

Walsingham rubbed his cheek and raised an eyebrow, as if to say he had not realised what he had been doing. He could tell that Elizabeth took this as a further insult to her person, and she turned her back on him before walking furiously across the room.

Her ladies were scattered all over the chamber now, preparing this or adjusting that, but Francis knew, in truth, that they were simply finding a good vantage point from which to watch the show. These standoffs between he and the Queen were becoming a common occurrence and the ladies didn’t like to miss a thing.

As the Queen gestured for Bess to pour her a goblet of wine, Walsingham cast caution to the wind and moved towards her. “Do you think it wise to flaunt yourself so shamelessly in front of the court, Madam?” he asked.

Elizabeth laughed in that out-of-control, angry way whilst Bess curtsied and stepped out of the picture. “Flaunt?” she repeated, taking a gulp of her wine, “Am I not permitted to make merry however I choose, at my own discretion, Sir Francis?”

Walsingham noticed she wasn’t moving back towards him so he pushed his advantage and stepped again in her direction, approaching her in a curve from the left. “You do so carelessly, Madam,” he said. “Such open frivolity with men who are not your suitors is like to cause scandal, to –”

She was quicker in her response than he expected and, slamming down her goblet and sending the liquid sloshing all over her dresser, she shot back at him, “Do not lecture me on *scandal*, Francis! You, who took Mary of Guise to such a happy end! Ha!”

His eyes flared at her and he said in as measured a tone as he could muster, “Be silent, Madam!”

That was a mistake. He knew it from the get-go as she sauntered towards him, hips swaying in the manner of a woman in complete and utter control. “*Be silent*” she repeated with a sinister playfulness, circling his person. “Oh yes, I remember *that* lesson.”

Francis swallowed again and tried to reason with her through his unwavering gaze. She was being needlessly foolish. And she knew it.

“Tell me to be silent again, Francis,” she goaded, stepping slowly round and round him, watching his eyes, waiting to see if he might snap. “Go on. I can see that you want to.”

Walsingham refused to be baited, however, and simply held his ground. He knew that he simply could not win this battle of wills; Elizabeth had set the game up for such a result. (He had long ago encouraged her to reign supreme, and, in moments like this, she proved that she certainly did.)

The Queen was not impressed by his lack of reaction, though. “What, no response? No smart reply?” She snorted. “Once upon a time you would have striven to advise me. Now you say nothing. What use are you to me now?”

Again, Walsingham said nothing, but his gaze remained fixed on her, eyes unmoving.

“Remember your place, old man,” the Queen continued despite her spymaster’s seeming indifference. “I am Queen and I do as I please.”

Now Walsingham chose his time to react. He raised his chin without breaking his eye contact and said, “That may be the case, Madam, but you would do well to remember what, as Queen, you cannot have.”

Though Walsingham’s counterattack was calm and composed, it was more effective than any tirade he could have launched upon Elizabeth, and it showed in the sudden paleness of her complexion, her face whitening in a combination of anger and shock. Francis could see that her mind was working furiously to produce a response, thinking of how best to parry his small but significant riposte; and he could also feel all eyes in the room upon him, each of them wondering at his bravery... or idiocy.

“Jealousy does not become you, Francis,” Elizabeth muttered in that restrained tone of voice which told of her desperately seeking for a new foothold in this quarrel.

Walsingham smiled blithely. Jealousy had nothing to do with it, and he was sure that, in truth, the Queen knew it. She was trying to bring envy into the matter, perhaps hoping to

set up some rivalry between her spymaster and her present favourite Raleigh; and yet she must know that Walsingham controlled his feelings too well to let them interfere with his court duties.

“I am merely concerned for your Majesty’s lack of subtlety,” Francis replied, taking another step closer to her. “I care not for who you chose to cavort with, so long as you remember – nay, *know* – when to draw the line!”

Elizabeth was quick and, in the blink of an eye, had closed the remaining gap between them before slapping him again, as hard as she could, on his other cheek! Walsingham recoiled and turned his head in response to the strike, but again made no sound.

The room felt silent in the extreme in the aftermath of such a clout and Francis knew that, if the attention of every single one of Elizabeth’s ladies hadn’t been on them before, it certainly was now!

“Draw the line?” Elizabeth snarled once she felt she had left enough time for the blow to sink in. “Just like *we* should have drawn the line, long ago? Do you remember what it was we did? Where was your line then?”

Walsingham rubbed his cheek and his eyes scanned the faces of each of Elizabeth’s ladies whilst the Queen berated him. He was wondering how acute their hearing was, of whether they had heard what their Queen had just said, and what they must have inferred from such words if they had. He then returned his eyes to Elizabeth and met a face that was flushed red with exertion.

“That was long ago,” he stated plainly.

Elizabeth scoffed. “And that’s an excuse?” Another hysterical laugh and she began to pace again. She was clearly very stressed by this little argument; Francis inferred that he had hit a spot in her psyche which was, at present, extremely sensitive to pressure.

“You have a wife and child,” Elizabeth raved, gesturing a hand toward him. “You have what it is normal for people to have! But what do I have? Nothing but memories of stolen moments, painful losses, unlawful affairs...”

Walsingham was becoming increasingly irked by her loose tongue, but he had to trust that her ladies would be discreet. He was certain that he had made it clear in the past that there would be a high price to pay for those who were not. “You have had to make many sacrifices,” he said gently.

“By God!” she continued to rage, “I wish that I hadn’t!” Her wild eyes focused sharply on him as she then asked, “Why did I listen to you?”

Walsingham’s smile faded and he glared. He had before him a spoilt woman, so used to having all that she desired that she at times forgot her place and obligations. “You *had* to listen!” he growled, his voice broaching no argument. “Do you not see, Madam? Do you not remember all that you have been through? It is my business to protect you!”

She rolled her eyes. “From all things...”

He nodded gruffly. “Yes. Including yourself!” He calmed himself with a long exhale before he paced towards her and reached a hand out to touch her cheek. “Yourself more than anything else,” he added.

Elizabeth stared firmly at him, a slight sparkle in the back of her eyes hinting at another potential attack, but rather than take that course of action, she settled, and closed her eyes, leaning into his touch.

“Oh Francis,” she sighed, her voice barely a whisper. “How I long to be free...”

Walsingham's thumb caressed her skin before he drew her into his arms and whispered down to her, "But you *are* free. And such freedom is the greatest burden of them all."

Elizabeth's ladies-in-waiting were all surreptitiously observing this exchange but, as Francis held the Queen in his arms, Bess had to cast her eyes down. She felt unable to watch any longer, as if she were intruding on something very private and personal between these two people. She was well aware that Walsingham had been at the Queen's side since Elizabeth had ascended the throne, and she had always had an inclining that maybe something more than a professional respect existed between them. Maybe years ago they had shared more than each other's arms...? Bess could just see it in their eyes, insinuate it from their words, and even tell from the very way they moved and interacted with one another. The Queen's relationship with Sir Francis was different to that between the Queen and any of her other councillors, and that had to be for a reason.

Finally, after a short lull of contentment, Elizabeth's voice rose up from folds of Walsingham's clothes, muffled and unclear. "Leave us," she said.

The ladies exchanged uncertain glances with each other, not sure that they had heard correctly.

When none of them made to leave, Elizabeth raised her head from Walsingham's shoulder and, after sharing a significant glance with him, looked again to her ladies and repeated more firmly, "Leave us!"

This time the ladies did as they were bid and curtsied to their Queen before filing out of the room, one by one, and just as she had been the last to enter, Bess was the last one to leave. When she turned to close the door behind her, though, she caught a brief glimpse of Elizabeth placing a hand upon Walsingham's cheek and moving her lips up towards his. Then the image was lost to her behind the door...

~The End~



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