

“IT CAM WI’ A LASS AND IT WILL GANG WI’ A LASS!”, OR MARY STUART, THE
WOMAN OF SCOTLAND

A THESIS

by

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This thesis meets the standards for scope and quality of
Texas A&M University-Corpus Christi and is hereby approved.

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ABSTRACT

This manuscript explores the controversial life of Mary Stuart, a sixteenth century Scottish Queen through the lens of intimate household staff and the Edinburgh citizenry. Traditionally, Mary Stuart has been portrayed in relation to the various men in her life, including her three husbands, half-brothers, and son. However, less work explores her relationship with noble women, and even less about the historically overlooked lives of her Scottish household. This creative thesis explores the socio-political hierarchy of the sixteenth century, warring religious ideologies, and the power of privileged information, amongst others, to create a narrative that embodies life, while simultaneously respecting the lives overlooked by the archive. By exploring the lives of those virtually silenced in an incomplete archive, this creative exploration begins the conversation of how these private lives were ultimately affected by Mary Stuart's mediation of religion and politics. This creative thesis will broaden the historical and literary exploration of untold stories, and assist in the development of Mary Stuart, the woman of Scotland.

DEDICATION

For my best friend, Hannah Mery, who believed in my craft from the start. I hope Morgan and Mary's story keeps you company until Treverse Greytson's story is complete. Thank you for your ever-present encouragement, even when I believed my stories were not worth telling.

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INTRODUCTION

The inspiring rise and tragic falls of monarchies are insatiable topics of history, literature, and pop culture. Within the past decade, numerous movies, television shows, and book adaptations have been made, specifically regarding the turbulent lives of Henry VIII's familial legacies. These legacies surround two of the most prominent women in monarchy history, England's Queen Elizabeth I and Scotland's Queen Mary I. Both powerful women have undergone numerous adaptations revealing their ruthlessness, humanity, and power struggles within or outside their designated countries. Recently, Mary Queen of Scots has been spotlighted in Focus Film's *Mary Queen of Scots* in 2018, following CBS's rendition of her and Elizabeth in *Reign*, running from 2013 – 2017. The Scottish Queen is no stranger to being fictionalized but has often remained in narrative or historical fiction novels like those of Carolly Erickson's *The Memoirs of Mary Queen of Scots*, Jean Plaidy's *The Captive Queen of Scots*, and most notably Philippa Gregory's *The Other Queen*. The lush history surrounding Mary I beyond Scottish records showcase how prominent and controversial her life was.

While Mary Queen of Scots is fictionalized with (loose) historical accuracy, I am interested in knowing those overlooked by history, despite their intimacy with the Scottish queen. Rosalind Marshall, author of *Queen Mary's Women*, explicitly makes the point that much work has been done about the relationship between Mary Stuart and the men in her life, while far less has been explored about her women. Marshall laments, "members of Mary's own household are dismissed as minor characters of no importance", likening them to a Greek chorus (1). Who has been made invisible due to Mary's prominence that may have assisted her, betrayed her, or unknowingly led to her beheading at the command of Elizabeth I? Marshall explores three women of rank who were close to the Scottish monarch to explore the relationship between women of power: Jean Stewart, Countess of Argyll, Annabella Murray, Countess of Mar, and

Agnes Keith, Countess of Murray. These women of rank are prominent figures and their lives are further enhanced by their association with the controversial life of Mary Stuart. However, when locating other women's names in the archive, Marshall falls short as I have. Marshall then asks the same questions I do, "Did [these overlooked women] help [Mary] the woman she became, and how did their dealing with her affect their own lives?" (1). While the lives of women in power are more likely to be recorded, limited historical information is documented about servant life in Scotland. This limitation of the archive has either knowingly or unknowingly assisted in the silencing of those who surrounded Mary Stuart. These questions may lead historians, philologists, and literary theorists to broaden their studies to incorporate these nearly forgotten voices who stood in the shadow of the colossus. By exploring the lives of those closest to Mary Stuart, stories from her body servants, handmaids, and bodyguards can be revived from obscurity. In my creative thesis, I will include those often overlooked by history and pop culture to situate those lives entangled with Mary Stuart as they struggle for survival in sixteenth century Scotland.

I have chosen the creative writing medium to tell the story of Mary Queen of Scots to create a productive tension between the intellectual pursuits of developing Mary the Monarch and Mary the Woman. Mary the Monarch's rise to power was dogged by the religious wars of Catholicism and Protestantism, most notably by John Knox, the deaths of three husbands, and her demise on the orders of Elizabeth I. While her life is substantiated by numerous historical documents, and developed further in literature and pop culture, the lives of those who served her may broaden the narrative of Mary Stuart *the Woman*. My decision to pursue a creative thesis draws on my fascination with warrior women. My project will ask what defined strength to a dethroned queen who strives to reclaim and maintain her birthright.

My research of what defines a warrior woman, or what makes a woman strong, is a personal investment and a topic within my previous works. As a published creative writer (Switchgrass Review, Gulf Coastal Bend Writing Community), I strive to explore how different strengths, like physical, emotional, and mental prowess, assist in defining a powerful woman. My current projects, alongside my creative thesis, work to establish and broaden this theme of how women endure conflict through personal and public demonstrations of power. Alongside my study of Mary Stuart's history and research on the lives of servants, I have read other historical fiction texts to assist in my creative development.

Alice Hoffman and Jeanette Winterson act as roadmaps when combining historical records with creative narratives. Alice Hoffman's *The Dovekeepers* explores the volatile and intimate relationships between strong and weak-willed female characters. Hoffman's novel delves into the Siege of Masada (73-74 CE), one of the final confrontations of the First Jewish-Roman War (66-73 CE). Hoffman develops the narrative of four women and their struggle for survival amongst their desperate community and the guerrilla-warfare of the Roman army. Like my project, Hoffman develops a different perspective of the historical event through the voices of those overlooked by historians and literary theorists. Alternatively, Jeanette Winterson's *The Passion* explores the inner lives of history's minor characters during the Napoleonic Wars (1803-1815) and what it means to be a witness to history. Winterson's approach assists in the development of both female and male characters and their navigation of their affections and personal agendas in the face of historical and social oppression. Neither of these works develop an alternative narrative but utilize the historical events as a critical backdrop that influences each of the characters.

I selected Mary Stuart as the focus of my creative thesis due to her historical and literary prominence as a controversial figure and because I will be participating in Texas A&M University Corpus Christi's Scotland trip in Summer 2019. Mary Stuart's reign became a target for the furthering the Scottish Reformation and as an antagonist to Elizabeth I's rule over England. Few female monarchs are as well-known as Mary Stuart alongside Elizabeth Tudor, but the lives of their households are less explored. Mary I was a young queen, and her interactions with her household would have influenced her social and political maneuverings. Most, if not all, of these household voices are only documented in household records, of which, Scotland is lacking in its national and university archives. By combining a physical exploration of texts and historical landmarks in Mary's Scotland with a creative narrative, I will attempt to reclaim the often-silenced voices that history has overlooked to create a new narrative about Mary Stuart the Woman of Scotland alongside those closest to her.

My creative thesis was influenced by two theoretical frameworks, Beth Newman's "The Situation of the Looker-On" and Hélène Cixous' "The Laugh of the Medusa". Beth Newman describes the gaze as, "a look that the subject(s) whose perception organize the story direct at the characters and acts represented" (449). The gaze's original description works to diminish autonomy, and by extension agency, of the individual being subjected to the gaze. However, my project will work to provide agency to individuals who may only exist in historical archives. Many of my female characters will embody Newman's invocation of Freud's "Medusa's Head", "the sight that makes the Medusa threatening to the male spectator may be understood as the sight of someone else's look – the knowledge that the other sees and therefore resists being reduced to an appropriable object" (451). This maleness, I feel, limits the objectifying power of the gaze. Instead, I propose marking the gaze as a masculine act able to be directed by anyone –

even the female servants beneath Mary Stuart's notice. According the historical archives, or lack thereof, these household servants are relegated to a line of text to be objectified to an end. My creative piece works to define how warrior women break through the objectification of the gaze as defined by Newman and into Cixous' exploration of how women write other (silenced) women into being. Cixous writes that by writing (silent *and* marginalized) women into being, "[this] act that will also be marked by woman's *seizing* the occasion to *speak*, hence her shattering entry into history, which has always been based *on her suppression*" (351). My project works to utilize both Newman's gaze to demonstrate the double-bind of women during Mary Stuart's reign worked to subvert the masculine gaze, but still feeling its entrapment of the historical archive. By giving voice to those who served Mary Queen of Scots, historians and literary theorists can learn more about who influenced the young queen.

Audre's Lorde's work, *Zami: A New Spelling of my Name* (1982) has influenced my own creative work in the genre of Biomythography. Tanvi Gupta describes the genre as "an amalgamation of history, myth, and biography" (19). My exploration of historical documents (history), fill gaps in the archive (myth), and my development of warrior women (biography) acts as a placeholder until further information about these unknown and silenced voices are heard. My creative work is described as a placeholder because, without any representation, these voices remain only in the archive as a servant to Mary Stuart. Michael Benton, a literary theorist, further explores the biographical aspect of this genre, specifically exploring the how the writer situates themselves in the text. "[Biomythography] encompasses the necessary invention of self and identity of the writer, and the virtual representation of the subject by the biographer" (48). My creative investment is to explore how warrior women survive in sixteenth century Scotland under the reign of Mary Stuart.

I had the opportunity to conduct research in Scotland for my exploration of Mary Stuart's life in Scotland, exploration of the household archives, and develop a knowledge of palace and castle layouts for my creative thesis. I lodged approximately 45-minutes outside of Edinburgh in the historic Dalkeith Palace. From Dalkeith, I explored other historic buildings associated with Mary Stuart: Linlithgow Palace, Holyrood Palace and Edinburgh Castle. From my exploration of these buildings, I learned the distinction between palaces and castles in terms of space and practicality – Castles are made for defense and are narrower, while Palaces were built for luxury and more open spaced. I spent more of my time in Holyroodhouse and Edinburgh as they are the focus of my narrative setting. I explored the spaces and the history associated with them such as main corridors versus servant hallways that move between these larger rooms. Additionally, my exploration of these buildings focused on the sheer mass of people these sights could accommodate. With this knowledge, I am can develop a realistic description of the space for my creative narrative.

Beyond my exploration of the Scottish landscape and historic buildings, I focused on delving into the archives of the National Museum of Edinburgh, the National Library of Scotland, and the University of Edinburgh. While I was unable to physically explore the archives myself, I utilized many of the online sources to explore Mary Stuart's life. Prior to this creative project, I did not have any background knowledge of the Stuart Monarchy. Due to the limitation of my previous knowledge, I worked to understand Mary's and the history of Scotland prior to exploring the lives of her household. I explored various artifacts of Mary Stuart's Monarchy at the National Museum of Edinburgh such as a replica of her cast tomb (to assist in determining her height), and her jewelry pieces (maintained by Mary Livingston), and instruments used during the sixteenth century (Mary Stuart's love of music). The archives at the National Library

and the University of Edinburgh assisted in discovering the gaps in the household records of Mary Stuart's Scottish household. These archives allowed me the opportunity to explore life under Mary's reign by reading through the daily warrants she would have signed and the political upheaval due to the Scottish Reformation. Much of my work was utilized as background information when developing my characters to act as named-stand-ins for those overlooked by history and unnamed in the household records under Mary Stuart, Queen of Scotland.

My creative piece will follow a vignette-styled approach, featuring voices of several distinct servants following the history of Mary Stuart's short-lived monarchy. The historical exploration of Mary Stuart the Woman of Scotland will be loosely connected by the servant's perspective. Each servant's perspective will develop the intricacies of court life, the turbulent times in Scotland, and the interrelationships of each character. My creative project will broaden the historical and literary exploration of Mary Queen of Scots to describe how women navigate using personal and public power, and to give voice to those overlooked by history.

CHAPTER I

August 1561

Morgan – Palace of Holyroodhouse

Isla's apprentices scampered around me with bolts of cloth from outside the palace gates. The young girls' frames teetered left and right as the drenched wool swelled from the pregnant fog. The hurried pace of accommodating the newest mistress of Holyrood¹ left our faces damp; sometimes a drop of sweat fell from the tip of my nose onto my breasts. My hair was teased apart like spider silk from the rapid clip across the courtyard. The cooks yanked the swollen bolt of cloth from the apprentice's hands – not to assist the young seamstress, but to hurry the work along. My palace slippers tore at the seams from darting in and out of Holyrood. Mud caked the hem of my dress and climbed higher with every accidental splash into the growing puddles. Carts and cattle lumbered up the gates, squelching and splattering more mud onto our clothes as we unloaded furniture, décor, and food crates.

The cooks hauled heavy iron cauldrons, copper pots, and assortments of cutting knives; their apprentices guided lumbering pigs to the stables and carried crates filled with delicacies from the ports. House servants heaved in pairs to carry in furniture, gilded mirrors, and wooden chests. Members of the senior staff rolled their sleeves to work alongside the younger servants – no one had time to be idle. We dictated to the younger servants where the furniture would be placed, but our goal was to have fully functioning rooms prior to the queen's arrival. I followed the largest of the furniture into the queen's chambers. The heavy tapestries were unrolled to suffocate the drafts constantly breathing into the bedrooms. My shoulders burned, and the musty

¹ Founded as a monastery in 1128 founded by David I; Palace constructed un James IV in 1501; Official residence of The Queen in Scotland today ("Royal Residences...")

Author's Note: Holyroodhouse and Holyrood are used interchangeably

smell of damp fibers made me sneeze. Plush rugs were dragged through the hallways between three or four girls, their legs shaking from the weight. The other body servants and I burned the dust away with torches and lit fireplaces. More servants were called from the various Lords and Earls to prepare the home of Mary Stuart. Too many faces were unknown to me, but we worked alongside each other as ordered. Few precious hours remained until Lord James Stuart² would arrive with the disheveled queen. I paused to glance around the sparse bed chamber. My legs and arms continued to burn as I mused,

Mary Stuart, the widowed French Queen. Now she's taking up the mantle as Queen of Scots.

I felt numb to the taste of her title; she was no queen of mine! My shadows stretched across her empty bed as I twisted my fingers into my damp dress. The younger staff continued to fly around me, their bodies sending small breezes around the room. My mouth filled with spittle as I worked my tongue and cheeks to spit into her bed. I swallowed. I barely turned as one of the senior staff cried out for anyone to help him unload more furniture into the dining room. The open door behind me flashed with young servants dashing madly back and forth. Squeals of excitement echoed down the long hallways as palace guards hollered the arrival of the new Queen of Scotland. I almost wished I shared in their excitement, but a new queen would mean a new order, a ruler more French than Scots.

Even her bedroom was littered with French artifacts, remnants of Mary Stuart's mother, the former regent Marie de Guise³. Marie de Guise had been kind to her household, indulging us by reading the letters she received from the young Mary Stuart in the evenings. We learned about

² Illegitimate son of James V and Lady Margaret Erskine; Supporter of the Lords of the Congregation (Reformation)

³ Wife of James V; Scots Regent from 1554 – 1560; Regent during the Scottish Reformation upheaval

the young Mary's classical education of language, music, and dance, but her mother was especially proud of her daughter's commitment to strengthening ties with Scotland and France through her marriage to the dauphin⁴. Marie de Guise doted on her daughter, as any mother would, but I developed a different opinion of the distant queen. de Guise once read us a letter concerning Mary Stuart's irritation with a Francoise de Paroy⁵. de Guise and the other body servants laughed at the idea of a peevish little queen taking her first command of removing a woman from her station, but I only glowered at the letter. I thought the far-off Mary Stuart was a brat and I was happy she was France's problem, not Scotland's. Now, she would become our problem.

My opinion of the little queen fell further when her mother passed away. Few of us remained employed in Marie de Guise's household, but we remained by her side when her legs failed her⁶. Word was sent to the young Mary about her mother's passing, but the Queen of France did nothing. I waited to hear news of her arrival, to offer my condolences and household support, but the daughter never came. My jaw ground against my teeth until the bones popped. Instead, Marie de Guise was sent to France to her awaiting daughter, because, I believed, the young Mary couldn't be bothered to leave her gilded cage in France – even for her own mother.

I had served under the mother, and now I was to serve under the daughter. Marie de Guise, like her daughter, was raised in the French courts, but de Guise's hatred for the English and sharp maneuvering of the lukewarm-minded James Hamilton, the 2nd Earl of Arran⁷, endeared her to those within her household. Or at least, to me, as the Earl of Arran would have

⁴ the eldest son of the King of France

⁵ Mary Stuart's second governess in France; animosity between the two regarding Mary's castoff dresses

⁶ Marie de Guise suffered and died from dropsy (swelling of the legs); a cardiac disease

⁷ 1545 negotiator of the infant Mary's marriage to Edward VI of England; Political "chameleon"

sold Scotland the first chance he had to the English. Rumors circulated of Arran's groveling and bootlicking to William Cecil⁸. I muttered a curse into the quiet air of the room,

“Trait’rous bah’stards!”

My throat tightened at my language. I crossed myself quietly, breathing in the comforting words of the Holy Trinity. I looked over my shoulder, fearful of those who might see me. While only the practice of holding Mass was outlawed, the Lords of the Congregation were often unkind to those who proclaimed their Catholicism openly. Gavin swore he witnessed a man casted out of his home in Leith for refusing to give up his rosary. Priests were harassed and monasteries were ransacked. Few priests petitioned to remain in Scotland and the few that remained were priests in name only – they no longer held services, unless you traveled into the country. I fiddled with my dress collar, pretending I was adjusting it. I turned and across the threadbare room towards the open doors.

My small stature heaved the bedchamber doors open and a waterfall of echoes washed into the room. Laughter and yelling fought for dominance. Some voices shrilled, while others boomed. The stone walls vibrated like an angry wasp nest, readying to strike with a thousand needles of poison. Younger and older servants continued to drag in furniture as I dictated their arrangement. The queen's personal furniture had not arrived and so, we made do with what we had. Much of the furniture was pushed against the walls of the room like inanimate sentinels. I focused my dwindling energy on the queen's royal bed. Each corner of the queen's bedding was tucked in elaborate folds to minimize the appearance of crow's feet. The head of the bed was stuffed with an arrangement of pillows and colors that would make a peacock jealous. The centermost satin was stuffed with feathers, some from great hunting hawks, others from the

⁸ 1st Baron of Burghley; Chief advisor to Elizabeth I of England; Supporter of Protestantism in Scotland

delicate swan, and one (or maybe two) from an angry goose. Many others were plush'd with cotton and loose balls of wool. Long rods of iron encircled the royal bed with a combination of thick and thin veils. Each piece of cloth reminded me of an elegant, but flimsy, cage for Mary Stuart. I stood on a stool, stretching out the slightly damp material and feeling my fingers prune. A familiar voice whispered behind me,

“Ev’n queens are hos’ages to somethin’, ev’n the’r li’estyles.”

I jolted from how close the voice cooed behind me with a short cry. The stool beneath my feet rocked as I crashed onto the floor. My vision flashed the room with black and white spots like I had been staring at the sun for too long. I craned my head up at the woman, squinting and blinking. A podgy woman, Isla, shuffled over me; my leg had caught beneath the bed. Isla squatted over me and her calloused fingertips searched my forehead for bumps or bruises. She patted my cheek and pulled me upright by my arms. I swayed against her as her hands kept me steady. Isla smirked around the room; her bright teeth reflecting in the firelight. She was quiet and fast despite her squat stature. She often played tricks like this on her apprentices.

“Fer a fo’mer servant of t’e Queen Regent, Morgan, yer slow whe’ it comes to decoratin’ bed’ooms.” Isla clicked her tongue with mock distain, while shaking her head.

“Would ya not want th’best for the return o’ *our* Scots Que’n?”

I retorted before Isla gripped my nose playfully between her fingers. She tugged once. We grinned.

“Girl, goh make yer’self presen’able. You ‘ave more mud on ya than the ‘igs I saw rootin’ through the kitchens.” Isla threw back her head as she laughed. “I ain’t havin’ ya slacking and draggin’ yer feet ev’n before she arrives.”

I darted around Isla before she could yank at my muddy dress. I stepped over the door's threshold and then stopped. I watched Isla shuffle around the hammered gold and reflecting silver of Marie de Guise's former décor. Isla's hands barely touched the expensive furnishings as she sighed. She halted in front of a vanity mirror. The slim glass couldn't contain Isla's figure. She rubbed down her pox-marked face in delicate circles as she stared at herself. I turned into the hallway, still an angry buzz, as Kip's words came to my mind,

Isla's face is like the moon, full of scars that tell her story of survival. Aren't they beautiful?

I never once thought of Isla as ugly, and I often agreed with Kip about his lovely wife.

* * *

My back burned as I shivered alongside Holyrood's patchwork senior staff. I sniffled, and a coarse snort startled the unknown faces around me. In haste, many of Holyrood's staff were *borrowed* from nearby Lords and Earls. Strangers stood around me in the cold fog as we waited for a woman few of us had even *seen*, and now she was to be Scotland's queen. Someone sneezed and spat behind me. My nose was dripping, and I desperately wanted to wipe or scratch the sliding itch. Clusters of guards stood along the path leading up Holyrood. Hurried whispers were exchanged as Lord James slowly came into view with Queen Mary Stuart and her French entourage. The fog did not part with the return of our queen. Instead, the bloated air merged into a floating puddle that barred her further from our view. My eyebrows and eyelashes collected the fog in fat droplets. Lord James's voice boomed before the gates of Holyrood, but I heard nothing. Mary Stuart⁹ drew down her riding hood and several of us sucked in the wet air rapidly through our teeth and nose. Her porcelain skin and dark eyes reminded me of a doll, while her

⁹ Arrived in Scotland the 19th of August

hair – frazzled by the fog and wind – fluttered around her face. We bowed together in small clusters. I felt my ankle tremble from my fall earlier, and I reached out to grip the arms of those closest to me. They shook me off.

Gavin and the other palace guards assisted Mary Stuart from her horse. Even taken down from her horse, Mary Stuart stood near eyelevel or over the men surrounding her. Four women, all named Mary¹⁰ apparently, dismounted and swarmed Mary Stuart like a protective shell. Other members of Mary Stuart’s train stepped forward to fall behind the steps of their queen. The ring of people surrounding the Scots Queen was several layers thick: The Four Maries, the French senior staff, and then her staff residing at Holyrood. Lord James guided the mob-like retinue into the palace as he looked around the bobbing heads of staff members. He found me. He pushed his chin forward and I pushed myself through the mob to him. I stepped forward as politely as I could as Lord James led Mary Stuart into the dining hall. My heart rattled inside my neck and my nails dug into the palms of my hand as I stood a few steps behind Lord James. I stood beneath the notice of Mary Stuart. I think she would have barreled passed me if Lord James had not halted. He spoke, his voice booming over the mass of heads,

“Dear sister, this is Morgan. She was one of your mother’s body servants while she resided in Edinburgh Castle and here in Holyrood.”

I curtsied, aware of my small stature shrinking before her further. I hadn’t noticed before, but I stood an even head and a half shorter than her! A few of the French servants tittered as they appraised me. My stomach boiled. The whispering ceased when Mary Stuart spoke,

“You were there when my mother died?” Her voice dropped.

¹⁰ Mary Livingston; Mary Beaton; Mary Seton; Mary Fleming

“Yes ma’am, and if yer wish, I wil’ serve as I served Marie de Guise, Queen Regent of Scotland.”

I bowed my head lower, conscious of her auburn eyes on me. My neck burned and I was grateful for the high-collared dress I wore now. I glanced up and Mary Stuart waved me behind her ring of Maries, beside her French servants. The Four Maries whispered in rapid French as Lord James continued to turn about the dining hall where a hastily prepared meal waited. I lengthened my spine, trying to measure up to the eyes of those around me, at least. The French servants hissed in my direction like a clowder of cats.

The dining hall burned in torchlight with the fireplace hissing whenever a damp log was replaced. I blinked several times to adjust my eyes to the light and heat. Four master cooks and their apprentices stood as representatives of the kitchen staff, while the revolving door flowed with servers. The servers came in waves, none of them making a second appearance as they weighed down the table with various meats, spiced fruits, bread, wine, and beer. Isla had warned me of poking my head into the kitchen that day. The labyrinth-like kitchen was a war zone of tempers and sharpened knives were drawn. The hundreds of men working in the kitchens could have provided Holyrood with its own army if need be. Mary Stuart glanced around the trays of pewter, the plates and cups of silver and gold. She sniffled into a handcloth and turned towards me, away from Lord James, her Maries, and her French staff.

“Prepare a plate for me in my bedchambers, I will retire early. It’s far too cold this evening. *Météo horrible ici!*”¹¹

Lord James nodded to me before directing the remaining members of his sister’s staff to dine. Holyrood’s staff gawked at their new monarch, unsure of their status now with Mary

¹¹ Terrible weather here

Stuart's French court. We were all uneasy. After Marie de Guise's death, Lord James welcomed a few of Holyrood's remaining staff to serve his household. Many others had walked away to find work with the nearest Earls' and Lords' estates. I swallowed hard and clenched my jaws until they popped in a small explosion of pain. I curtsied and led Mary Stuart to her chambers. Behind us, servers loaded a tray with cuts of food and sat the newly arrived French. The clump of Maries remained in the dining hall like an unsure flock of pigeons without their handler.

I walked briskly, barely remaining ahead of the Queen's long steps and her own staff of bedroom servants. Her stride easily overtook mine, and I hurried along the hallways of Holyrood. I watched her from the corner of my eye as her eyes narrowed at the hastily and sometimes haphazardly arranged furniture. Tapestries, décor, and even a few rugs were crooked and damp from the hurried travel from the nearby nobility. We made do with what we had on hand. We ascended the staircase to the queen's lobby which we had decorated with the same furniture Marie de Guise once owned. I never understood my former mistress's love of gold, the gaudy metal always gave me a headache, but Mary Stuart seemed to breathe easier when she entered. She continued to blow her nose into the handcloth, sniffing as she walked around the room.

"I had hoped my furniture would arrive before our coming here¹². This place does not welcome me with open arms."

Mary Stuart didn't sound cross, but she didn't seem pleased either. I considered her words for a moment, unsure if she meant Holyrood or Scotland. I answered quickly,

¹² "The bulk of Mary's goods were still impounded at Tynemouth" (Graham 129); They would arrive months later

“I hope yer’ll pardon the furnishings for the eve’ng, your majesty. I perso’ally decorated the room wit’ the furnishings your mother had. I hope it brings you comfor’ and memories of her.”

We neared the door to the rooms where Gavin and another soldier stood at attention. Mary hardly glanced their way as they opened the double doors. A man stepped forward into the room with Mary Stuart and a cluster of women, I followed. Again, I was unsure of my role now. Mary stepped towards the center of the room, taking a moment to breathe in the space. I stood near the periphery of the room, the place I often stood when Marie de Guise read us her letters of her daughter. Now, the daughter stood in the mother’s place. I twisted the sleeves of my dress as a familiar burn emerged. I knew Marie de Guise rarely spoke of her health to her daughter, but after the mother’s death, why hadn’t the daughter come to mourn? Was she so selfish that she couldn’t bother to leave her gilded French cage?

The fireplace hissed, jolting us back into the present space of Holyrood. Mary Stuart stretched her body, looking like Isla’s dress mannequins. This was a signal of sorts as three of Mary’s servants moved to undress her. The man that had entered with us drew my attention now.

“As you served her majesty’s mother, you will keep your station.” His voice clipped across each English word with a French lilt. “However, know your place, *Scots*. You will refer to me as Servaise de Conde¹³ and god willing, you will learn how to serve your *French* queen.”

I lowered my eyes, feeling the boil of heat rising at the back of my neck. My tongue nearly corrected this man. Mary was no longer a queen of France; she was a Scots queen.

“I understand, I am her’ to serve.”

Servaise de Conde waived me away from the wall. He spoke through his nose,

¹³ Mary Stuart’s French Chamberlain; an officer that manages the household of a monarch or noble

“Morgana will assist with undressing the Queen. I pray there are decent clothing in this place?”

“It’s Morgan, sir. We’re not so barbaric as to *not* ‘ave suitable clothin’ for the Queen’s arrival.”

“Will your name stop you from removing the Queen’s garments?” He snapped and crossed his arms over his chest.

I paused at the crack of his voice, unsure of *where* my place was amongst these chattering women! My jaws popped again as I ground my teeth and moved towards Mary Stuart. Her auburn eyes followed me; my head must have barely reached her chin. The chatter of the fireplace mocked me as I stood within her shadow. I had been swallowed by her, and I was afraid of how I would tear myself free. My neck continued to flush as I moved toward the many layers of her clothing. The French body servants had begun to untie the laces of Mary Stuart’s sleeves, the wool fell in thick folds around the monarch’s alabaster skin. Her dress was a mix of wool to thicken the dress, followed by a layer of satin to denote her status. The laces that secured the bulk of the dress were elaborate and braided instead of crosshatched down her back. Like a cocoon, we freed Mary Stuart from her thick outer clothing¹⁴. The bodice and skirt were taken carefully into the arm of the French servants and only the silver and gold threaded chemise remain on Mary’s person. The hair on her arms rose as she shivered slightly from exposure to Holyrood’s drafts.

I quickly moved to one of the small drawers, pulling out a long-sleeved shift that belonged to her mother during her stay at Edinburgh Castle. I averted my eyes as the French ladies undressed Mary and I gingerly handed them the thick woolen shift. When I opened my

¹⁴ Lambert, Tim “16th Century Clothing”

eyes, I saw that Servaise de Conde had disappeared, as well. The battle with Mary's clothing left me winded and hot. Many of the girls were also fanning themselves and I tucked my sleeves further up my forearms. Mary stepped away from me with a loud gasp.

"What disease is eating away at your arms, girl?"

Her forehead wrinkled like the ripples on water as she shrank from me. Mary's eyes flicked between my arms and face. For a moment, she looked terrified as if I would drop dead before her. I responded slowly,

"My duties 'ave me runnin' in the sun, yer majesty. I am not as fair as you and my condition whitens my skin in this od' patchwork."

Her mother never mentioned my condition before. The Scots Queen raised her chin and spoke down at me.

"If you're to remain as one of my bed servants, Morgana, you will cover those arms of yours immediately!" Mary then whispered, "will you die in pain from it?"

I pulled down my sleeves. The flush of blood burned my neck and traveled up to my ears. My voice was tight, and I felt my eyes itch with tears.

"No, yer majesty."

"Good, good, I have seen enough of disease for a lifetime of nightmares."

The tall Queen's shadow continued to digest me whole. I turned away from her to store her belongings in the drawer. I stuffed clothing into the shallow drawer space, wondering what had made the Queen wary of diseases. I took my place along the wall again, but I could not escape her shadow. Mary stood too large for me. Everyone in the room turned as Gavin knocked and opened the door quietly. One of the master cook's apprentices stood outside the threshold with a tray in hand. I gently took the silver tray from the skittish apprentice.

Isla – Holyrood; South Privy Room

Isla's hands were having another fit. Her fingers could barely thread silk through her worn iron needle; they no longer flexed as they did a month ago. Her favorite iron needle had darkened over the years from the oils on her fingertips. Now, the needle trembled between her calloused thumb and forefinger. Isla walked each day to Holyrood with her brother-in-law, Gavin, to accommodate the Scots Queen's order of altering and creating new dresses. Though the queen brought her own French tailors, the cold weather left many of them ill and some had returned to France. Isla appraised her wooden mannequins dressed in the latest project she and her apprentices had sown. She felt the dresses the Queen demanded of her were more appropriate for a child's doll and not a breathing Queen of Scotland. The elaborate layers of tulle and chiffon lay in tight formation beneath the heavy woolen bodice.

She arched her back, feeling the rapid crack of her spine as she paced around the small room given to her by Servaise de Conde. The man had delegated himself as a general overseer of Holyrood while Mary Stuart collected and reorganized her staff. Isla scratched at her scalp, which caused her barely contained bun to loosen. Several pins came loose in her tangled hair, never to be seen again. According to Kip, she never lost hairpins, they just disappeared somewhere in her hair. She considered loosening all the pins and letting her hair drape over her shoulders like a shawl. Isla was cold most days, but today she felt she would freeze in place. Despite the heat from the hearth, its mouth a glowing mass of red and yellow, her hands locked up from the cold. She felt her joints tighten, and it was difficult to stretch her hands on cold days like this.

The palace was warmer than her home, but there was little comfort with the drafts constantly breathing in the cold. Some mornings Isla couldn't feel her toes and she had

developed a wet cough the previous night. Kip had taken it upon himself to massage the warmth back into her feet or lay her stocking and boots in front of the fireplace. In their later years together, every ache and sharp intake a breath would send him into a frenzy. Before, Isla mused, she would have swooned at his attention, but now she only laughed and shooed him aside to prepare breakfast. When she first began walking to Holyrood under Marie de Guise, Kip had begged her to ride with Gavin as they were both traveling to the same destination. She believed it was better to maintain life on her feet than limping on and off that bastard horse of Gavin's, which incidentally, was named Bastard. The creature had the temper of a mean drunk and actively moved to stomp on people's feet and bite into their shoulders. Isla wanted to shoot the animal at times, but Gavin had paid for the beast himself and swore he would break Bastard of his habits. It had been five years since; Bastard was still a bastard.

Isla's forehead beaded with sweat as she poked the fireplace with a rod of iron. The poker looked like a giant needle with its slender point on one end and a looped hole on the other. Everything in her life centered around her sewing skills. She wiped the sweat from her upper lip, touching the scar-like craters left from the pox she caught decades ago as a child. She wished she could have sewn the pox holes shut to have a fuller face. Queen Mary had ordered her to wear a veil, just as she had commanded Morgan to wear long gloves to hide her white-stained skin. Morgan suspected the Queen may have witnessed a companion die from some disease which suggested as to why the Queen avoided anything resembling disfigurement. Few of the French servants spoke Scots and Morgan did not speak French, so Isla wondered where Morgan had gotten the idea of Queen Mary's disgust.

A sharp pain lanced through Isla's ankles, warning her of their weakness. Recently, her ankles had begun to swell and became painful when she stood for too long. Isla shuffled towards

a highbacked chair reserved for Mary Stuart. Her ankles rolled and shook as she gripped the arms of the chair and lowered herself onto its velvet cushion. The cushion disappeared beneath her as she massaged her ankles atop a nearby ottoman. The muscles along her legs were spasming and visibly twitched down her leg. Once the pain had passed, Isla slumped inside the chair.

“Isla, I am comin’ in.”

A knock always accompanied Morgan’s entrance. She treated almost everyone with the same respect she gave to the nobility. Isla struggled as she tried to lift herself by the armrests. Morgan urged the door open with her hip, her hands carrying a steaming bowl that fogged her face from view. Isla dropped back against the chair as her mouth opened into a pant. The trials of age, as Morgan often reminded her! Morgan set the bowl atop a table near Isla’s dress mannequins. Spools of red, blue, and silver thread stood at attention with their little needle swords tucked beside them. The bowl continued to steam into the open air.

“Isla consider let’ing yer girls take over the wor’ if it’s dif’icult for you to eve’ stand! Ya can’t continue to wor’ at this pace.”

Isla laughed and rested her head against the highbacked chair. She turned her head slowly towards Morgan.

“The dain’tee French tailors are il’ again, and the bul’ of the work fal’s to us anyways. I ‘ave half a mind to sugges’ to Servaise de Conde to dismis’ all of ‘em back to France. I’d ra’her not forsake my independence, Morgan.” Isla laughed as she looked down at her claw-like fingers in her lap. “Ah yes, we live on the whims of que’ns, dear girl. Wer’ not for the queen’s dear mot’er, you’d have ‘en on yer back submittin’ to some insipid lord, while I would’ve ‘en burned for witchery.” Isla gripped Morgan’s chin between her forefinger and thumb. The pain tore

through her knuckles like a dozen needles. “Some say I can mar a ween with one ‘lance of my unveil’d smile! Or bet’er yet, some of the guards say I ‘witched the que’n to act as her ugly shield to mai’tain her beauty!”

Morgan grinned and snapped her teeth with a rhythmic crack.

“Insidious lords are the ‘est kind, Isla. They are ma’leable enough and I kno’ no su’mmission.”

“Su’mmission comes in al’ forms, Morgan. We live under su’mmission if we want to survive. Outside the palace, the world on fire with the comin’ of our French-raised, Scottish Queen. Kip doesn’t kno’ which is worse, to be under the employment of a Catholic Queen or to be in the frenz’ed streets where the various Lords and Earls strug’le for pow’r.”

Morgan lowered her head and sighed.

“The ‘ords of the Congreg’tion made things dif’icult, but Isla, this Knox¹⁵ man is makin’ more trouble than the En’lish –”

Isla raised a half-curved finger, halting Morgan’s words.

“Morgan, please not anot’er word. Kip is an ‘damant man of Knox’s and I stan’ by his convic’ions, even if I don’t share ‘em. All I pray for now is that Queen Mary can set’le these turbulen’ matters before we turn agains’ ourselves and are too weak to face the English. T’at Tudor woman leaves me nervous.”

Morgan’s neck flushed as she turned away from Isla. Isla watched as Morgan’s jaws ground against her teeth. Morgan rolled her head back and sighed heavily before returning to the table where the steaming bowl awaited. The clay bowl was placed on Isla’s lap as Morgan knelt before her. Isla felt her hands tremble as she raised them over the open mouth of the small basin.

¹⁵ John Knox; Scottish Minister; Leader of the Scottish Reformation (Protestantism)

Tendrils of steam passed around her fingers like will-o'-wisps. Isla breathed in deeply before submerging her hands to drown them in the borderline-painful heat. They watched together as Isla's knuckles bloomed with a momentary white heat in the water. Slowly, Morgan joined her hands with Isla's and flexed each of the older woman's fingers to their full length. Isla winced as some of her fingers were forced from their rigidity. Eventually, Morgan worked the stiffness out of Isla's hands and then worked to massage the callouses Isla had developed from years of sewing. The water's heat also sucked the cold chill from Isla's hands until she was able to flex them herself. Morgan lifted Isla's hands out of the water and dried them with a towel she had laid across her lap. Finally, Morgan assisted Isla from the highbacked chair into a stool beside the dress mannequin, and together they waited. Morgan unfolded the gloves she had been given by Mary Stuart and slipped her patchwork colored arm into them.

The hallways rattled with laughter as the gaggle of Maries approached the privy door. A guard rapt his knuckles against the door and stepped quietly inside as the Maries waited beyond the threshold. Gavin acknowledged Morgan and Isla with a nod before sweeping the room. Isla's various aged apprentices entered through a pair of side doors; their arms laden with cloth. They were considered Isla's adoptive children and she provided for them through her live-out servant pay. Her weekly pay alongside her commissions paid for the wellbeing of these children and Kip. The children were originally from the Scots-English border and the constant raids and warring countries left behind many homeless children. She tended to them until they were adults and then introduced them to other nobility houses so they may begin their careers as seamstresses. As Isla directed her apprentices, and a few of the remaining French apprentices, she forgot Gavin for a moment. She glanced down as he lifted the dress skirt from the mannequin

and waggled his eyebrows. Isla suppressed the impulse to smack the cheekiness out of him. She mouthed a warning down at Gavin,

Yer wait, boy. Make a foo' out of me and I wil' skin you for Kip's hunting leathers!

Gavin turned towards the door where his partner, Calum, held it open. He bowed before speaking,

"The seamstress is ready for yer Majesty."

Isla and the apprentices bowed like a wave. Morgan's jaw tightened as she curtsied, like a French woman. One of the Maries – Livingston? Not Seton. Must be Fleming then– swatted at Morgan for her to curtsy lower with her wooden fan. The Fleming Mary spoke through her nose,

"It's all in the knees and hips, girl. Lean into it like you're balancing on a wire."

Mary Stuart spoke, her voice light,

"My Morgana is a quick study, dear friend. She'll learn, give her time. We all had to learn once too, remember?"

Isla glanced up mid-bow with her knees cracking in the small room. Morgan's neck flushed a deep scarlet. Neither Isla nor Morgan knew if Mary Stuart – Queen Mary Stuart – couldn't remember Morgan's name, or enjoyed watching Morgan's bottled anger. Gavin gave the Maries a final bow before exiting the room. The heavy door creaked along its hinges. Mary Seton stepped out of the ring of Maries and stood beside the vanity. She rearranged the combs and brushes on the table, her arms moving as if she were playing the piano. Seton's young, supple hands had prepared Queen Mary's hair since their arrival, according to Servaise de Conde. Isla was amazed at how the Seton girl could coax the sometimes-frazzled hair of the Queen's into decorative weaves and braids like an artisan. The Seton Mary then pulled out

various loops of gems and pearls from the vanity's drawers, preparing her workspace for Mary Stuart.

Mary Stuart sat before the vanity while Mary Seton uncoiled the Queen's sunset-colored hair. The thick coils of auburn buried Mary Seton's hands as she brushed out the hair. She began with a comb, untangling any knots before brushing out the monarch's hair with a horsehair brush. Isla's apprentices presented samples of cloth to the seated monarch as Mary Seton continued to brush and oil the tendrils of red. Isla had interrogated the French seamstresses about the French-style of dress the queen preferred. These consultations often led to a screaming match as the French refused (or didn't know) to speak Scots, and Isla didn't understand French. Mary Stuart watched the procession of Isla's apprentices as they presented her with cloth samples that made up one of her ceremonial gowns. Morgan stood beside the dressed mannequin for the queen to see her through the mirror. Servaise de Conde brought a command from Mary Stuart that she wanted a new dress for her Edinburgh *joyeuse entrée* ¹⁶. The dress Isla had prepared was elaborate with its many layers and the mannequin looked like a prized doll instead. Mary Stuart addressed Isla through her reflection in the mirror,

"You are from Edinburgh, seamstress?"

Isla stepped away from the mannequin and bowed in the direction of the seated monarch.

"I am, yer majesty. My husband and I li'e on the outskirts close't to the palace so I can be closer to serve ya."

"Tell me then, your townsmen, how do they celebrate the return of their monarch?"

¹⁶ French for "joyous entry"; "the ceremonial first visits of a [monarch] to [their] country, traditional the occasion for the granting or confirming of privileges" (Encyclopædia Britannica)

Isla paused, scraps of tulle fell from her dress cuffs and the unseen needle in her hand was gripped tightly between her fingers. The room was leeched of heat as the hearth hissed and ate away at the log between its teeth. The Scots apprentices busied themselves with folding and refolding bolts of cloth or rearranging the spools of thread on the desk unnecessarily. The French seamstresses looked about the room, unsure of the sudden change. Even Morgan paled at the queen's question. Isla swallowed and forced her mouth to widen into a smile.

"Pleasantly yer majesty, we welcome stability. Prior to your comin', yer mother – may the Heavenly Father bles' her – fought and barr'd the English from yer country and crown."

Isla returned to the mannequin, her needle reinforcing a stitch of tulle beneath a layer of satin. Mary Seton continued to weave smaller braids into a loop atop Mary Stuart's head. Queen Mary continued talking to Isla's reflection.

"My uncles tell me of a divide within my country, a religious war amongst the citizenry and nobility, these Lords of the Congregation?"

Mary Stuart raised her chin in the mirror, her reflection watching Isla. Mary Seton gently shifted the queen's head to continue her work. Isla straightened as tall as she could, but her shoulders still slumped. The layer of tulle began to pucker from the reinforced thread.

"These be tryin' times, yer majesty. I've said, we welcome stability and look to ya for it. And yes, 'hile the Catholic Mass has been outlaw'd, your grace and compassion will protect us from further divide."

"These Lords of Congregation have no hold over me; My brother has made certain of my personal Mass within the abbey."

Mary Stuart smiled and nodded to herself, satisfied. She turned her attention to her other Maries in the mirror, tittering in French. Beaton, Livingston and Fleming giggled as they

examined each of the jewels Mary Seton was placing into the queen's hair. Isla watched the gaggle of Maries, distracted. She winced suddenly as her worn needle stabbed her in the thumb. A drop of blood welled up and stained the tulle hidden beneath the chiffon and satin.

CHAPTER II

Skye – Holyroodhouse Hills

Skye peeled herself away from her fellow guild-apprentice, the bed covers still loosely cocooning him as he slept. He snorted as he breathed in and wheezed out a pitched whistle through his nose. The noise was repetitive, and Skye hadn't slept all evening. She chucked the thick bedding over his face to silence his snoring. The hearth in her room had died sometime during the night and the morning chill rose the hair around her nude body. Her long legs stretched over the edge of the bed as she blindly moved her hand in circles looking for the pitcher on the floor. She found the coarse clay pitcher and brought it to her lips as she stepped into the room. Her muscular legs swept the floor in front of her, clearing empty bottles and cups out of her way. Some of the bottles were still full as she splashed the beer over her toes. Her room was a dark maze as Skye fumbled for her trunk beneath the curtained window in the room.

Her toes finally crunched against the iron trunk as she cursed into the darkness. Her toes curled in pain as she dropped to her knees to massage them, all the while muttering. Skye flipped open the trunk and dug blindly around the mess of coarse wool fabric and leather. She shimmied into her trousers, cinching the waist ties and knotting them. The wool itched and she wondered if mites had made their home inside. Her thin slip lay beneath her tunic and was secured with a leather vest. She continued to dig around her trunk's stomach until her fingers touched thick leather. Despite her lack of sight, she knew falconry glove by touch. She wriggled her right arm inside. The leather glove was soft on the inside, while her weekly coating of beeswax hardened the thick leather to protect her from her peregrine's claws. Skye wound the straps across her wrists and pulled at the corset-cords along her forearm with her teeth. The leather creaked as she

flexed her fingers in the darkness. When she was finally dressed for the day, she stood in the darkness, mentally looking at the disarray she knew her room was.

Skye swung her boots over her shoulder, slammed the door to her bedroom to awaken the sleeping apprentice, and padded down the stairs. The guild tucked itself like a hermit crab against the hills of Holyroodhouse, nearly blending into the landscape were it not for the stables and peregrine cages being a constant source of noise. She plopped down on the steps of the guild, yanking her boots over her small feet and thick calves. Skye jumped from the steps of the guild towards the peregrine cages nestled even further into the mountainside. All the peregrines were hooded as they noisily peeped and screeched at Skye's approaching footfalls. The guild masters housed their partners in the topmost cages, while the newest apprentices housed theirs nearer to the ground – but not enough to where snakes or other vermin could catch the hooded peregrines. Skye's partner was housed closer to the guild masters, but she still had to clean the constant droppings that covered her partner in the mornings. The covered cages protected the birds well enough, but Skye had found pawprints the last few days circling the grounds, and she worried for her partner.

A newer apprentice, judging by how his glove hung limply on his arm, reached inside his peregrine's cage. The peregrine shrieked at being awoken and shook his head violently enough to loosen its hood. With another shriek, the bird darted from its cage and flew out. The apprentice screamed for his partner, but the grumpy bird flew over his head and landed atop the house, ruffling her feathers with freedom. She shook her body and released a few stray feathers as she began to groom herself. The young boy, maybe no more than 15, looked to Skye and the guild masters, seeking help with a gaping mouth. The guild masters sat between the guild house and cages on log benches, eyeing the roads leading to Holyrood. They *harrumphed* and returned

to chewing their gristle, spitting at the sun as it continued to rise over the hillside. Skye returned to cleaning and feeding her partner until one of the guild masters cursed into the morning air. Skye poked her head outside and spied a pack of Holyrood guards riding up the hill slope. Gavin and his horse Bastard hustled up the rocky trail.

Gavin and the other three guards slid off their horses and approached the five guild masters. Gavin spoke to the old men as they spat their gristle over their shoulders and grumbled. Skye and the other apprentices remained where they were, trying to listen in, but not daring to step closer. Finally, one of the guards behind Gavin joined the conversation and the layers of chatter blended into an indescribable babble. The oldest guild master hollered over his crooked shoulder,

“Aye, Skye! Yer summond to Holyrood fer sport with the Queen. Ready yer ass!”

Skye waved from inside the peregrine shelter. Her gloved hand gently rubbed the peregrine’s belly, near its talons, as the bird of prey stepped up and allowed her to place it inside a smaller cage for traveling. The peregrine hissed as it tried to stretch its feathers inside the narrow cage. Skye scratched its small head behind its ear hole. With the cage in one hand and a pack across her breasts, Skye stepped out to meet Gavin and the other guards of Holyrood. Gavin held out his hand for the peregrine’s cage, but instead, Skye unslung her pack and deposited it across his arm. She stepped up to Bastard, the beast’s dark eyes narrowing as she tied her cage to his saddle. The peregrine peeped beneath its hood, probably smelling the horse’s sweat. Gavin stepped beside Skye, making a show of tying her bags to the horn of the saddle. He whispered,

“I am gratefu’ the Queen requests your skil’s of’en. It’s bet’er having ya close than up in these hil’s.”

Gavin's hands briefly touched Skye's hips as he tightened the saddle against Bastard. Skye grinned and popped a wad of gristle she kept in her bags.

"A monarch nev'r requests, Gavin. She com'ands and we 'bey."

"She's a lot like you," Gavin retorted.

Skye punched him before she mounted Bastard with ease. The horse bucked once, causing the peregrine to screech, and Skye smacked Bastard with her gloved hand. Gavin took Bastard's reins and lead the group down the rocky hills towards Holyrood. The other horses stepped tentatively around the rocky path, sometimes skidding and neighing with fear. Bastard had taken the path often enough and chewed his bit grumpily. The palace was a few miles from the falconer's guild, but Mary Stuart's hunting grounds extended between them. Skye had been requested specifically by Lord James, and she would be riding closely with the queen and her honorable ladies-in-waiting. Skye's hips easily matched Bastard's gait as she eyed Holyrood from her perch. Her eyes dilated with hunger as she scanned the palace walls and thought,

I need to win the queen's favor. I can be her personal hunting caretaker and move into the palace.

Skye smiled at the thought of a room in Holyrood again; the drafty guild house was beneath her, in her mind. Her thoughts and smile disappeared as Gavin slowed his pace, allowing Bastard to walk beside him. Gavin spoke first,

"I 'ave not seen ya since Queen Mary's arrival."

"Busy trainin' the gre'n 'prentices. My guild work comes firs', eve' before ya."

"What els' comes 'fore me, Skye?"

The glare of the sun answered his question as it reflected the emblem of Queen Mary Stuart. Skye smirked down at him as she moved with Bastard's clipped gait, daring him to say

more within earshot of his fellow guards. Her peregrine continued grumbling to itself and ruffling its feathers in the tight cage. Skye sighed as Gavin sucked in his lips and stomped beside Bastard, indicative of his displeasure. She smiled down at him, but looked through him,

“The queen ‘fore all else, myself, the guil’, and then ya, Gavin.”

Gavin grumbled and scratched at his nose, another sign she knew. Skye rolled her eyes up at the sun, bored with the silence between them. She raised her voice and smiled through her words,

“How are yer brot’er and sis’er-in-law? I ‘eard the Queen brou’t her French court with her.”

“Isla’s naw a tailor to Queen Mary; her work is ‘eautiful despite her ailin’ health. Af’er losing ‘nother ween, her body hasn’t recovered. Kip, well, he’s still a’followin’ Knox’s men like a lad. Morgan and I worry how Kip’ll effect Isla’s position.”

Skye projected her voice towards the other palace guards. She knew that they were listening to her conversation with Gavin.

“Our Queen is tol’rant of her Protestant subjects; your brother is reinforcin’ the ties ‘tween him and his countr’men. I don’t thin’ our Queen is troubl’d by who sews her clothes, so long as t’ey are done beautifully. Isla will endu’e.”

Gavin nodded to Skye’s assertion and then stepped ahead of Bastard. He easily entered a conversation with his fellow guards. Skye eyed Holyrood growing above the horizon. She gripped Bastard’s ribs with her knees until her thighs burned. Bastard shifted his shoulders and bucked, trying to dislodge her. She released him and continued to stare at Holyrood. She had hoped with the arrival of the Mary’s French court, Morgan would have been dismissed. Skye and Morgan were previously at odds with one another, with Gavin trying to mediate. Skye had been

sponsored by Marie de Guise when she first entered the guild, but Morgan had brought the young falconer's expenses into question. Morgan had suggested that Skye's sponsorship was a drain on the royal treasury at a time when de Guise was travelling extensively to quell Scottish affairs and feuds. Morgan had convinced Marie de Guise that Skye's falconry services were not required if the Queen Regent was occupied elsewhere. Instead, de Guise compromised by having Skye retained in the guild permanently and only called upon when needed, rather than living within Holyroodhouse. When Gavin brought Skye the news of her dismissal from the palace, she was livid. Skye had spent years in the guild's service, but she had higher aspirations of finding employment under the new monarch. A position in the palace would offer her greater opportunities to catch the eyes of the nobility.

They finally descended the hillside and trotted into the outermost courtyard. Skye stretched her spine as they paraded around the various windows of the palace leading to the stables. She imagined the gaze of onlookers as she rode passed the washed windows, she hoped one of those pairs were from Lord James. Gavin rounded Bastard towards the stables.

Groomsmen washed the horses as the stable boys ran to and from the water well. Few of the men waved to Skye and she waved her hand delicately as she had seen Marie de Guise do. Gavin halted Bastard in front of Queen Mary's hunting cages. Several peregrines and larger birds of prey dozed in the cool morning air; their hoods stitched with the royal crest. Skye leapt off Bastard and untied her peregrine from the beast's haunches. The peregrine cooed and raised its talons, expecting Skye to reach inside and release him from his narrow accommodations.

The peregrine swiveled his head as Skye lifted him into his cage below Mary Stuart's birds. She pulled off his little hood and smiled as the bird nipped at her fingernails. The peregrine's beak could have easily torn her nail off, but only nibbled to show his disdain. She

stroked the bird's ash-colored feathers as it closed its eyes and lowered his head. Skye's gloved hand retreated from the cage door, and as she was closing it, the peregrine shot its neck out to block the door! Skye laughed as she pushed her partner's face back into the cage and locked it. The peregrine muttered and hissed as it paced around its new cage. Skye's partner then turned around, lifted his tailfeathers, and defecated near the cage's lock. With a self-satisfied pip, the peregrine shook himself into a plume of bird dandruff before preening himself. Skye turned to see Gavin scrunch his nose at her bird.

An elderly Frenchwoman bobbed into view of the stables from Holyrood. She spoke with a cloth covering her mouth and nose. The woman's eyes watered, and Skye wondered if it was because of the stink of the stables. The Frenchwoman nearly shouted due to how the cloth muffled her voice.

"If you follow me to the South Quarter¹⁷, the Queen is attending her morning Mass, you will wait for her in its courtyard."

"Aye."

The woman turned and retreated towards the palace, not waiting to see if Skye was following her. Skye glided in front of Gavin with long strides, aware of his eyes on her as she disappeared through the stone archway leading into the palace.

* * *

"Always fe't abbeys were more fer a country's monarch than us common fo'k."

Skye crossed her legs as she spoke atop a low courtyard wall. She chewed a chunk of gristle from her waist pouch. She had offered Lord James her pouch, but the Lord had declined

¹⁷ Abbeymount; Destroyed during the Rough Wooing (1543 – 1551); Rebuilt

as he leaned against the wall to sun himself. They waited outside the front door of Mary Stuart's private chapel as Lord James continued their conversation,

"My dear sister and her honorable ladies-in-waiting find comfort in its teachings. To them, daily service is their daily bread. Religion is for everyone, monarchs and common folk alike." His eyes turned to her without moving his head. "Besides marriage, is religion against your guild's wishes too?"

Skye ground the gristle between her canines and spat the glob onto the hydrangea bushes nearest them. She was sweating furiously in the rising day's heat and no one, *no one*, thought to offer her water? She glowered at passing servants. They bowed to Lord James, but they looked through her. Skye felt her station was above theirs; she was a *guildswoman*, and these cretins had the nerve to ignore her? She snorted and answered Lord James,

"Why 'ould his Godliness concern hi'self with me when he has words of wisdom to pa's onto his chosen, those with royal blood and pre'nant spouses, or mistresses."

Skye shifted closer to Lord James, her short hair waving in the breeze. Lord James stepped away from the wall.

"There are those who teach equality under Protestantism, a nice sentiment, but I agree, why would an omniscient, omnipotent being bother with those not chosen to rule? Seems like a waste when the plights of Kings, and Queens, determine the fate of *those who serve them*."

Skye lifted herself off the wall and bowed her head to Lord James before taking a walk around the chapel's garden. She could never read Lord James, not like her other lovers. After Marie de Guise's death, she felt sure Lord James would be legitimized as a Regent of Scotland, while his sister Mary continued her ruling as a Queen of France. However, the sudden return of Mary Stuart, Queen of Scotland, threw Skye's plans into disarray. Lord James Stuart was still an

illegitimate child of James V; he would never rule. She had tried for months to find herself pregnant with his child, but each month passed with disappointment. When Mary Stuart requested her as a falconer, she had changed tactics. Skye pricked her fingers against the spines of bushes as she trailed her hands across those bloated from the heavy plant heads. Flowerbeds bowed each time the breeze passed by. Skye watched the slender stems bow headfirst, even in the light breeze, imagining them in place of Holyrood's staff. She glared at the plants and thought,

What does it feel like, having those beneath your station bow fervently in your presence?

She looked around as the palace guards rotated around her, some smiling up (and down) at her, while others stared blankly ahead. While her social station, as an apprentice, was a coveted one, Skye knew she could do better. The mistress to the Queen's half-brother or a position as the Queen's personal falconer would elevate her further. Skye dug her toe into a grassy patch, uprooting a rock and casting it out of the flowerbed as a group of servants walked into the courtyard. Morgan's voice grated on Skye's ears.

"Besides falconry, I didn't realize ya wer' a gardener. Make shure the soils tilled."

Skye rolled her eyes to face Morgan and a handful of unfamiliar French girls. The falconer and body servants glared at one another. The French girls behind Morgan shifted uncomfortably as Skye stood before them in trousers. They seemed almost embarrassed to look directly at Skye. Skye stretched her body before them and then responded,

"I've nev'r ben afraid to muck 'round, Morgan. Glad to see yer faring well amongst the French than yer own people. How is our Queen und'r yer care?" Skye smoothly waved her voice over Morgan's, "poorly if Queen Mary would rath'r ride and hunt with her ladies and me, than stay with ya as company."

Skye watched with a smirk as Morgan's jaw protruded from beneath her skin. The falconer stretched herself taller, listening to the cracks and pops of her back and hips. Morgan raised her chin at Skye and sidestepped the falconer closer to the chapel's door. Lord James spoke to one of the French ladies and nodded to Morgan. Morgan made her report of the Queen's health and Lord James spoke of his sister's parade through Edinburgh soon. Skye stuffed her left cheek with the remaining wads of gristle from her pouch, chewing and smacking her lips in their direction as she leaned against an alder tree. Her mouth filled with spit from her rapid chewing, causing her to bite down on her cheek. She grunted from the sharpness of her teeth and the tenderness of her cheek. She spat out a bloody mass of gristle onto the roots of the alder tree. Gardeners glared at her as they rose from the flowerbeds, their knees and hands wearing dirt and mud like gloves. Skye glared at them as her cheek swelled, daring them to say something to her.

Voices rose in volume from the courtyard's entrance as a stream of guards suddenly rushed in from Holyrood, Gavin amongst them. He had his sword gripped tight, but not unsheathed as Lord Lyndsay¹⁸ shouted from the front gates,

“The idolater Priest shall die the death, in accordance with God's law¹⁹!”

¹⁸ Lord Patrick Lyndsay, 6th Lord of Lyndsay led two mobs against Mary's private Mass on 24 August.

¹⁹ John Knox's *History* p. 191, “the idolater Priest shall die the death, according to God's law”.

Gavin – Holyroodhouse Front Gates

“She’s certainly usin’ yer for her pleasure. I fi’ured this was old news to ya and ya just went alon’ wit it? I nev’r took you for an idiot.”

Gavin gaped across the table as he folded his cards in defeat. Calum took a swing of beer, his eyes watching Gavin from over the rim of his cup. Gavin swiped up the cards and reshuffled them. He couldn’t meet Calum’s eyes in the small guard’s room just inside Holyrood’s gates. Mary’s Servaise de Conde had ousted the palace guards from taking their breaks inside the palace kitchens. The chamberlain claimed the guards were distracting the cooks and making a mess of the kitchens. Gavin and Calum wondered if Servaise de Conde had ever *actually* seen the kitchens, it was a warzone whether the guards were there or not. In fact, Calum began a betting pool to see who would survive a kitchen war, the French or the Scots. Nonetheless, the chamberlain made a convincing argument to Lord James, and he had a guard’s station erected just beside the gates.

Calum swiped the card deck from Gavin and dealt between the two of them. Gavin still couldn’t meet his partner’s eyes as he fiddled with his gauntlets. Calum ceased his dealing, folded his hands, and drummed them atop the table.

“I’ve ‘ot myself a credible source sayin’ yer Starry Skye is lookin’ higher than the wife of a low-tiered palace ‘uard.”

Gavin hissed, but his words were shakey.

“Apprentices can’t marry until they’re masters, Calum.”

“Seems plenty experience’d to me.”

Without a thought, Gavin lunged across the table and tackled Calum to the floor. Calum coughed out a lung-full of air and sputtered, while Gavin pressed his forearm against his friend’s

throat. Gavin's nostrils flared as he glared down at Calum, his friend desperately trying to squirm out from beneath his heavier friend. The white-searing anger in Gavin's gut churned his stomach into a cauldron of bile that bubbled near the back of his throat onto his tongue. With deliberate slowness, Gavin moved his forearm away from Calum's throat. Calum laughed weakly and patted his friend's shoulder.

"'avin, tell me yer not as stupid as she makes ya out to be. She's ambitious, and your bed isn't lofty enou'h to tempt her for lon'er than a warm ni'ht or two." Calum wheezed and smiled sadly. "'avin, I want to watch out for ya, but she's only usin' ya for sex."

The bile in Gavin's throat turned tail and retreated to his stomach as he released Calum. Gavin hoisted Calum to his feet and stepped back as Calum spat into a corner, breathing heavily, and then retying his long hair. Gavin returned to the table and laid his face against the wood. A couple of splinters buried themselves into his skin, but he didn't care. He knew the rumors that circulated around Skye, but he *knew* they were only rumors. Calum stepped over to pound a warm hand against Gavin's back. Gavin groaned and Calum sighed.

"Yer a fool friend of mine, 'avin, but a friend to me ya always be."

Gavin's voice was muffled by the wood pressing against his lips.

"I kno' her, Calum. She's nervous about me, but I kno', I just kno', I can provide for us. She looks at me dif'rently than other men. We're faithful to each other, and that's 'nough for me."

Calum yanked Gavin off the table and guided him towards the gates of Holyrood. Gavin turned his face away from two pairs of guards that were waiting outside the guardhouse. He didn't realize it was time to change shifts, and he was embarrassed that his fellow guards saw

him like that. He was grateful to Calum for dragging him out of there. Once they were before Holyrood's gates, Calum exclaimed,

“Ack! Whose idea was it to hire ya as a ‘uard?” Calum snorted. “Yer fancy with a sword, but yer words are deadly – I ‘most, ri’ht, threw up!”

Gavin massaged his eyes with his fingertips, worried how red they must have looked after he nearly started crying. As he sniffled, and the black and white dots disappeared from his vision, he saw Calum suddenly gripping his sword and sliding the blade halfway out of the sheathe. Calum lowered his center of gravity and stepped forward a few paces from Holyroodhouse. Gavin turned around him to see other palace guards hurrying to the front entrance. He finally looked down the pathway leading up to Holyroodhouse, a mob rose from the hills led by Lord Lyndsay. Lord Lyndsay shouted over his mass of men,

“Stand down, curs! We’re here on official business.”

Calum spoke first, his voice alerting and drawing more palace guards to the front gates.

“State yer business then, Lord Lyndsay. The Queen’s occupied and will hear yer bu’iness in the throne room. I’ll escort you *only* to the throne room, yer ‘uests must remain outside the ‘ates.”

Lord Lyndsay snarled,

“We are here not for the Queen, but to punish the Catholic priest she houses here. We are a Protestant country and will not stand for the Pope’s dog to practice and preach here!”

Calum sheathed his sword and raised his palm. However, his fellow guards unsheathed their swords. The mob drew closer around Lord Lyndsay. Many of the citizenry carried small daggers and thick sticks, none of them pointed at the guards, yet. Calum spoke softly, his words slow,

“I kno’ yer frustration, my Lord, I am Protestant myself.” Gavin froze, trying not to give away Calum’s lie. “Ho’ever, our Queen practices all quiet like and Lord James protects her person’l practice. Will ya act a’ainst both children of James V?”

With their weapons drawn, both the mob and palace guards stood unsure of the other. Lord Lyndsay halted before Calum. Calum whispered without moving his lips to Gavin,

“Find Lord James, now!”

Carefully, Gavin retreated between the amassing guards, never taking his eyes off the mob in front of him. The air was sharp with human static. The citizenry formed scattered, tight circles behind Lord Lyndsay, while Calum stood with his wall of fellow guards. Calum was not the highest ranked guard in the vicinity, but his proximity to Lord Lyndsay deterred Calum’s superiors from interfering. Even Lord Lyndsay stilled as Calum kept his sword unsheathed, but relaxed. Curious servants huddled around the front entrance as Gavin slipped between the doors. Guards from inside the palace either broke rank to defend the gate or followed Gavin towards Mary Stuart’s private chapel. The mob’s presence had alerted the servants, and the Scots gathered weapons, readying a butter knife if necessary. The French servants scattered around the palace, most of them darting towards the chapel for protection from either their Queen or God. Gavin ran into the courtyard, his hand securing his sheathed blade as it bounced on his hip. Behind Gavin, Lord Lyndsay screamed (hopefully not in triumph over Calum),

“The idolater Priest shall die the death, in accordance with God’s law!”

The mob began chanting alongside Lord Lyndsay as Gavin darted towards the chapel where Lord James stood. Gavin halted as Skye lunged and gripped his forearm, Lord James and Morgan approached quickly. The gardeners gripped their shears and hoes, standing in front of the Queen’s chapel alongside the remaining palace guards. Morgan’s French body servants

huddled like sparrows in between the palace walls and bushes. Skye gripped Gavin's forearm, her eyes moving from Holryood gates to the chapel. She shook Gavin's arm and barked at him,

"What's happening outside?"

Before Gavin could answer her, Lord James approached. Gavin quickly turned to his superior. Skye's eyes darkened and released Gavin as she stood inside Lord James's shadow.

"Lord Stuart, Lord Lyndsay has approached the palace with the citizenry! They're calling for –"

Gavin gasped, his heart clamoring. Lord James spoke over Gavin with quiet urgency,

"Yes, yes, we can all hear the screams of the 6th Lord of Lyndsay. I'll speak to him myself." Lord James turned to Morgan, "bar the chapel door from the inside. If the Queen protests, let her know it is for her own safety. The Earl of Montrose²⁰ and Thomas Randolph²¹ should ease her into staying put."

Morgan gripped her skirts over her ankles and ran towards the chapel. She yelled at the flock of French body servants to follow her inside. Gavin and the other guards fell behind Lord James as he stepped to face Lord Lyndsay's rising volume. Skye turned briefly, standing alone in the courtyard, gripping her waist pouch and turning away from the chapel. Gavin paused as Lord James led the pack of palace guards out towards the front entrance. Gavin heard the crunch of Lord James' heavy steps; Mary Stuart's half-brother balled his fists as he marched towards Lord Lyndsay's chanting mob. Instead of following Lord James, Gavin followed Skye into a palace corridor.

"Skye, I think it's safer for ya to wait inside the chapel with the Queen and Morgan."

²⁰ Only noble to attend the Queen's first Mass; Politically moderate

²¹ English ambassador to Queen Elizabeth and William Cecil; friend of Mary Stuart

He reached for her hand and clasped it. She yanked herself away from him, her gray eyes flashing like a thunderstorm.

“You think I would be safer in the company of a soft, religious book reader, noblemen, a meek bedchamber servant, and yes, our beloved Queen?”

Skye’s voice shrieked throughout the corridor, guards and servants paused before remembering the angry Protestant mob outside Holyrood. Few members of Mary Stuart’s house paused to listen in, but someone was always listening in Holyroodhouse’s halls.

“Skye please, I jus’ want ya to be protected in case Lyndsay’s mob storms inside! I know yer scared, but please, let me protect ya.”

Gavin’s voice pleaded as he mimed with his hands to quiet herself. His raised palms seemed to have the opposite effect. He glanced around, feeling the judgmental stares of his fellow guards and the inevitable palace gossip. The long hallways were still sparse with tapestries and rugs, causing her voice to boom all throughout Holyroodhouse.

“What isn’t like me Gavin?” Her voice continued to rise in volume. “I refuse to wait like a corner’d rat, pleading not to be found in a tight box.”

Gavin gripped his sword, nearly jerking it out of its sheath, as he shook it. He waved his free hand around, knocking against a suit of armor and flung the suit’s helmet right off. The heavy metal bounced and skittered across the corridor, leaving fingernail-thin gashes along the floor before it settled against the wall. Gavin and Skye watched the helmet slide, neither one of them moving to pick it up and replace it. He finally spoke with a tight voice,

“My duty is to protect Queen Mary and everyone in this palace, have some faith in me!”

Skye barked out a laugh; the explosion of it echoed between them. When she whispered, the hair on his arms rose.

“I trus’ ya in my bed, Gavin, not with my life. I will protect it myself.”

She turned away from him towards the fallen helmet. Skye snatched it from the floor, turned, and shoved it into Gavin’s arms. Her short hair seemed to stand on end from her anger.

“That’s for your protection when this place falls around your head.”

Gavin felt his eyes itch as he stared at her retreating reflection in the dull helmet. He quickly wiped his eyes and began to turn towards the palace entrance to assist Lord James. He’d nearly cried twice today in succession, he wished he had a drink. Gavin still carried the helmet when a podgy woman turned a corner with a bolt of cloth and two apprentices. Isla eyed the helmet in Gavin’s hands.

“No need to raid the armory, Gavin. Lord James has ‘ready sent Lord Lyndsay and his mob away. Apparently, Lord James request’d our Morgan barricade the Queen in her chapel. The was Queen was nay too happy about it.” Isla leaned forward, the bolt of cloth somehow weighing her down enough as she teetered forward. “Poor Morgan got an earful. Queen Mary’s booming lecture – some in French, which I don’t kno’ what that was meant to accomplish, Morgan doesn’t kno’ French. If you ask me, Lord James did the ‘ight thing and –” Isla finally paused. “Gavin?”

The man turned from her, setting the helmet where it belonged as he bit into his upper lip to keep quiet. Isla set her bolt of cloth in the hands of one apprentice.

“Abby, Rebecca, take this to the French tailors. They could use something to do instead of sippin’ tea and eatin’ all day. Really, they gab as if there’s no work to be done ‘round here!”

Abby and Rebecca shared a smile at Isla before hurrying to the privy room where the seamstresses, all of them, worked. Once the girls’ braids were out of earshot, Isla took Gavin’s

hand in her own and lowered him to the floor. He relented, gripping her hand tightly as she lowered herself. Once she settled against the floor, she clapped her palm against her thighs.

“Old age weight has its perks, ample padding for flo’r conversations.”

She smiled at her brother-in-law, but he continued to stare down the hallway with a shaky breath. Isla ruffled his hair before smoothing the mess she made. They sat quietly side-by-side, Gavin still inhaling staccato breaths and Isla making use of the time. She fished around the pockets of her apron until she pulled out a cloth doll and several squares of castoff dress material. Gavin watched as Isla’s hands worked to create a tiny dress for the doll. The scraps of tulle were pleated beneath a layer of yellow wool and the two ribbons of chiffon were suddenly tiny sleeves. Gavin’s shoulders finally stopped shaking as he listened to Isla’s hum to herself as she worked.

“Skye and I fought ‘gain. She doesn’t see the lengths I go to, to protect her. Those guilds run like brothels – I’ve ‘eard stories from other guards that if an ‘prentice can’t pay their dues, the guild masters take them, man or woman. Why would she want to stay ther’? She needs to move into the palace wher’ I can watch over her. I was the one who recommend’d her skills to Lord James and...” Gavin rubbed at his temples. “I kno’ she wants stability and I can give her that, why can’t she see that, Isla?”

His sister-in-law finished a stitch. The pop of the thread seemed unusually loud to him.

“Gavin, ‘as it ever occurred to ya, that Skye might not want to be with y, other than yer bed?”

“Not this ‘gain, Isla. I kno’ what she’s lookin’ for, it’s what we’re all looking for. Both you and Morgan talk about it, like it’s some magical faerie. But I can give it to her if she’ll just stay with me.”

Isla twirled the needle between her forefinger and thumb, pointing it at Gavin as if it were a tiny dagger. He stared at the tapered edge of the needle as it pointed towards his right eye.

“Yes, Morgan and I are lookin’ for stability. With the English breathing at our bord’rs, a civil war brewing in our backyards, and a *young* Queen does not inspire the stability we’re lo’king for. But perhaps where you see stability lacking, Skye sees freedom. It’s not for us to decide what is bes’ for another person. Especially,” Isla pushed the needle closer to Gavin, “to those we say we love.”

Gavin hung his head over his forearm, willing himself to rise to his feet. His ankles shook inside his boots, but he hauled himself upright. Isla cleared her throat haughtily, her hand outstretched for assistance. He pulled his sister-in-law upright, feeling her body rock as she pushed herself forward. She stuffed the little doll back into her pocket and the needle along the hem of her apron. She dusted her dress and moved to straighten Gavin’s tunic too. She fussed with his sword belt, tightening it so it wouldn’t rock so much when he walked. Then she waddled up the stairs towards the privy room with a low whistle through her teeth. She called from the stairs as she ascended,

“Stay safe durin’ the Queen’s ride through Edinburgh, Gavin. We shou’d ‘ave your new uniforms done with all these extra French hands just lyin’ around in a stupor.”

Gavin stepped back outside the gates of Holyrood, his hand trailing against the wall as if he needed assistance walking. He asked his fellows about Calum, but they said he had left with Lord James after Lyndsay’s dismissal. Gavin continued to walk around the palace, his feet leading him to the stables and towards the falconry cages.

CHAPTER III

September 1561

Gavin – Edinburgh Royal Mile

Gavin's teeth crunched against his tongue as more dirt was kicked into his face. He turned and spat, feeling the gritty dirt crunch like salt between his teeth. The French guards of Holyrood turned their noses at him in disdain, mocking him in a language he didn't understand. The march to Edinburgh should have been pleasant, Gavin rode the road every day with his faithful horse, Bastard. However, the thick tunic Isla had sewn drew the sweat out of him like a bloated sponge. The day wasn't unusually hot, but Gavin felt the morning sun was purposely singling him out amongst the escorting guards. After Lord Lyndsay's second mob attempt, Lord James commanded several of the palace guards to act as an overwhelming escort during Queen Mary's Edinburgh *joyeuse entrée* ²². Gavin and Calum were originally partnered for Queen Mary's parade, but Calum's recent promotion had him escorting the Four Maries instead. Gavin, alternatively, found himself relegated to the rearmost guard, a direct order by Lord James.

The march was dull as Gavin didn't speak French, and the Frenchmen ignored him or kicked rocks at his greaves. His body moved mechanically, sidestepping the rocks, and thought about Morgan and the other French ladies, recuperating in the palace from injuries. Lord Lyndsay's second mob had successfully entered Holyroodhouse. The Earl of Montrose had suggested more guards escort Mary Stuart's hunting party that afternoon of the first attempt, which left few guards protecting the chapel and its priest. Many palace servants, mostly French, were attending Mass with Morgan among them. Gavin heard no one was seriously injured, but

²² 2 September 1561

Lord James didn't want to have the spectacle of surrounding Mary Stuart's ceremonious arrival through Edinburgh with injured servants in tow.

Gavin heard from Isla that Morgan's face was only slightly battered with an inflamed cheek and a small cut below her right eye. Morgan's knuckles had apparently been split by her fall onto the cobblestone. Gavin originally feared Morgan's knuckles had been split from an altercation with Lord Lyndsay. Isla relayed Morgan's seething words to him,

"This Knox and his lackey Lyndsay are Protestant bastards, what right do they have to label us as *dontibours*²³ for our faith?"

Gavin's stomach knotted with sickly guilt as he hadn't volunteered to stay behind at Holyrood. He had hoped Queen Mary's *joyeuse entrée* would provide him the opportunity to gain Mary's favor, but he couldn't accomplish anything from the rear of the train. Mary's parade entered Edinburgh with fanfare as she made her arrow-straight path towards Edinburgh Castle for lunch with the nobility. The eighteen-year-old Queen must have glowed in her regal dress and jewels as she passed through the city. Gavin rarely looked upon the Queen as he wasn't often stationed around her. He looked around as the citizenry of Edinburgh threw petals and streams of paper from the windows of nearby buildings.

The once open road from Holyrood to Edinburgh was suddenly narrowed by the influx of citizens and onlookers from neighboring towns. Gavin felt Bastard sidestep closer to his French allies as a wall of living people seemed to fall into the streets. As quickly as the citizenry fell, they backed away against Edinburgh's buildings like a constant wave. Bastard snorted a web of mucus into the air as Gavin raised himself over the populace. The crest of Mary Stuart blazed on his chest from the sunlight. The road sloped downwards as Gavin spied the head of Mary

²³ "translatable only as 'whores'" (Graham 131)

Stuart's processional train enter the gates of Edinburgh Castle, leaving much of her entourage in the streets before it. Gavin squinted from the sunlight at the sudden halt. He waited for their orders, but the crowds were too dense and noisy for him to even hear his French partners that stood beside him. A few of Gavin's neighbors called out to him in recognition, but he couldn't hear them either. He stood in the sun, feeling the sweat slide down his chest and the inevitable itch of drying salt on his skin made him irritable. Bastard turned to chew on Gavin's boot, but slowly halted when Gavin drummed his knuckles against the horses back. He fumed in his head,

Are we to enter or not? Where are our orders? Gavin wondered if Calum had been allowed to enter the castle. *I'll buy the lucky bastard a drink and drown him in questions.*

Gavin smiled as he thought of his friend. Calum deserved the recognition. Especially so when the other Holyrood guards had been too afraid to challenge Lord Lyndsay. The smile disappeared as he scratched at the drying sweat-salt that shimmied further down his back. He gripped his sword and wondered if Lord Lyndsay had been dealt with more severely by Lord James. Perhaps none of the servants would have been harmed by the second mob.

The fanfare continued to roar in the narrowed street as Gavin looked up to see one of the Scots palace guards riding towards them. Fraser was perpetually sweaty, and despite the wind, his horse provided through sheer speed. He always looked like he had run from Arthur's Seat and back to Holyroodhouse.

"Dam' hot toda' for a parade! Gavin," Fraser ignored the Frenchmen as they stepped closer to hear their orders. He was a notorious Francophobe, which brought many pranks atop his small head from Gavin and Calum. "We're to 'ait out in this bastard hea' until the proces'ion

begins later this afternoo'. Captain James²⁴, Calum, and a few at the fron' are inside, but the res' of us worms are to dry out in the heat. We'll see abo't getting' some drinks out here!"

Fraser muttered to himself as he rode back to the front of Mary Stuart's train, scratching at his sweaty armpit. Gavin felt his stomach curl into a ball of ice. Calum's position had rose higher than Gavin had considered. Perhaps Calum was ingratiating himself to Mary Stuart. Gavin felt the hot ground crack beneath his leather boots as he considered Calum's words earlier that week,

"I've 'ot myself a credible source sayin' your Starry Skye is lookin' to climb higher socially than the wife of a low-tiered palace 'uard."

He wiped the sweat collecting beneath his stubble. At times, he felt closer to Calum than his own brother, Kip, but now, he didn't know if he wanted to buy Calum a drink, ever again. Gavin followed the French guards as they made their way towards the entrance gates of Edinburgh Castle. The guards of Edinburgh acted as a second barrier between the Holyrood guards, the citizenry, and the palace walls. The men of Edinburgh spat as they saw the mixing of Scots and French Holyrood guards. Knox's promotion of Protestantism made the nobility wary of the Catholic French. In contrast, most of the citizenry tolerated the French guards so long as their practicing of Mass was unseen.

Gavin slid down Bastard's side, the beast shaking its body as if Gavin were a great weight. He shouldered his way through the mass of bodies as his horse nipped at any shoulders he could reach. Gavin felt his tongue glue itself to the floor of his mouth as he tried to swallow what little spittle he could form. He clopped inside the closest shadow of Edinburgh Castle and dropped himself against the stonewalls. Bastard remained standing, absently tugging at the plants

²⁴ *Author's note:* Captain James is not to be confused with Lord James, Mary Stuart's half-brother

growing in between the walls of Edinburgh Castle. Gavin's legs stretched out, and he closed his eyes as sweat continued to slide down his stomach into his trousers. He yanked at the collar, trying to force the tunic to unglue itself from his skin as he panted alongside Bastard. A line of ants marched in front of his boot. Gavin watched momentarily before skidding his boot across their line. The sudden disruption caused the grain-sized, black bodies to scatter into a tangled mass before returning to their formation. Gavin moved to disrupt the line again as a worn, hunting boot kicked away his heel. He nearly snarled at the Edinburgh native before recognizing the man with a jug of water. The man playfully growled in a mocking voice,

“Glad to see I ain’t a royal with nap’ing guards like ye. I’d be murder’d for chure.”

Gavin rose to hug his brother, but Kip gently planted his foot on Gavin's chest, pushing him back into the shadows of the castle. Kip returned to his own slightly slurred speech,

“Figured you’d be thirsty and drams ain’t the best for days like t’is.”

Kip bent down to hand Gavin a ceramic cup as the sun glinted off his increasingly balding head. Kip's facial hair tried to climb past his ears to cover his crown, but Kip was destined to remain bald the rest of his short life. Gavin smelled the stink of deer urine and droppings that marked Kip as a hunter. Kip sold the meat in the market, and the pelts and antlers to the nearby nobles. Gavin never asked, but he wondered how Isla dealt with the smell day after day, even when Kip's hands weren't covered in deer blood. Gavin's voice was muffled as he spoke through his cup at Kip,

“Speakin’ of shirking duties, why’re here and not out in the woods like a normal goblin?”

Kip leaned against a wooden barrel, peeking inside before waving his hand up at the castle. He smacked his lips from his sip of water.

“Thou’t I catch a glimpse of the Cat’lic Queen ‘fore she returns to her perch. Rode into town late, ne’er saw her. But tel’ me, Gavin, isn’t she a lass? Barely touch’d with womanhood from what I ‘ear.”

Gavin glanced around his fellow Scotsmen, and then at the sweating French. He never knew how much the French understood Scots, and he knew his brother wasn’t a peach towards the monarchy, especially after the Reformation.

“She’s a wee Queen, aye, many years in her to find her pow’r and mature.”

“Ah, naïve then.” Kip swirled the water in his cup, shaking his head. “‘eard about Lord Lyndsay’s event, a drinkin’ lad of mine went ‘long. He said it was only to smash a few wi’dows, not hurt anyone. Sorry about the Morgan lass. Isla’s been worried about that cut on her face.”

Gavin rolled his eyes over the rim of the cup and retorted tartly,

“I bet you whoop’d with glee at ‘earing your leader take a swing at the Pope-y priest.”

Kip swiped his bald head with his forearm before fully turning to speak to Gavin.

“Knox doesn’t belie’e in the violence Lyndsay does, Gav. Ye, we’d like these idolatrous Cat’lics to swim back to France, but what does harm do? Makes ‘em dig their heels deeper and fight back.” Kip waved his hand, splashing Gavin’s leg with water. “Then what, the country ‘ill split itself and be too weak to stand and face that cad Cecil and his pet Queen, Elizabeth.”

Gavin quickly glanced around the clustered guards; none appeared to have heard Kip. Thomas Randolph had “friends” in the guards, Calum suspected as much too, and he didn’t want to be found having close ties with Knox’s insurgents. Even Lord James was wary of the zealot.

“Kip ‘eep your voice dow’.” Gavin took another drink, smacking his lips as he was finally cooling down. “I didn’t think you took his words serious’y. What does Isla t’ink of it?”

Kip refilled their cups and joined his brother in the shade. Bastard nuzzled Kip's shoulder before biting into him. Kip smacked his cup against the beast's nose. They drank quietly for several minutes, slurping instead of speaking, and watching the passing ant line together.

When they were children, Kip and Gavin were practically joined at the hip. They ran through Edinburgh's back alleys like cats, chasing women and running from the city's guards. However, once Gavin became a man and took a position under Marie de Guise, their easy brotherhood faded. Gavin never asked what his brother thought of his position at Holyroodhouse, and Kip never probed for an explanation. Gavin wondered if Isla would ever ask on his brother's behalf, but she never did. Instead, she mediated between them over the topic of the Reformation. Kip was a Knox man; Gavin was not, and its simplicity put them at odds. Kip finally spoke, breaking Gavin's moody thoughts on the change in his brother.

"Iz²⁵ says to step caref'lly; despite the tolerance the Queen is showin' to Protestants 'ithin her household. But 'tween her and the Lords of the Congregation, sides will need to be taken, 'pecially if she's young and na'ive. Gav, do you believe this wee Queen can control or com'and the Lords and Earls? Not 'ven de Guise could keep them in line, and she was bless'd with a wit sharper than steel. On top of that, the English have enter'd our country, ambassador or not. Gav, do you have faith in a *queen*?"

Gavin drank the remaining half cup. He didn't have an answer for his brother.

²⁵ *Author's Note:* Iz is Kip's nickname for Isla

Kip – Edinburgh, the *joyeuse entrée*

Kip excused himself from Gavin when the gates of Edinburgh unveiled Mary Stuart before the populace again. The Queen's procession would slowly progress through the city again as she was officially named the country's monarch. The guards of Holyrood and Edinburgh Castle found themselves in tight formation as the citizenry continued to swell into the streets. Kip maneuvered between capillary-thin alleyways, further away from Edinburgh Castle, until he neared a building a half mile away from the castle's gates. He climbed the back stairway, his knees buckling as the wooden staircase splintered from his weight. The old wood held him aloft, but Kip never trusted the slumping steps as they slowly reached towards the ground.

The upper floors of the building were in disarray with peeling paint, chunks of plaster missing, and a few of the windows broken through. However, despite its defects, Edinburgh's nobility ignored the building as its ground floor was used on occasion by Knox for impromptu sermons. Kip stepped lightly across the wooden floor; he swore he could hear the wood crack as he made his way to a window to watch the procession of Queen Mary Stuart begin. The crowd beneath their window applauded and roared like a feral beast as Mary Stuart waved from within her elaborate pall of purple velvet decorated with gold and silver silk. When she peaked out from within the thin curtains, her dress and hair shone in the early afternoon. She was layered in crisp whites and her hair burned like fire as gems sparkled. The display of wealth caused a mass grumbling from the men beside Kip. The hoisting of Mary Stuart reminded Kip of the blasphemous Israelites and the golden calf. He wondered, out of all the nobility in Scotland, who played the part of Aaron, and who of Moses²⁶?

²⁶ Biblical narrative of the Golden Calf; Exodus 32:1-24

Mary Stuart's train slowed beneath Kip's window. The streets were narrower here and the mass of people reaching out to her slowed her procession to a near crawl. Kip stared at the young Queen. He watched as she smiled and waved her delicate hands in broad strokes, but her head never remained still. Kip wondered if she was dividing her attention amongst the citizenry instead of focusing on the nobility. Kip appraised her garments from his height, wondering if the unseen needlework was the craft of his wife or someone else from Edinburgh. He had seen Gavin's tunic and recognized the unique threading his wife employed as a signature. Isla was possessive of her craft, and Kip never knew where she learned her trade. He briefly smiled down at the young Mary Stuart, as he thought of his wife. If it weren't for Isla's skills, they would have been in the poorhouse during the lean-hunting months when Kip returned emptyhanded. If anything, the nobility ensured his wife's employment and comfort. A voice slurred behind Kip,

"Ack, fallin' for her hel'ish charms too, Kip?"

Kip's smile disappeared as he turned to his burly companion. The man's barrel-belly wriggled each time he spoke, and his shirt was always stained with ale. Kip felt his nose scrunch from the reek of alcohol perpetually following the man like a cloud. Everyone in the room quieted to watch Kip's reaction. Kip rolled his shoulders and returned his attention to Mary Stuart.

"Thinkin' about me own kin down there in this bastard heat. Poor boy was sweatin' air instead of water, he was so dr-aye."

Barrel-belly sneered as he drummed his fingers across the lid of a barrel.

"T'at's right, yer brother's a guard for that fiery-haired woman. And yer wife's one of her *personal* dressmakers. Tsk tsk, perhaps they're idolatry Cat'olics too." Barrel-belly shook his

head as the other men began whispering to themselves, “Where yer loyalties Kip, with family like that leading’ ya astray.”

Barrel-belly’s lip split with a crack like lightning as he smashed onto the floor. His eyes blinked several times as he laid on the floor, sprawled over his stomach and knees. Several men in the room gripped beneath his hefty forearms, but Barrel-belly’s body remained flaccid on the floor. Suddenly, the large man turned onto his side as he retched a stomach full of ale and cheese onto the boots of those nearest to him. They leapt back from his vomit, hissing and cursing as he lay heaving on the floor surrounded by his personal moat. Kip walked calmly through the ring of men and the moat of half-digested stomach contents. Kip yanked Barrel-belly’s hair, twisting the man’s head back and upwards. Kip dug his nails into the man’s scalp as he whispered,

“T’ey are me kin and if you, or anyone takes a swipe at ‘em, be royal or ain’t, I’ll make them suf’er for it. Ain’t I a good Protestant for warnin’ ye with just my fist, and that was only for yer words. Now ‘magine what I’d do for action agains’ ‘em?”

Knox’s acolytes stood around Kip and Barrel-belly like a fighter’s ring. Some nodded at Kip; others shrunk away from him. Kip kicked at Barrel-belly once, hard enough to leave the larger man hacking out pieces of gooey cheese. One of the older men in the room turned from the window, unconcerned with the ruckus Kip made. His wispy beard was tucked carefully into his shirt like a cravat. The man spoke without turning his head,

“If ya ladies are done gossipin’ and dancin’, ya missed her passage through West Bow²⁷.” The man waved a wad of paper with charcoal scratches at the procession. He raised his nose at

²⁷ Mary was given keys to the town, a Bible and a book of Protestant psalms all written in the vernacular

the open window as the crowds surged behind the trailing guards of Mary Stuart's procession.

"She'll be making her way to High Kirk of St. Giles²⁸ soon."

The men stormed out of the room and shuffled, carefully, down the still-splintering stairwell outside. Not one remained with Barrel-belly as he lay slumped against the floor. Only Kip slid a pitcher of water next to the man before he left the room. The rotting scent of cheese and sour ale lay over Barrel-belly like a blanket. Knox's followers entered the back alleys of Edinburgh, scattering into the crowd and cheering alongside their townsmen. Kip followed, shimmied between the narrow alleys with two acolytes, who were supposedly close friends of Knox's. The alleyways were tight with three grown men nearly jogging between them. Stray cats hissed in the darkness of carts while the occasional bird squawked in agitation. Edinburgh's alleys were labyrinth-like as they detoured away from the largest stretch of road between Holyrood and Edinburgh. Kip glanced at the closed shops and shuttered homes as they passed, wondering if he and Gavin had run through these hidden roadways when they were young. Kip loved his brother, not his choices, and that was the distinction he hoped Barrel-belly understood now.

Kip and the two men moved quickly through the emptier alleys. Several times they halted between the intersections of the alley and main road to gauge Mary Stuart's progression. They remained ahead of her as the citizens of Edinburgh stalled her train with gifts and sheer numbers. The alleyways began to open as the spires of St. Giles clawed at the sky. To Kip, the cathedral reflected the devotion of those who built and maintained it. The face of the cathedral could be split vertically, and each side would reflect perfectly, like a mirror. The great arching windows appeared frosted or dusty from a distance, only to change color as you approached it. The

²⁸ St. Giles' Cathedral; Royal Mile, Edinburgh

architecture was beautiful to Kip, his mind fascinated by the geometry and complicated mathematics he couldn't understand – and never would. His chest warmed and cooled in equal measure as they moved towards the cathedral.

They waited at the margins of St. Giles' square. Kip leaned against the foundational stones of a nearby building, warming his face against the sun. His eyes scanned the face of the cathedral, his memories guiding him inside into a little room where he and Isla had married decades before. Kip walked through his memories like a gallery, some images of the cathedral clearer than others as he retraced his steps. The stain glass bathed the main interior of St. Giles in a rainbow with each band of light shifting with the sun's movement. The long rows of pews stood perpetually in attendance, waiting for the weekly services to begin. Kip could almost breathe in the incense that wafted around the rooms like angels. He and Isla had glided into a backroom where the citizenry of Edinburgh was married. Kip folded his arms across his chest in the sun as he continued to reminisce. As the then-Catholic priest spoke blessings over the couple, he had whispered to Isla,

"I will ever support your aspirations."

Kip smiled to himself as one of Knox's acolytes cut into his memories.

"Yer a creepy 'astard, always smilin' at not'ing."

Kip ignored him as the square began to swell with people. Kip and the two acolytes turned away from St. Giles, away from the approaching queen, and towards a ground-floor house. John Knox's residence stood almost central to the fanfare without so much as an open window to watch. The three of them shuffled through the dense crowd to seat themselves in front of Knox's home. More people shoved themselves into the square to see Mary Stuart. Several girls waited for their queen at the Mercat Cross, three were dressed as Fortune, Justice, and

Policy, while the remaining others greeted Mary Stuart near a fountain flowing with wine. Kip muttered notes to himself as the others wrote their thoughts of Mary's interaction with Edinburgh's populace. She smiled at each virgin girl, holding their gazes for several moments before moving onto the next. Kip considered the personal effect Mary was having on each girl and how their positive interactions with her could sway the citizenry back into the maw of Catholicism²⁹.

The crowds were amassing further as Mary Stuart was carried into view. Her white clothing trailed behind her like a waterfall, rippling over the cobblestone and her heels. Numerous hands reached out to the new monarch, their bodies rushing her like a tidal wave. Calum and several guards intercepted Edinburgh's citizens and lead Mary Stuart further into their midst. The unusually tall woman disappeared from Kip's sight as people climbed atop each other to see Mary Stuart. St. Giles' square was thunderous as the citizens cheered, clapped, stomped, or simply screamed, vying for the attention of the young Queen. Kip shuffled his way back into the alley, hastily collecting discarded wooden crates. He gathered five crates, three to create a base, and the top two to stand upon. The wooden panels gave way slightly as Kip stepped onto his platform with the alleyway acting as a flat handrail. Knox's acolytes saw Kip's elevation and scrambled atop barrels to view the Queen's interactions with the people.

Their vantage point gave them a visual to Mary's movements. The young Queen moved within her tight circle of guards and Four Maries to speak with her subjects. She gently laid her hand on those who reached out to her, but Mary Stuart remained nearly stationary in her tight bubble. Mary then took a cup from one of her honorable ladies-in-waiting, one of the Four Maries, as Kip followed the Queen's movement. Kip was not able to distinguish the Four Maries

²⁹ "Protestantism was by no means in the majority in Edinburgh" (Graham 132)

from one another yet. To him, the Four Maries were unimportant in comparison to Mary Stuart. Calum, one of Gavin's friends, waved and grinned at Kip before gently guiding the Four Maries back to the main street of Edinburgh. Mary Stuart stepped back into her pall with her guards in tight formation.

Kip jumped from his hastily made platform and entered the alleyways again. The acolytes struggled to follow him as the backstreets of Edinburgh swelled with people. Kip wove himself between his neighbors as they shimmied to let him maneuver around them. Kip and the two acolytes pushed and pardoned their way through a narrower road to the Salt Tron³⁰, where a scaffold had been erected for a lecture of sorts. Kip had seen its construction last night and was genuinely curious to know its purpose. The alleys continued to narrow as they neared the Salt Tron. Roaring cheers filled the alleys with a reverberating echo. Kip struggled out of the alleyway, his ankle catching the foot of a sleeping drunk. He fell out of the alleyway, banging his elbows against the cobblestone and feeling the snap of numbness sever sensations from his arms. Kip lay on the ground momentarily as he twisted to snarl at the drunkard. The drunk snored as Kip grabbed the half-filled bottle and chucked it into a nearby drain. Not even the shattering glass of his wine was enough to disturb the splayed man.

The Salt Tron was built on a hill and Kip saw the event had already begun. Mary Stuart stood perpendicular to Kip as they watched an interpretation of Korah, Dathan and Abiram's³¹ hellish fate performed on the platform. Mary Stuart's face was still, a diplomatic smile strained across her powdered face. Kip returned to the performance, unsettled as the actors writhed in mock pain as a lecturer denounced the Catholic Mass before the young queen. He forgot about

³⁰ A weighbridge, used to weigh bulk items; roads were named after the tron; Royal Mile, Edinburgh

³¹ Biblical narrative of a rebellion against Moses and Aaron; Numbers 16:1-31

the two acolytes still struggling in the alleyway as he looked between Mary Stuart and the performance. Despite the Queen's makeup, her dress, and even her status, Kip's stomach twisted as he remembered how young she was. Queen Mary Stuart's smile shrunk as she folded her hands across her lap in small fists. No one else had seemed to notice her as they stared in a numb stupor at the scaffold, except Kip.

One of Knox's acolytes finally freed himself of the alleyway. The acolyte then tripped over the same drunk Kip had and both began cursing at the other. With a wave of his hand, the drunk dismissed the man and returned to snoring. The man stepped leisurely over to Kip to glare at Mary Stuart.

"Damn, we mis'ed a good show again't those Cat'olic bastards. My brother ain't bonny but does a man proud to speak out again's these idolatrous mites. Look at her ladies, *dontibours*, every last one. They look a might sq'eamish, 'haps this'll change their hellish ways."

"The man is yer brot'er?"

Kip stared at the man on the scaffold, hearing, but not listening to his rising voice over the crowd. The acolyte responded,

"Aye, some kin or other t'rough my father. He likes shoutin' more that...er," the man waved his hands, trying to find the words. "Hm...skillfully speakin', or some such."

"Oratin'?" Kip offered.

"That's the bastar' word! See, Knox 'as the fancy trainin' for that. Us, not a mite."

Kip turned to watch the oration and performance come to an end. The second acolyte finally arrived, his trousers stained with a foul-smelling, dark stain. The two of them exchanged words and wrote their observations down, while Kip continued to watch Mary Stuart's face. He wondered how pale, or red, she became during the performance in 'her honor.' There was no

way to tell beneath her powered exterior, and he wondered if that was the point. She was an actor too, an elevated one to be sure, but like the actors on the scaffold, she was looking to gain a reaction from her audience. The cheers around her spoke of her achievement, Edinburgh had accepted her as the monarch. Kip sighed.

CHAPTER IV

Morgan – Holyroodhouse; Queen's Antechamber

I rocked on my heels outside the Queen's bedchamber. The thick wood of the door and walls muffled Mary Stuart's wails inside. Servaise de Conde had banished me from her majesty's presence as I was Scots, just like Knox³². The theologian and young Queen fenced with religion and politics, but when Knox challenged her right to rule, Mary Stuart lost her composure and the debate. Someone had said Lord James was present, acting as the mediator, but I didn't know for sure. I scratched at the scab beneath my eye from Lord Lyndsay's raid. The skin was puckering and coarse beneath my gloved fingertips. The Reformation hadn't brought the stability we had hoped.

A screech echoed within the bedchamber as the door was thrust open and one of the French body servants dashed out. The blonde Frenchwoman returned after some time with a basin of steaming water. Steam blew around her face as she shuffled across the antechamber's rug. I had warned her before to lift her feet when she walked. Just as before, her shuffling feet caught the rug and she nearly tipped forward. I rushed to catch her arms, the slight girl feeling like a limp weed as I steadied her. The water had splashed her dress across her thighs and hips, and I would have laughed if another wail hadn't erupted behind us. She smiled unsure at me, her thin lips smirking up to her high cheek bones. I held open the door into the Queen's chambers for her. Mary Stuart's voice rushed out in rapid French.

Each time the door swung open, I braced myself for the Queen's laborious cries of a pampered child being told "no" after she had just finished her *joyeuse entrée*. I twisted the loose fabric of my dress like a knotted rope. The same disgust had risen from Marie de Guise's reading

³² 5 September 1561; Knox's first private debate with Mary Stuart

of the young Mary's letter against Francoise de Paroy. I privately thought of how the young Queen hoped to rule if she threw herself into a fit each time her subjects challenged her. This was not uncommon in our country. Knox was not her worst enemy – only the most vocal – but thankfully, she lost privately and not publicly. The door and walls shook again as she wept.

Isla had already dispensed a version of Mary's sparring with the Protestant minister. Sometime during the exchange, Queen Mary accused Knox of witchcraft or necromancy to gain a following in *her* Scotland. Knox's later retort suggested that if a sovereign were to lose God's favor, the monarchy's subjects could resist openly. I picked at the small clumps of dirt stuck to the bottom of my palace shoes. Oddly, I was satisfied that someone had broken the fantasy in which the Queen surrounded herself. She was not invincible and needed to sharpen herself to survive. I wanted to hear more from Isla, but Servaise de Conde had screamed for me to return to the bedchamber. And yet, here I stood, outside the bedchamber listening to the cries of Mary Stuart.

I mentally counted each time Mary Stuart bawled the words: "absolute obedience," "Knox," or "I am Queen." My head rolled against the door with a sigh. Despite her heritage, Mary Stuart didn't have the sharp wit of a de Guise nor the resilience of a Stuart. I tucked my bangs back into their tight coil as I considered the treasonous notion that perhaps, Mary Stuart was a legitimized bastard. I mentally slapped myself at my criticism of her; could I have done any better in her place? Here was a woman – no, a girl! – stripped from the only childhood she had ever known, following the deaths of several family members, and finally, thrust into a social-political-religious terrain unlike any other country. I rubbed my tongue across my teeth, making little sucking noises as I reconsidered my place by her side. She had few allies, and even fewer without personal agendas. I ticked off the names of those in her intimate life: The Four Maries,

Lord James Stewart, and William Maitland³³. I continued to suck in air with a hiss. Lord Stewart was *tolerant* of his half-sister and acted as a chief advisor. Maitland acted as ambassador within Elizabeth's court, but made him easy prey for Cecil to corrupt. I considered each of the Four Maries, but no, they wouldn't betray their Queen, too much love between the five of them, even I saw that. I edged the door open with my toe.

Servaise's cooing whispered inside the bedchamber, casting blame on Knox for disrupting Mary Stuart's hard-won peace. The French body servants must have agreed, what else were they to do? I snorted to myself. One successful trip around Edinburgh did not make the rest of our country peaceful. The French body servants cried alongside their queen, likely sharing in their Monarch's misery of the Scottish country. Servaise's heavy footsteps had turned from the bedridden Queen and clipped towards the crack-opened door! I stepped away from the door, pretending to gaze over an open space where the guards sparred. The door opened further as Servaise de Conde jerked his hand inside the Queen's bedchambers. I attempted the French curtsy before entering the room.

Mary Stuart was atop her bed, her face wiped clean of her makeup and her pale skin blotchy with tear stains. Her usually beautifully braided hair was smooshed against one side of her head and the rest puffed around her shoulders in a red mass. The mass of red reminded me of some red sea grass Kip once showed me washed ashore. The oceanic plant was splayed on the beach like tendrils, which mirrored her majesty's hair. For a moment, I preferred the sight of her like this. Mary Stuart looked human. She looked like the young woman she was. I stood in the entrance of the Queen's bedroom, waiting for her or Servaise's orders. Like lightning illuminating the night, the French body servants thrust open the curtains too quickly. I blinked

³³ Secretary Lethington to Mary Stuart; Politically Moderate (Protestantism)

around the room as light reflected the gilded décor to bathe the Queen in natural light instead of just the fireplace. Queen Mary continued to hiccup and cry behind the thin curtains of her bedframe. They were the same ones I had arranged the day she arrived. Mary Stuart spied me through her wet eyelashes and sniffled,

“I am Queen, your Queen, am I not, Morgana?”

I resisted the urge to correct her, she sounded too pitiful. Why was she looking for my confirmation? Although, I did mentally check the thirty-seventh time she said, “I am Queen.”

“Yes, yo’r majesty.”

“Then answer me, truthfully!” I didn’t dare. “Would you turn against me as Knox has? Does all of Scotland follow his lead rather than their monarch’s?”

Her voiced whined in the grand room of painted angels and statuettes of bathing women. She tried to glare at me, a trick she may have learned from her mother-in-law, Catherine de’Midici³⁴. Her dark eyes weren’t strong like onyx or a terrifying dark loch. Sadly, pathetically, her eyes reminded me of charred wood, all burned out. But, somewhere in those charred ruins of a broken fantasy of childhood, I spied an ember of hellfire. I straightened and stepped closer to her flimsy barriers as the French ladies held their breath. My hands opened the curtains separating us. She looked worse without the curtains protecting her even slightly from view. Her nose dribbled as I handed her my handcloth from my pocket. I bowed.

“Yo’r our Queen, my lady. My role is to provide whatev’r you wish of me. I will support you.”

“Then tell your countrymen I am their Queen and I will demand their absolute obedience!”

³⁴ French Queen; Wife of King Henry II; Oversaw Mary’s French upbringing

The force of her voice pushed me back like a physical assault. My heart had stalled, and for a moment, my hands shook against my chest. Her growl trapped itself in my head; I found her fire. Mary Stuart hiccupped once, and the spell was broken. She fell atop her pillows in tears as her other servants cheeped in French. Servaise de Conde quickly crossed the wooden floor topped with tile-like rugs towards me. I didn't resist as he dragged me from the queen's side and back into the antechamber. He tossed me out, the force of his push causing me to stumble. I called out to the slamming door,

“Tea wit’ hon’y ‘ill soothe her throat!”

The Queen's room shook with her outrage. I was pleased, at least, she had changed from sadness to anger. I swore I heard her accuse the Scottish country of killing her mother. I rolled my eyes and massaged my grinding jaws. My fingers pushed against my jawbone in tight, firm circles until I loosened them. The antechamber was bathed in softer light from the large windows. Honeyed wooden browns encircled the room as I toured about. Mary Stuart rarely stayed in this room, or any room, for long. She preferred to be outside hunting, sporting, or dancing. I loved this room. All the wood reminded me of a civilized forest, far, *far*, away from bugs. A few of the wooden slats creaked against my weight; the sound barely audible over the queen's screaming at Servaise now.

The writing desk-cabinet combination was warm from the open window, and I could feel the heat from behind my gloves. My fingers trailed over the whirls and loops that fingerprinted the wood. Smudges of ink and skin oils had darkened the wood over time. It was an old resident of Holyrood. I tugged at some of the drawers, many containing ink, paper, and wax seals. However, the topmost drawer housed sheets of parchment with tightly-aligned scribbles across them. I pulled out the thick pieces of paper and squinted at the loops of ink, unsure of what they

said. I chastised myself for not learning to read, or write, from Isla when she was learning at the local abbey. I pulled the paper closer to my face as I had seen Isla do; maybe there was a trick to reading there? Nothing. I shoved the paper back into the drawer.

I had just now realized how quiet the Queen's bedchamber was. I moved towards the door and knocked. My knuckles sounded unusually loud. The echoes seemed to ripple across the wood as Servaise opened the door. Servaise clicked his tongue and pushed passed me, leaving the door open. I stuck my tongue out at his back and entered the room. Mary Stuart lightly snored behind her bedcurtains, again, reminding me of a thin cage to contain her. The other body servants were slumped over stools, their necks flushed and eyes crusting from tears. I leaned against one of the wooden posts of her bed, appraising her as I folded my arms. She had only just arrived in Scotland; Mary Stuart needed to be tempered. I had seen it, barely, but it was there, the hellfire that would burn away her submission and naivete. I stepped inside her cage and tucked her further in as if building a cocoon for her. I whispered to her as she slept in her armor of wool and satin,

“Let your fire burn. Burn brighter than anyone this country has ever seen.”

December 1562

Isla – Holyroodhouse's Back Kitchen

Isla's chair rocked against the floor as she leaned backwards to stretch herself. A series of audible pops followed from her hips to her shoulders. She had been sitting at the table for the better part of the evening hour, packing the remains of the court's dinner for her apprentices and herself. Several little canvas bags bulged like knots on a log as she patted them gently. Inside each of the bags were cuts of meat, rinds of cheese, fruit, and nuts crusted with sugar. Despite the hefty luggage each apprentice – 4 girls and 1 boy – took home each night, Isla worried if they were eating enough or if they ate at all. The road from Holyroodhouse back to Edinburgh saw a fair amount of traffic, but she worried about them at night. No one had dared assaulted them to her knowledge, but she still fussed. She would ask Gavin and Calum to escort the children home again, if she knew where either of them had run off to!

Loitering house servants congregated inside the furthest preparatory kitchen. The cellar-like room was cold without all three fires burning at once, but one remained hearty with its red glow and lapping flames. Servants of various stations moved around the table were Isla and a few of the Scottish cooks were, packing their evening meals in cheesecloth or canvas bags. Some of them pulled up chairs, their hands crinkly and red from scrubbing the floors and walls of Holyroodhouse. Isla offered her seat to one of the head cooks, a thick-necked man missing the tip of his left forefinger from a knife accident. Two of the cook's apprentices dragged an iron cauldron from outside. Their faces were red and sweaty as they held onto the giant, iron cooking bowl. They finally hung the iron beast over its designated fireplace as other apprentices finished cleaning out the charcoal and ash from the constantly hungry fires.

One of the breadmaking cooks began preparing the dough for the next day, her back turned to the room. An open bottle of wine was passed around with ceramic cups as Isla's apprentices stepped into the back kitchen, their traveling cloaks making them appear like sparrows as they hopped down the steps. Each of them kissed Isla on the forehead before taking their food. Isla grabbed the arm of her eldest apprentice,

“See if Gavin or Calum can escort you all home, one of them should be finishing soon.”

They smiled and nodded, taking care to say their good evenings to everyone in the room before skipping up the steps and disappearing back into the palace. Isla rested her chin atop her hands as men began dealing cards amongst themselves. The cards slid noiselessly across the table as apprentices began sweeping the dingy floor of the preparatory kitchen. No one knew if the floor was originally wood, stone, or more dirt from the spices, spilled wine, and congealed honey of the daily cooking required of a household the size of Holyrood's. They swept, nonetheless. Everyone chatted about their respectful aches, some showing cuts and bruises atop the table for general comparison. Their warm breathing filled the cavern-like kitchen as the bread maker pounded the dough with a steady rhythm. Apprentices eventually came and went, their enthusiasm and skipping wearing out their elders just by watching them. Guards came and went, but neither Gavin nor Calum ever arrived. Isla shrugged as Gavin was most likely somewhere with Skye. The two lovers had since made up from what Kip told her. Gavin seemed happier when he joined them for dinner a few weeks ago, but he never mentioned a word about Skye, and Isla didn't pry.

The thick-necked head cook stood and glanced around the table at the Scottish servants of Mary Stuart. Isla sat with her back to the breadmaking servant as she counted how many were in attendance that evening. She nodded to one of the seated women and she rose to the door,

leading from the kitchen to the rest of Holyrood. Isla listened for the dull thud of the iron lock leading towards Holyrood and a second thud leading towards the stables. Once the locks were in place, the servants slouched in their chairs, pulling out wine and passing cups around. Cards were passed and played. Isla sipped her wine as she dozed in her chair. The cards continued to play hands, some folding and others calling bluffs. Isla opened her eyes as the conversation drifted towards the lives of the nobility.

“De Englishman Randolph, Elizabeth’s pet, been sniffin’ ‘round the Queen of’en enough,” an apprentice cook offered his mentor.

A stableman laughed, “Maybe the gut’ershite’s lookin’ fer a new master. Can’t blame him fer favorin’ Mary over the pale devil in England.”

Wine made it round the table as they picked at the leftover meat and spiced peaches of the evening. One of the guards in the room chuckled into his cup as he knocked his feet atop a corner of the table.

“Ain’t our Stuart he’s chasin’, but Mary Beaton. When Calum was promot’d, ya ‘member the Lyndsay incident?” Everyone nodded. “He was sent to ‘uard the Four Maries during the Edinburgh rally. Since then, he’s ben guardin’ our fair Queen and her *Mary bunch*.” A few eye rolls and chuckles echoed around the table. “That Randolph lad is cooin’ at Beaton like a pige³⁵. The lass is relat’d to the late Cardinal Beaton³⁶.”

Isla leaned forward, her tangled hair loose on her shoulders. The thick-necked cook waived the young guard on. The guard continued,

³⁵ *Author’s note:* shortened speech for pigeon

³⁶ David Cardinal Beaton; Lord Chancellor of Scotland’ Archbishop of St. Andrews; Cardinal Legate in Scotland; Murdered by Norma Leslie and William Kirkcaldy in 1546

“Not’ing to spice your meats with though. Maybe a bit o’poetry, or note or two from the court musicians, but the Beaton lass isn’t payin’ him a mite.”

The room quieted as the head cook spoke. The bread maker halted her assault on the dough.

“These poems, ‘ave you got any?”

The guard smiled and pulled out a scrap of paper. The cook handed Isla the paper, the only one in attendance that could read. Isla examined the paper as creases appeared between her thinning eyebrows. The edges of the paper scrap were blacked and jagged, with only two lines of flawless script identifying it as poetry. Isla leaned back from the table, her palm holding out the partially-burned piece to everyone around the table.

“We can’ot know this was from Randolph to Beaton. From the script, I can say it’s Chastelard’s³⁷ poetry to Queen Mary. There aren’t names hand a scrap o’poetry could have come from anywhere.”

“Found it in his room, but aye, I see yer point.”

The guard shrugged and took back his paper, removing his boots from the table. The bread maker resumed her pounding. A gallery servant spoke, meat still chewing in her mouth.

“Lord James been spendin’ a lot of time here, eh?” Raised eyebrows greeted her words. “His visits ma’ch that of a young falconer. My fellows in the galla-ree see her leavin’ Lord James’s suites when he visits.” The woman waggled her eyebrows. “Disheveled, mind you.”

Isla casually glanced around the table. Three guards were present, all under Captain James’ command, like Gavin. Her heart climbed through her ribcage as she thought of this rumor leaking. The servant continued,

³⁷ Pierre De Bocosel De Chastelard; French poet in Mary’s Scottish court

“I see the pret-ee falconer, the one from the guild over the hills. Dat’s her, with the grey and black bird in the royal cages now. I o’ten see her leavin’ the galler-ee after Lord James. Then, she walks ‘round the palace until she’s sum’oned for a bit o’sport with the Queen.” The servant deviated for a moment in awe. “Our Mary is a very good rider, I’ve seen her! Reminds me of Ar’emis the way she moves. In the eve when they return, she dines with the Queen and Lord James before then runnin’ out into the night embracin’ a palace guard or some such. I can n’ver see his face, but he spins her about and well...such is my tale. I t’ink she’s Lord James’s mistress and the guard’s lover!”

The servant looked up, expectantly, at the head cook. Isla’s body creaked as she laid her hands atop the table and leaned forward again. The gallery servant smiled at the attention,

“Aye, I’ve ‘eard the tale” A second guard spoke, his stubbled mustache wet with wine. “My wife heard da’falconer has the ear of both Lord James and Mary Stuart. Wond’r what the Earl of Moray³⁸’s wife³⁹ t’inks about all this?”

Those sitting around the table laughed, their thumping fists rattling the now empty bottle of wine. Isla remained rigid; a plastered smile grew across her face. She smoothed her hair, as her fingers twisted more knots into its already curly frame. The head cook laughed and turned around the table with a sweep of his hands,

“Our contenders for the night are a piece of English poetry and a bed-soaked falconer, any others?”

A groomsman to the mustached guard raised his hand; he smiled a challenge to the gallery woman. By this time, the bread maker had ceased her pummeling of the bread and sat

³⁸ Lord James Stuart, titled September 1561

³⁹ Agnes Keith, Countess of Moray; married to James Stuart early 1562

beside Isla. She had taken the time to brew coffee and slice fruits for them to enjoy as they wound down for the evening. Now with the wine gone, each of them sipped their diluted coffee, some with milk, others preferring water. They never dared drink it straight for their days were early and long. When the others had finished interrogating the gallery servant, the guard's servant stood up. His small frame gave him no height despite his straight posture.

“My tale may ‘ave already circulat’d, but I know todah we had a guest in the Queen’s audience chambers. Our theologian friend⁴⁰ returned t’day with an even rowdier reap-reputation.” The boy was having difficulty articulating the word. “The Lords of the Congregation sem to be backin’ him now! ‘member last year durin’ our Queen demanded an explan’tion for his work, *First Cannon...Blast*⁴¹?...somet’ing like that, against lasses? I t’ink it ended in much the same way, but without speakin’ of necromancy this time!”

A loud roar of laughter echoed in the preparatory kitchen. Servants and guards choked and coughed out mouthfuls of apples and coffee. The gallery woman slammed her hand on the table as she laughed silently, wheezing. The groomsman smiled, satisfied with his tale.

The gallery servant wiped her eyes of tears before speaking. She snorted from laughter.

“Tell me la, how can ya come to know this? Only those like Calum and her honorable ladies-in-waitin’ are allow’d inside?”

Isla mentally nodded to herself, but as she looked over the boy’s stature, she wondered if he was like a rat. His small frame may have found a hole to wriggle inside and creep along Holyroodhouse. The boy continued to boast, his small chest puffing further.

⁴⁰ John Knox’s 2nd audience with Mary Stuart 2 December 1562

⁴¹ John Knox’s 1558 *The First Blast of the Trumpet Against the Monstrous Regiment of Women*

“Palace secrets missy. Let’s just say Holyroodhouse’s audience chambers is old and brittle.”

One of the apprentice cooks turned to Isla,

“Has Morgan said anyt’ing else about the Queen’s cryin’ spells?” He whined. “The last time Knox was her’, Queen Mary was confine’ to her bed from weakness.”

At this, all eyes turned to Isla. The gallery servant spoke first.

“Well, Isla? Isn’t Morgan station’d in the bedchambers. Where is the lass?”

All eyes turned to the podgy woman as she leaned back and rested her hands over her stomach.

“I haven’t sen Morgan this eve. She stays wit’ the Queen und’r orders from the French chamberlain. Morgan’s private about the Queen. She doesn’t tell me everythin’.”

The table continued to beg Isla for her to interrogate Morgan. They wanted confirmation on what the guard had said, and they knew the French ladies-in-waiting accompanying the Queen that afternoon would not say a word to them. Cards continued to be played as they gossiped and speculated about the innerworkings of Holyroodhouse. Mary Stuart had given them plenty to talk about with her constant masquerade balls, hunting tournaments, and country travel. As the empty mugs of coffee rolled across the table, the remaining live-out servants collected themselves and prepared to leave Holyroodhouse for the evening.

The two remaining apprentice cooks quickly washed the cups and stored them for their later use as the gallery servant unlocked the two doors leading out of the kitchen. The guards filtered out first, their banter suggesting a full night at a bar instead of returning home directly. Several servants, who hadn’t spoken the entire evening, left in the company of the gallery

woman and bread maker. The head Scottish cook and Isla remained in the room. He looked at her expectantly and then spoke.

“Anyt’ing useful to yer ears, Isla?”

The woman laughed as she pulled out a small coin purse. The cook quickly pocketed the money and wiped the table of spilled coffee.

“Every piece of information is useful; I just need ta know *how*. These shiftin’ dalliances ‘tween the nobility and ourselves are dangerous.”

“How so? If a ba’tard is born her’ or ther’, the nobility remains where it a’ways has.” He rung out the cloth between his bear-like hands, squeezing the coffee juice into a basin like it was a neck he was wringing.

“P’haps, but say Randolph is pinin’ for the Beaton girl. Is it fer her hand or an order from his English Queen? The falconer, Skye, may have Lord James’s ear. Is she a vyin’ for a Stuart child to claim the Scottish throne? Anot’er civil war? And Knox, I doubt he will leave quietly wit’ the Lords of the Congregation now encouragin’ ‘im.” Isla sighed and massaged her temples as she stepped over the threshold of the kitchen. “Too many threads, Albert, too many threads.”

“And Morgan? Wher’ she fit as the Queen’s bed servant?”

Isla picked at a thin scab forming over her finger. She had accidentally sliced herself that morning with her well-worn, rust colored needle.

“She wants to believ’ Mary Stuart is anot’er Marie de Guise. Morgan will encourage Mary to o’ertake those who question her, a policy that seems more Scots than French-tolerance. Morgan has step’ed into a pawn position on Mary Stuart’s chessboard, but I wonder if Mary is a player or simply the queen piece?”

CHAPTER V

February 1563

Gavin - Holyroodhouse

Several huddled shadows oozed passed the Queen's lobby, skulking from the third to second floors. The skittish mob of servants poked their heads out of various headcovers. Some wore shawls, while others wore their aprons. They slowed at the lobby door that lead to Mary Stuart's bedroom door. A few of the bobbing heads bowed before it as if the Queen were standing before them. Gavin herded them down the wide corridors, prodding a few wayward behinds with his boot. He knew they had to move quickly; the other house guards would be coming from the inner court on their rounds. He hated the route Kip had suggested, but a larger stairwell would move the Protestant servants faster through the palace. Gavin straightened his back, towering over one of the head cooks, Isla's older apprentices, and even the robust gardeners. Each one of their tired and callused feet thumped against the floor, sounding like muted drums as Gavin's heartbeat kept time. He hated these favors from Kip. At best, Gavin would simply lose his position as a house guard; at worst, he would be executed by Lord James. These weekly services for the live-in servants were going to get someone beheaded – like Gavin! Gavin groaned inside the safety of his thoughts.

Knowin' my luck, my head wou'd roll into t'e marshes wit'out a splash.

One of the senior servants, his back hunched like a willow, tripped and yelped into the throat of the hallway. He cried before he slammed into the ground as the others clamored to help him up. The usually mild yell rochet around the empty hallway like a child's ball. Gavin cringed as his nose flared from a sharp intake of breath. His head swiveled around the hallway as he bounced up and down to keep his legs from panicking. Rising like one of Mary Stuart's

concertos, a crescendo of iron boots stormed the hallways. Gavin nearly choked as the servants broke into several masses of shadows. They wriggled over one another down the hall like an intrusion of roaches. The servants fled beyond Gavin's sight as his throat tightened. The iron boots thundered beyond the corner and Gavin felt his knees give out. As Gavin knelt over his numbed legs, one of his superiors came into view with a torch.

"Gavin ya cur! Be 'bout your business 'stead of restin' on yer ass!"

Standing behind Captain James was Lord James Stuart, the Earl of Moray. Gavin wobbled into a near squat before slowly rising. His legs shook behind his greaves as he feigned a limp. Again, Captain James spoke,

"What hap'ed, boy?"

Gavin swallowed, his face already burning in the dim light.

"I was passin' the Queen's quarters and, erm, bow'd in respect, Cap'ain. My, uh, sword slipp'd on my foot and I yap'd."

His stomach twisted with shame as he maintained eye contact between Captain James and the Earl of Moray. Gavin refrained from glancing at his sword hip. However, he knew the blade was tucked inside its sheath. He breathed slowly, trying not to draw attention to himself as his commander muttered. The Earl's face was in shadow as he snorted out a chuckle. Gavin's toes tapped in agitation inside his boots, curling and stretching in a frenzy. Gavin exhaled slowly, conscious of his garlic-tasting breath whirling between his nose and mustache. Finally, the Earl waved his hand in dismissal, his clothing tight and bulging, where a breast plate surely was. Gavin rarely saw the Earl on his rounds, but Isla's rumors suggested he made nightly searches of the palace grounds when he and his wife stayed in Holyroodhouse. Gavin hadn't known

previously about the Queen's brother patrolling the palace that night! Gavin's chest immediately tightened; did Kip know?

Gavin bowed to the two men and turned into the dining hall adjacent to the Queen's lobby. They followed behind Gavin quietly, their steps falling in time with his. The torches along the walls were dimming. Small pockets of light gave the dining hall a catacomb-like feeling. Gavin strained his ears for the rustle of servants' clothing darting in the darkness to hear Kip speak in the west drawing room. He hoped to dictate the movements of his superiors, if they were indeed following him, by exiting the main gates into the courtyard. Thirty paces from the gate. Twenty paces. Ten paces. Five paces from the gate leading out into the courtyard. Morgan suddenly appeared from the opposite side of the dining hall. The body servant was practically a caravan of beddings as she was laden down like a mule. Her eyes narrowed in the darkness as she recognized the three of them. Her voice was muffled from the weight of the thick woolen beddings lined in satin.

"Gentle Earl of Moray, I was not aware of yer stayin' here. If I had known sir, I would have better prepared your room."

The Earl's voice raised in volume from behind Gavin,

"I would have requested your delicate touch if I had known it appropriate, Morgan. I know the Queen's comforts come before my own."

"Of course, sir, my life is hers to command."

The Earl side-stepped out of Morgan's way, his hand over his chest with a small bow. Even in the dim torchlight, Gavin saw Morgan's jaw tighten, but not so overtly to make her bones bunch near her ears. The four of them stood silently as Gavin curled his toes again. He had been so close, but at least provided a distraction. Yet, Morgan had not moved to either bow

to Lord James or to continue on her way. Instead, she raised her chin over the beddings. Gavin slightly moved his head, warning her. Captain James thundered as if he were personally offended,

“Ya stand ‘fore royalty, *dontibour*. Show yer respect!”

Morgan straightened her back and then bowed before the Earl as a Frenchwoman. The beddings in her arms looked bloated enough to envelope her. Captain James seemed to screech in the hallway,

“Are ya no lon’er a Scots, girl? Think ya a *French* Cat’olic now, eh?”

Captain James lunged to drag Morgan down, his lips pulled back to expose peddle-like teeth. Gavin halted between the two of them, his feet caught between them. Morgan curled herself around the bedding as Captain James snatched at the thick cloth. Morgan spoke over the top of her plush shield,

“I ask for yer pardon after I have delivered the Queen’s *requested* blankets. Our dear Queen Mary is fright’ly cold. I wouldn’t expect ya to keep her waiting,” she turned to the Earl, “or her kin, good sir.”

The Earl laughed from behind Captain James. Captain James held his breath with a snarl, he seemed to grind his teeth at Morgan. She shuffled her way through the three men, her eyes constantly flicking between them. Were it not for Captain James’s raised torch illuminating her, Gavin would not have seen the Earl gently pass a slip of paper into her dress pockets. Gavin furrowed his eyebrows as Morgan pushed ahead with a rapid clip. The Earl fell behind her as James and Gavin followed suit. The Earl lengthened his stride to match her pace. Gavin sighed inwardly, if nothing else, they were moving away from Kip and his sermon. Captain James suddenly spoke with a hiss, his beard curling around his lips,

“Waltzin’ *dontibour*, a shame the Queen favors her over Protes’ant lasses. The Cat’olic cur.”

“Her fait’ is her own, Cap’ain.”

Gavin swore for a moment Captain James would have spat if they were outside.

“Fie, the Scots Parli’ment celebrates Protestantism. We Scots are Protestant now! Only tah Queen, her Maries, these French, and Morgan continue to hol’ Mass.”

“Again, her fait’ is her own.”

Captain James grumbled as they drew closer to the Queen’s chambers. The three of them stood outside as Morgan announced herself before stepping over the threshold. The door thundered close and the Earl stood with his back leaning against the door. He seemed thoughtful for a moment before realizing James and Gavin still stood before him.

“Be on your way men. Who knows what mischief will find us if we are not prepared? Make your rounds, now.”

They saluted the Earl of Moray and moved towards the palace’s gallery. Gavin sighed with quiet relief; Kip would be safe for another night. Hopefully his brother will return home to Isla within the next hour or sooner. James muttered as he waved his torch over the blank faces of the noble portraits.

“Makes ya wonder about these royals, eh Gavin?”

“What?”

“Not Queen Mary ‘course, but wha’ of these other royal lots? Many a’bastards are born every yea’, the Moray Earl one of ‘em upon a time. They spawn like ‘shrooms in the marshes, and Morgan is just anoth’r fertile marsh to sprout upon.”

Gavin cleared his throat and flushed.

“Cap’ain, her status does not mean she’ll bare a...child. Ya know t’is. Morgan was fait’ful to the Fair Queen’s mother, de Guise. She has remain’d loyal and steadfast these uneasy years.”

Captain James laughed, the air wheezing through his nose.

“Laugh Gavin! Yer seriousness leaves ya wit’out humor!”

Gavin never understood Captain James’ humor despite the many years they served together. His captain’s mind was a mystery to him. They wound through the gallery and out into the front courtyard like Gavin had planned previously. The moonless night seemed to breathe on Gavin and Captain James as an icy wind weaved through their clothing. The sweat that had previously cooled on Gavin’s skin now attracted the chill. He shivered as he stomped against the ground, trying to warm his body up. Now he understood why Captain James stormed around the palace; it was a habit caused by outdoor patrols. Quiet bushes swayed as clusters of guards moved around, relighting torches or huddling around braziers. Captain James led Gavin away from the other cluster of guards and heat.

“Aye Gavin, any word from Calum? Haven’t seen the boy a mite since the Lindsay inc’dent.”

Captain James stomped the frost-lined grass, breathing into his hands. Gavin stomped beside his captain with his hands shoved underneath his armpits.

“Rarely now. I ‘eard Morgan tell the Queen’s seamstress, Isla, that Calum may have found a lass.”

Captain James growled at the clouds,

“T’at’s the point, lad! Everyt’ing’s ‘heard from one servant’ or ‘overheard from nobles’. We don’t even ask the man any’ore, just gossip ‘bout ‘im. Strike ya any strange?”

Gavin looked back at Holyrood, the torches blinking like fireflies as men tried to keep them lit. He had heard about Calum, much more than he would admit to his superior. Morgan had found Calum with a woman in one of the spare bedrooms reserved for visiting nobility. The same room where Lord James and Lady Agnes Keith were residing. Calum was close to any one of the Four Maries, and by the disgust Morgan relayed to Isla, perhaps Calum may have been found with one of the nobility. Gavin shook his head, but still grinned. He never suspected Calum of such indiscretions, but the world was changing and perhaps being in a noble's favor meant different things to a man than a woman. Captain James elbowed Gavin.

"Fie, this why I prefer being along the bord'r garrisons. At least when ya see the English comin', you don't question who they ben beddin'. Here, at court, it's all talk and politickin'. Give a man a sword and tell 'em, 'the point'ee end goes into the bad guy'!"

Gavin laughed and leaned over his knees. His breath came out in small wisps that floated around his ears as Captain James grinned. They patrolled the border of Holyrood's courtyard in silence, save for the occasional snuffle from the cold air. Clusters of guards reported in and out to Captain James throughout the night. They finally rounded the courtyard a fourth time as Captain James lead them back into the palace. The torches lining the walls were brightly lit, and the evening's shadows were gray and muted. Gavin halted in front of the torch to stretch his hands close to the flames as Captain James reported to the Earl of Moray.

"Anything of note, Captain?"

"Not a mite, sir. Borin' evening, fer the best t'ough."

The Earl nodded as he removed his sheathed sword from his hip. Gavin's fingers burned as he warmed them against the cloud of heat. The evening patrols were the worst for him as he was an early riser. Thankfully, Captain James took pity on him and only reported him for the

night shift every month or so for a few days. Gavin's eyes were heavy, and his feet felt numb in his leather boots. He dragged down the skin beneath his eyes, hoping to drag the exhaustion from his eyes. Captain James stretched as the Earl of Moray turned back to his apartments. Then, the screams began.

Morgan - Mary Stuart's Holyroodhouse Bedchamber

The bedding was snatched from my arms as Mary Fleming opened the door leading into the Queen's bedchambers. Mary Seton dragged me inside from the lobby, her hair bouncing in tight curls as she whirled me around. My feet fell over each other, and I was dizzy from the constant spinning. The Fleming woman struggled momentarily from the weight of the bedding before throwing it onto the bed haphazardly. I saw several of Mary Stuart's trunks crowding the center of the room with clothes thrown about the floor, bed, and dressers as if the entire court suddenly undressed and left their clothes! The Four Maries dithered around the bedchambers, swapping clothes of various sizes and colors in a frenzy. I suddenly smelled the perfume of wine on their breaths. Mary Livingston grabbed my shoulders and plopped me down on a stool. I suddenly noticed I was the only body servant in the room. Mary Livingston spoke, her voice high as she giggled.

“Behold the handsome lad that is your Queen, Morgana!”

Behind a tri-fold panel, were light scuffles of thick soles clacked against the wooden floor, the other Maries held their breaths. Mary Livingston flourished her hands like a court jester in front of the panel as Mary Stuart stepped out. I flinched and was thankful for the stool. Fleming and Beaton fluttered around their queen in trousers as they decorated their queen like one of Edinburgh's citizenry. I had no idea where they had gotten the plain clothes of scratchy cotton or coarse wool. Mary Stuart bowed like a man before me, her wry smile stretching her cheeks disproportionately in a smirk. Her long auburn hair hung like a cape around her shoulders as she sat before her vanity. My stomach tightened as I wondered what Gavin, Captain James, and the Earl of Moray would say if they saw their Queen dressed as a commoner! Mary Stuart in

sporting trousers was one thing, but for her to wear *men's* clothing at all was scandalous. Queen Mary raised her eyes to her mirror to speak at me,

“Morgana, please assist in piling my hair as a man would. Je veux assister aux activités locales ce soir⁴²”

I bowed, checking the dress of each of the Maries in turn. I pulled at the gloves along my forearms, fearful.

“You Majesty, ‘ave you lost yourself? W’at would become of the Monarchy if somethin’ were to happen to you in Edinburgh’s streets?”

Mary Stuart rose from her vanity and stepped towards me. Her shadow swallowed me again in the bright room and I felt cold. Her heeled boots rose her to greater heights, and I strained my neck to stare up at the colossus. The Four Maries moved behind their mistress, but their shadow could not touch me as my nostrils flared up at their Queen Mary.

“Your position is not to question me, *body servant*.”

I gambled and felt my tongue loosen. Isla always warned me about it.

“My position is to ‘est provide and protect yer Majesty wit’ in the boundaries of the bedchamber.” I waved my gloved hands around the space. “And be’old where ya are!”

My neck burned as she stared down at me with her amber eyes that glinted again with that hellfire I had seen. From my vantage point, I spied too late, a pistol on her hip. My body shook beneath my dress. Would she shoot me now? My life is hers; would it matter? The shadow that engulfed me writhed with the additional heads of the Four Maries, like a hydra from the old stories of Greeks de Guise read to us about. I gambled with her trust in me, if she wanted me as

⁴² “I want to attend the local pursuits this evening”

an alley within her halls, I needed my voice heard. Mary Stuart's voice was low and icy, the same tone as de Guise when she neared the end of the discussion.

“And what can you provide, Morgana, that my Maries cannot?”

I paused and rolled my eyes over each of her Maries before returning to her auburn eyes. I smiled.

“Dependin’ on your activities, ya Majesty, yer dress is not one of the average citizens. Yer trousers and boots are better suited for ridin’ than walking, Beaton and Livingston are fashioning their hair as *Frenchmen*, not Scots, and none of the citizenry wear taffeta and silk when sportin’ a dram.”

The room was silent except the hiss and whip-like crack of the fireplace as the logs split from the heat. Mary Stuart narrowed her eyes once before bellowing a laugh through her nose and snorting. The sounds made me smile and join her as the Four Maries shifted uncomfortably.

“My Morgana is wise beyond even my knowledge! Ladies, we must dress for the occasion, costumes at once!”

We dug through a series of trunks of play-acting costumes, many of them from the court's jesters and fools, while some were stolen from the male live-in servants. Each of the Five Maries were fashioned in cotton trousers, coarse tunics and vests befitting domestic servants within the palace. However, Mary Stuart refused to give up her pistol, claiming,

“Protection for me and my ladies, Morgana.”

The Four Maries shuffled down a secret stairwell, their hips swaying like ladies still, but I suspected they would be called dandies in the streets without hassle. I leaned against one of the dressers, holding the stairway's door open as they filed out. Their giggles continued to reach me as their steps faded down the stairwell. Mary Stuart was handsome in her dress, like a lad of

incredible height. Her smile was mischievous, and I smiled back at her. She then took the door from my hand and began to pull it close. I slipped my foot between the door and frame. Her trim eyebrows rose, but she didn't seem bothered.

“My l'dy, please be careful. I'll be awaitin' yer signal to open the door.”

The lady-in-men's-clothing smiled and kissed my forehead.

“You are indeed my ally, Morgana. I trust you to guard this door for when I return.”

* * *

The hours were long as I hauled another log into the mouth of the hungry fireplace. Sparkes shot out like greedy spittle as the flames lapped the fresh wood. My white gloves were caked with ash with the splotches making interesting patterns like my two-toned skin beneath them. I reclined against Queen Mary's bed, the fresh bedding smooshing my unbound hair against my neck and shoulders. Sometime in the last hour, I had replaced Queen Mary's bed bedding in preparation for her return from merry making. I yawned and massaged my cheek. Lying across the floor with only a bedding left my face with a bruise, or at least tenderness. Sometime during the evening, the same cheek became caked with drool. I scrubbed the dried spit with the heel of my hand.

I laughed as I pulled my knees closer to my chest and thought about the Five Maries. Isla had mentioned a few years ago that every Queen was caged by something, even their own lifestyles. Perhaps this was Mary Stuart's way of rebelling? I laid my chin across my knees and thought how different our relationship would be if we had met just as fellow Scots. Would she like my company, and would I hers? None of the other servants, not even Isla, knew of her majesty's comings and goings, only I. Why she only confided in me, I knew not. I once prayed for her death – may Heaven forgive me – but now, I knew better. She was gathering intelligence

for herself of how the rest of her countrymen were faring under her rule. She listened to their intolerances and the shifting alliances of the nobles to gather them under a single banner. Perhaps Mary Stuart was naïve in her thinking. I wondered if she believed if she could unite Scotland, then Queen Elizabeth would think of her as a competent heir to the English throne. I rolled from my thoughts of the English Queen and gazed about the room.

The firelight casted a sunlight glow about the room, glittering off the gold and silver in colorful streaks like comets. Throughout the evening, I had seen the stars shift, and I knew the night was still young. And I was bored and sleepy. I rose on all fours and shuffled towards one of the Queen's favored vanities. She had several, but none as plain as the solid oak decorated in thin, hammered silver designs. There was a trick to the piece, one only the Maries and I (as a skilled observer) knew about. Taking hold of the second and fourth drawer, I opened them slowly and quickly thrust them shut. The puff of air caught between them opened a compartment beneath the third drawer to a hidden stash of liquor. The bronze color sloshed dreamily in the hand-blown glassware. The bottle tinted my white gloves blue in the firelight. Here is what made the Five Maries giggly and perfumed their breath.

I pulled the thick cork away from the bottle's lip, tugged my long gloves loose with my teeth, and swam my finger into the hard liquid. My finger played small circles within the liquid, drawing out a swollen droplet as I traced it along my lips before finally tasting the sunburnt flavor. The fire burned my throat as it crawled down into my stomach before breathing further fire. I continued to drink the liquid film from my lips in slower and slower motions. The Maries, and maybe the Queen herself, only took small thimbles of the concoction. I took heavier sips until my mouth was swollen with fire. The world began to sway as I reclined on the floor, clutching the bedding. The bottle remained upright, but my fingers were beginning to numb as I

took gentle tongue-fulls. I squinted towards the window, trying to determine the time and Her Majesty's arrival.

"I s'ill 'ave time."

No moon kept me company as I lied on the floor of my Queen's chamber, wrapped in *her* bedding, drinking *her* liquor, and no fear drew me upright. I glanced down at my naked hands. My hands and forearms were a patchwork of skin color. My mother and father often said I was stitched together from the best pieces of them. I wish I had asked why my arms did not match the rest of me. The skin held a lighter touch, as if I was moon-burned instead of sunburned. I laughed as I rolled across the floor, tossing my gloves away. As I rolled upright, my blurry eyes saw a huddled shadow beneath the Queen's bed. The firelight behind me reflected something metal beside the crouching figure. Then, the figure blinked and darted towards me. My tongue was dry and heavy as I tried to claw at the door. My knees banged against the floor as I seemed to slowly crawl towards the door. I screamed inside my head, but my mouth produced no sound.

Gavin! James! Even the Earl, damn him!

The world swayed with color and heat as the stranger gripped the back of my corset and wound his arm across my mouth. I struggled to plant my feet atop his, the metal thing hitting my thigh and telling me it was a sword! I bit and tore against him, but he jerked me upright and threw me against the ground. My head pounded against the Queen's floor like a dropped cannonball. My hair splayed over my face and veiled my sight. I struggled to breath as he rolled on top of me. His hands – No, God! – never reached for my skirts or corset. Instead, they clamped around my neck and squeezed. I thrashed beneath him, feeling the muscles in his legs and thighs tighten before traveling up his arms to close my throat. I bucked and struggled. The firelight began to fade. I looked above me – why had I never noticed – a great mural of God and

his angels observed my murder with mild interest. Some of the angels, Gabriel perhaps, seemed content to lie on his cloud and smile down at my demise. I gripped the man's arms, trying to reach and claw at his face. I felt as if I was drowning, I nearly did as a child. A warmth was spreading along my body as I turned towards the door. My head swam slower and slower into the darkness as I thought,

Gavin...Gavin...protect Isla...

The world cracked with light and sound as Gavin, Captain James, and the Earl tore the man from my throat. Behind them, was a screaming Queen Mary Stuart, in her lad costume. The other Maries stood behind her, holding her back as Mary Stuart shrieked with her pistol in hand. The Great Queen moved beyond her veil of Maries towards me, shrieking and gesticulating at the man writhing in Gavin and Captain James's grip. She held me close and screamed at Lord James. The man Gavin and James were hauling away screamed for Mary Stuart. There was too much screaming. I blinked in recognition of the man's voice. His French was muffled to my droning ears as the Queen held me tighter. He spouted nonsense, I think,

“Je ne puis cesser d'aimer, je ne puis cesser d'aimer!”⁴³”

One of the Maries, Beaton I think, took charge of me as the Queen stepped forward. Gavin and James forced the man to his knees as they lowered their eyes before her. Mary Stuart's voice cracked over Pierre de Boscosel de Chastelard's ⁴⁴ head in rapid French. Too quick for my ears to comprehend from my deprivation of air and excess alcohol. Chastelard sniveled and said more, his body shrinking like a struck dog. I had delivered his poems to Her Majesty on occasion, I knew him...and he tried to kill me. He continued to blubber in French as my head

⁴³ “I cannot stop loving you”

⁴⁴ Discovered on 14 February 1563

lulled onto Beaton's shoulder. The other Maries cooed around me. Even their whispers were grading on my ears as Mary berated her favored poet. He continued to spice the air with French as Gavin and Captain James eventually led him away. He called out from the hallway, crying out poetry, this Pierre de Boscotel de Chastelard. My head was fuzzy with cotton, and my words slurred from the liquor. Mary Stuart stood over me with her shadow enveloping me as I hastily stood. Her voice cracked over the heads of Gavin and Captain James,

"And where were my guards that anyone can simply enter my rooms?" Silence followed as the Earl tore Chastelard down the hallways of Holyrood. "My body servant was harmed today for your negligence. What next then? Will your Queen share a similar or worse fate?" Gavin and Captain James lowered their eyes to the pistol she gripped in her fine, white hand. "Out of my sight, both of you."

The guards saluted and quickly exited the room as Mary Stuart snarled at me,

"And you, what is the meaning of this mess?" Her hands waved to the disheveled bedding on the floor and the broken liquor bottle. "Do you know how this looks, *Morgan*? An illicit liaison between my favored court poet and my personal body servant? What trust can you inspire within my circle if not discretion?"

"Yer Majesty," my voice croaked as I dropped to my knees. "My hono' is s'ill yers; my virtue is s'ill intact! I wou'd nev'r risk damage to ya!"

I found myself crying, but why, I didn't know. Her voice boomed over mine,

"The damage is done; you will not accompany me and my ladies to Rossend Castle. *Morgan*, you are dismissed from my service."

I felt Mary Stuart's shadow had finally finished swallowing me. Now, the Queen of Scotland had spat me out.

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