

THE GAMESHOUSE I



THE  
SERPENT

CLAIRE  
NORTH

# **The Serpent**

*The First Gameshouse Novella*

**Claire North**

**BY CLAIRE NORTH**

The First Fifteen Lives of Harry August  
Touch

***The Gameshouse (ebook novellas)***

The Serpent

The Thief

The Master

## Copyright

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## Chapter 1

She is gone, she is gone. The coin turns, and she is gone.

## Chapter 2

Come.

Let us watch together, you and I.

We pull back the mists.

We step onto the board, make our entrance with a flourish; we are here, we have arrived; let the musicians fall silent, let those who know turn their faces away at our approach. We are the umpires of this little event; we sit in judgement, outside the game but part of it still, trapped by the flow of the board, the snap of the card, the fall of the pieces. Did you think you were free of it? Do you think yourself something more in the eyes of the player? Do you fancy that it is not you who are moved, but is moving?

How naïve we have become.

Let's choose a place and call it Venice. Let us say it is 1610, six years since the Pope last declared this place heretic, barred from the blessings of his divine office. And what was this to the people of the city? Why, it was no more than what it was: a piece of paper stamped with wax. No Bishop of Rome could shake this sinking city. Instead the black rats will come, they will come with fleas and plague, and the city will rue its impiety then.

But we run ahead of ourselves. Time, to those of us who play in the Gameshouse, stretches like kneaded dough; fibres split and tear away but we persist, and the game goes on.

She will be called Thene.

She was born at the close of the sixteenth century to a cloth merchant who made a fortune buying from the Egyptians and selling to the Dutch, and her mother was a Jew who married for love, and her father fed her pork from infancy and made her swear never to reveal this terrible secret to the great men of the city.

- What will I be when I am old? she asked her father. - Can I be both my mother's daughter, and yours?

To which her father answered, - No, neither. I do not know who you will be, but you will be all yourself, and that will be enough.



Later, after her mother dies, her father remembers himself speaking these words and weeps. His brother, who never approved of the match and dislikes the child as a symbol of it, paces up and down, rasping:

- Stop crying! Be a man! I'm ashamed to look at you!

She, the child, eight years old, watches this exchange through the door and swears with her fists clenched and eyes hot that she will never be caught crying again.

And a few years later, Thene, dressed in blue and grey, a silver crucifix about her neck, leather gloves upon her hands, is informed that she shall be married.

Her father sits, silent and ashamed, while her uncle rattles off the details of the match.

Her dowry is greater than her name, and it has purchased Jacamo de Orcelo, of ancient title and new-found poverty.

- He is adequate, potentially a fine husband given your degree, her uncle explains. Thene keeps her fingers spread loose across her lap. The act of keeping them so, of preventing from them locking tight, requires a great deal of concentration, and at fifteen years old, Thene has not cried for seven years, and will not cry now.

- Is this your wish? she asks her father.

He turns his face away, and on the night before her wedding day she sits down with him before the fire, takes his hand in hers and says, - You do not need my forgiveness, for you have done nothing wrong. But as you want it, know that it is yours, and when I am gone I will only remember the best of you; only the very best.

For the first time since her mother died, he cries again, and she does not.

Jacamo de Orcelo was not a fine husband.

For the sake of Thene's dowry, this thirty-eight-year-old man of the city swore he would endure the snickering of his peers who laughed to see his fifteen-year-old bride, whispering that he had married the merchant's daughter, and murmuring that beneath her skirts there was only cloth and more cloth, no womanly parts at all for a man to grapple with.

The first night they were alone together, she held his hands, as she had seen her mother do when she was young, and stroked the hair back from behind his ear, but he said this was womanly rot and pushed her down.

His aged mother told her that he loved fresh shrimp cooked over a smoky flame, the spices just so, the sweetness just right, and she learned the secrets of this dish and presented him a platter for his supper, which he ate without thanks, not noticing the efforts she had gone to.

- Did you like the meal? she asked.

- I had better as a boy, he replied.

She sang when first she came to this house, but he said her voice gave him a headache. Then one night, when she was walking alone, she sang one of her mother's songs, and he came downstairs and hit her, screaming, - Jew! Jew! Whore and Jew! and she did not sing again.

Her wealth bought him some redemption from his debts, but money dwindles, and the laughter persisted. Was it this, we wonder, that made their marriage so cold? Or was it the fumbling of the old man in the sheets with his teenage bride, his love of wine, his affection for cards and, as she failed to produce an heir, his growing fondness for whores? Which piece of all of this, shall we say, was it that most defined their home?

We watch their house, proud and tall in the heart of San Polo, hear the servants whisper behind their hands, see the wife withdraw into her duties, witness the husband spend more on less, see the coffers empty, and as the years roll by and Jacamo grows ever more reckless in the destruction of himself, what do we see in her? Why, nothing at all, for it seems that against the buffets of fortune she is stone, her features carved into a mask of perfect white.

Thene, beautiful Thene, grown to a woman now, manages the accounts when her husband is gone, works with the servants and hides in the lining of her skirts those ducats that she can best secure before he finds them and spends them on whatever – or whoever – it is that today has best taken his fancy. And as he grows loud, so she grows quiet, until even the whispers against her character cease, for it seems to the gossipy wives of Venice that there is nothing there – no merchant's daughter or gambler's wife, no woman and no Jew, not even Thene herself – but only ice against which they can whisper, and who has any joy in scheming against winter herself?

All this might persist, but then this is Venice, beloved of plague, reviled by popes, the trading heart of Europe, and even here, all things must change.

## Chapter 3

There is a house.

You will not find it now – no, not even its gate with the lion-headed knocker that roars silently out at the night, nor its open courtyards hung with silk, or hot kitchens bursting with steam, no, none of it, nothing to see – but then it stood in one of those little streets that have no name near San Pantaleone, just north of a short stone bridge guarded over by three brothers, for there are only two things that Venetians value more than family, and those are their bridges and their wells.

How did we come to be here?

You – why, you have come with Thene, you have followed Jacamo, who is for ever looking for new ways to lose his wealth and heard rumour of a place where he might do so in most extravagant style. You have come with them both to the door, for Jacamo is angry with his wife, angry at her coldness, her constant politeness and failure to scream, and so he takes her with him now, that she might witness all he does and suffer in him. Follow them as they knock on the door and step into a hall hung with silk and velvet, pressed with the smell of incense and the soft sound of music, past two women clad all in white, their faces obscured by nun's veils though they are of no such order, who whisper, - Welcome, welcome, please – won't you come in?

Follow them inside to the first courtyard, where torches burnt about the pillars of the walls and the sad faces of martyred saints, mosaicked in the Eastern style, sadly look on from their hollows above the arches of the doors.

Like Jacamo, perhaps you spot the prostitutes, hair pulled up high and dresses hitched about their knees, cooing in darkened corners at their clients. The sound of music, the smell of meat, the soft chatter of voices, the roll of dice, the slap of cards – why, they all call to him, sweetest nectar.

But more.

Perhaps, like Thene, you see too the boys and men who coo at the wealthy ladies gathered here, their faces hidden by long-nosed masks or silver-woven veils. Perhaps you observe the other doors leading to other places, from

which different voices and different smells drift like the reflected spread of candlelight. As her gaze falls around this place, and ours follow, we too now perceive that of all the games being played in this courtyard and the halls that surround it, there are more than the mere casual tumbings of chance from the gambler's cup. For now we see chess, checkers, Nine Men's Morris and many we alone can now name as toguz kumalak, baduk, shogi, mah-jong, sugoroku and shatranj – all the games of the world, it seems, have come here, and all the people too. Is he not a Mogul prince, a diamond larger than her fist in his hat, who now moves a piece against the Jewish physician, yellow scarf wound about his neck? Is she in red, rosaries slung around her wrist, not a Frenchwoman who now places her bet against a Ragusan pirate freshly come from plunder? And more – more exotic still! For it seems to us, as we inspect the room, that a Muscovite nobleman, who spits and curses at the foulness of Venice, now turns over a card which is beaten by a Bantu prince, who smiles faintly and says, - Another try? Is that not Chinese silk draped across the white sleeve of the veiled woman who brings drinks to the table, and is there not a hint of Mayan gold in the brooch of the man who stands guard before a silver door to a place that is, at this time, to us unknown?

There she sees it all, and though she cannot so precisely pinpoint the origins of all these sights as we can, she has wisdom enough to perceive its meaning.

## Chapter 4

Jacamo plays.

He loses as he plays.

He is a man who is played upon by players, and poor ones at that. We shall not bother much with him.

Thene watches. He keeps her close so that she can watch him lose twenty, thirty, a hundred ducats. When she does not react, he pulls her closer, one arm around her waist, so that she can watch him lose on the next hand, his father's ring, his estate near Forli.

When even this does not cause a flicker in her brow, he grabs the nearest girl by the thigh, kisses her neck.

Thene says, - Shall I fetch wine?

And rises and walks away. Her hands, folded one on top of the other across her belly, are perfectly relaxed. Jacamo knows the meaning of this, though others do not, and is satisfied.

He swears tomorrow they shall return.

## Chapter 5

We are not the only ones watching.

The umpires, as they shall come to be known stand apart from the servants who bring delicate foods and sweet drinks from some unseen kitchen. They watch, their faces masked, and they guard the silver door.

- Where does this door go? we ask.

- To the higher league.

- What is the higher league?

- It is a place for games.

- So is this place, so is this entire house. What is different about the higher league?

- The games are different.

- Can I join?

- Have you been invited?

- No.

- Then you cannot join.

- How do I get an invitation?

- We watch. You play.

And so the door remains shut. For now.

Thene watches too.

She watches her husband, his fortune steadily obliterated by men of meagre skill and poor strategy. She watches the lucky and the poor, the calculating and the giddy, as they move through the room, daring each other to greater odds. She spots a member of the Council of Seven, and two from the Council of Ten. She sees judges and merchants, lords and priests, and more – she sees women. Wives and daughters, mothers and ladies of the night: some play, some watch and there are some who are let through the silver doors to the unknown place without a whisper, without a sound, their faces hidden by the masks of carnival, their eyes watching her watching them.

Then there is the man.

Let us call him Silver in honour of the tracery of thorns that runs in that colour so softly, a thread wide, along his sleeves. He approaches her, and it is testimony to how innocuous he appears in all other senses that she does not mark him doing so, and as she turns at the sound of breath he says:

- Do you play?

No, she does not.

He smiles, half shaking his head.

- Forgive me, he says. - I misspoke. *Will* you play?

She looks at her husband's back, the empty glasses at his side, the coins on the table, and realises that there is anger on her lips, a tempest in her belly and her hands hurt – they burn from not clenching – and with the softness of winter mist in her voice says simply, - Yes.

They play chess.

He wins the first.

She wins the second.

They do not speak more than a few words as they play. The wager is information, for there must be a wager.

- Is it not enough to play for joy? she asks.

At this, terror flickers across his face. - You would wager your *happiness*? You would gamble with your self-esteem? Good God, don't play for joy, not yet; not when there are so many lesser things you could invest in!

This sentiment should have felt strange, and yet it settles over her as sure as the altar cloth across cold stone. - For information then, she says. - For answers.

When he wins the first game, he asks her even before the king has hit the deck, - Do you love your husband?

- No, she replies, and is surprised at the candour of her words.

When she wins she thinks a long time, and asks then, - What do you want of me?

And he replies, - One day I shall need a favour from a stranger, and I am curious to learn whether that stranger could be you.

Then Jacamo is up and drunk, and she takes him home.

The next day she dismisses another servant who they cannot afford to pay, and two nights later, they return to the house.

Again, Jacamo, the cards, the drink, the losses.

We are delicate watchers; we do not stare every night, but we have come here enough and seen him in this state before, and can surmise that there have been many more times that we were not privy to when this pattern played out.

We tut, perhaps, but say no more. Who are we to judge?

This night, however, we observe an alteration in events. Tonight he falls asleep after three hands, spittle falling from his lips onto the tabletop. Thene would feel ashamed at her husband's display, but regret, like the sound of her mother's songs, was lost a long time ago. Then Silver is by her side and says, - Will you play?

They play.

She moves too quickly on the first game, barely glancing at the board. When her final piece falls, he asks his question, and it is, - What do you fear?

She thinks a long time before answering.

- The things I might do, she says. - The woman I have become.

Their second game is slower, harder, and three moves before he's checkmated he says, - I should probably resign, but that would sully an otherwise superb win. So he plays through and she wins, and asks even before his king has toppled, - Did you poison my husband tonight?

- Yes, he replies. - How did you know?

- I saw you watch him play, stand close to his elbow. You have never watched him before, nor shown any interest in his playing as it is so poor. You smiled and laughed and sounded like one of them, the men with their cards, but you are not. I can only assume you have some other intention, and now he is asleep and nothing stirs him.

- He will live, I'm afraid. I won a knowledge of alchemy from an Alexandrian once. I wagered my knowledge of gunpowder against his skills. By chance, he played his pikemen badly and I captured the castle.

- You talk in riddles.

- You must learn my language.

- Or you mine.

- But you want a thing I have, my lady.

- And what is that?

- You want to know what is beyond the silver door.

- Perhaps I do.

- Let us not be coy.

- Then I do. I want to know.

- Then we should play.



They play.

## Chapter 6

On the day she has to take a loan from a moneylender in the ghetto who knew her mother and whispers that for her, he will find a special rate, the umpires come to her.

That night, as with many others, Silver is not to be seen, but she has grown confident now; she plays many people as she moves around the room, and loses some but wins more. Jacamo is too drunk to care, and so carefully she acquires wealth won on board and table, with cards and stones, pieces and dice, building up her own small stash of coin for the day, which must come soon, when he drowns himself and the household in that drink too far.

At first people played her out of pity, and lost. Then they played out of curiosity in the wife of this husband who plays so much better than the man who is meant to be her master. Now they play for the purest cause, and in the purest way, for now the Gameshouse works upon their souls and they play for the only thing which matters – for the win. And certainly, there are some players in some forms who will beat her on a certain day, but a great many more who lose, and still they try and try again.

Then the umpires come.

The voice is female, but beneath her white robes who could tell until the moment in which she spoke?

- Come with me, she says. - We have watched you play.
- Come where?
- You would like to meet the Gamesmaster.

It is not a question, nor does it need to be.

Thene follows to the silver door. Like Thene, perhaps we pause here to inspect the four carved panels which are mounted there. They depict the fall of empires. Proud Rome, overcome by the barbarians of the north. Noble Constantinople, its people screaming as the Ottoman pushes them from the walls. Two cities she cannot name, and as the door opens it occurs to her that, to another pair of eyes, the images carved there are not tragic laments at all, but celebrations of the new empire that slays the old.

Then the doors close and we are alone with Thene in a corridor, too long,

the path obscured by silks hung like ancient spider-webs, the sound of music muffled, the smell of wax and candlelight sweet in our senses.

She is briefly afraid, but to go back is impossible, so on, on she goes until a pair of wooden doors opens to a new place, a hall of soft voices, of low couches and bunches of grapes in copper bowls, of the old and the young, the beautiful and the strange. In the courtyard of the lower league, she thought she had seen some great variation in the peoples of the world, but now she looks and sees faces that, to her eyes, seem barely human, and yet now we might name for her as there the high historian of the court of Nanjing; there, the wife of a samurai slain in battle, her obi tight about her waist. Here, the Maori chief who glowers at the fur-clad woman of the steppe, and here is there not some clue to the nature of the house? For even Thene, who knows nothing of the camel-herders of the east or the canoe-builders of the south, can look and know that these people are alien to her world, and that their garb is not fitted for Venice. Not merely is it absurd to think that they could have passed without comment, but the very weather itself is set against them, for surely she who wears such white furs about her throat would swelter in the autumn warmth, while he who wore – and even she turned her face away from the sight – little but animal hides about his midriff, was surely too scantily clad to endure the Venetian night?

How then did all these people come to be here? A great many doors lead in and out, and of a great many different designs, for the one she came through is of a classical Roman bent, but over there are paper panels that slide back and forth, and there a great metal barrier that must be winched back to permit the passage of people through its maw.

All this she considers, and again feels fear, though it is a fear which cannot be named, and is greater for the ignorance which spawns it. Then an umpire is there and says, - Come, please, come.

She follows.

A small black door, tiny next to the vastness of the space, leads up a narrow flight of stairs.

At the top of the stairs is a windowless room.

Cushions have been set on the floor, and three men are gathered there already. Two of the men wear masks. The other she recognises: a player from the courtyard like herself, whose record stood on a par with her own.

Before them all, sitting cross-legged on a heaped mess of cushions, a silver goblet at her side and veiled all in white, is a woman. Like the umpires,

her face is hidden, but her robes are greater in volume and length than any other, swathing her entirely so that only where her wrist protrudes from her long winding sleeves, and when she speaks, could any sense of her form or sex be discerned.

For a long while they are silent, the four strangers and this gowned woman, until at last the latter seems to rouse herself from some manner of meditation and, raising her head, says to them,

- You have all been chosen.

She stops a moment and considers this remark, which came so easily to her lips. How many times has she spoken it before, and to how many players? Too many – too many.

- There exists in this house two leagues in which players may compete. The lower league you have all experienced, and there is gold and pride aplenty to be won from those who seek such material things. The higher league I now invite you all to join. Here we do not play for merely earthly things. You can wager diamonds if the glint of those gems amuses you, or rubies, or bodies, or gold, or slaves. These are all objects that others may covet. But here you are invited to wager something more. We invite you to wager some part of yourselves. Your skill with language, perhaps. Your love of colour. Your understanding of mathematics. Your sharp sight. Your excellent hearing. Years of your life – you may wager so much, if you choose, and those who wager unwisely and lose the game will find themselves growing old before their time, and those who play and win may live a thousand years, and become in their playing more than what they were. Nor, with the stakes so high, do we play petty games of chance or symbolic objects. If your objective is to capture a King, then we shall name that King, and to his court you shall go to win your prize. If you wish to compete, as our young boys do, for the ownership of a flag or other symbol of your power, then rest assured it shall be the flag of the mightiest general in the land, and your troops shall be legion, and with cannon and powder shall you make your claim. Our games are played for amusement and the increase of our minds, but they are played with flesh and blood and guts and pain as surely as any monarch of the world.

- You may decry such things as impossible or witchcraft but they are neither, and were you considered of such narrow-minded sort as to reject the veracity of what I am saying, you would not have been invited to participate. A great many people have heard rumours of this league and our house, and

many lives have been lost and confidences betrayed in seeking to reach it. You are, in many ways, blessed to have been chosen, but if my words cause you fear, then you may leave now and the game will go on. Be aware that you shall not be invited to return to this league, nor shall you be permitted to speak of it to any other. This is a term inviolable.

She finishes speaking, and waits.

No one rises, no one leaves.

- Very well, she says. - I accept your consent. Yet as this is the Gameshouse, you cannot simply walk into the higher league without some venturing first. Four of you have been judged suitable – one will join the higher league. The rest shall leave this place, never to return. A game is proposed to determine a winner. Please – take the boxes.

We watch now as four boxes, each in silver, are presented by the umpires to the players, whose fingers itch to open but who keep themselves perfectly still, locked perhaps in fear of she who sits before them.

- The game, she continues, - is one of Kings. Within these boxes are pieces that you may deploy. Each piece is a person, somewhere in this city, who has through rash venture, wager, debt or misplaced ambition come to owe a certain something to this house. Their debt we now transfer to you to be deployed as you may. You will also find within these boxes the details of your king. There is a vacancy emerging in the Supreme Tribunal for an inquisitor in black. Four candidates of some equal strength will compete for it. Each one of you has been assigned one of these candidates – one of these Kings. The winner is he or she whose king takes the throne. The rules of the game are also laid down within your boxes. Anyone who violates them will be punished most severely by the umpires and, friends, please do not doubt that the umpires will know. They will know.

So she finishes, and so she rises, and so the players rise too, and for a second all stand, stiff and silent in the room, waiting for something more.

Do we imagine a smile behind the hidden face of the Gamesmaster? Do we think we can hear humour in her voice?

We dare not speculate, not tonight, not with a silver box in our hand and the terror of the unknown beating in our breasts.

She leaves, and so do we, the room dissolving like memory.

## Chapter 7

We are in a most private place.

Thene and her husband do not share a room, and he, for all he dares, does not dare enter this place, her place, the highest room in the house, a place usually reserved for servants though they are now nearly all gone. In it are some little things, for only in little things will Thene invest, knowing that when they are stolen, destroyed or taken from her, the material loss is nothing, and as for the emotion, the history and the time she has put into them...why, let it go. Let it go.

We are bold, you and I, to be here at all, watching unseen. Yet here we must come, voyeurs to another's story, for here it is that Thene removes her bodice and her heavy outer skirt, unpins her hair, lights another candle from the stubby end of the first, sets it down beside her bed and, sitting cross-legged on top of the mattress like a child with a secret enthralling book, opens the silver box.

Dawn is rising outside through the streets of Venice, the grey light seeping in over the islands of the lagoon, through the slumbering workshops of Murano, across Piazza San Marco, that proud place built in defiance of Byzantine ambition, along the still waters of the Grand Canal and towards San Polo, where Thene's treasures are revealed.

A piece of paper outlines the rules.

Do not harm the other players.

The winner is the player whose king is crowned.

There was nothing more.

She turns it over a few times, then laughs out loud and stops herself at once lest the sound be heard in the house.

She looks into her box.

A silver figure, a statuette, showing a man in flowing robes and flat cap. His name, engraved on the bottom, is Angelo Seluda, though she little needs to be told. Everyone knows the Seluda family, who have for these twenty-five years fought running battles with the Belligno family in the streets of

Cannaregio. The Seludas wear blue; the Bellignos wear green. The Seludas trade glass; the Bellignos trade fish. Everyone knew why the feud had started, though no one knew the same thing. Some said a woman...others said a boat. It was whispered that Belligno's favourite son was betrayed to a rival from Milan by a Seluda captain. The boy loved a woman (in as much as a seventeen-year-old boy knows how to love with anything but a blazing passion that dies like candles in rain) but that woman had a brother, and the brother was jealous, and two years ago the child vanished. Belligno is too powerful for any one house to openly murder his kin, but not powerful enough, it seems, that even his mighty word can keep the wandering children alive. Then again, who is to say what really happens in matters of the seas and war? We trust only the uncertain men, for they are the ones who hear everything and believe nothing, reporting rumour as rumour, and in their doubts they stumble on a truth, and the truth is that no one knows anything and people like to talk for a long hour or two in the sun.

In three hours' time, word will spread through the city that Stephano Barbaro is dead, there will be elections for a new inquisitor to the Supreme Tribunal, and both Angelo Seluda and his arch-rival, Marco Belligno, will leap from their beds to fight for the post.

How, we wonder, did the Gamesmaster know that Barbaro would die?

We wonder, and then we do not. To wonder too deeply seems unwise, and will not aid our goal.

Her king, then, a sixty-one-year-old head of a merchant house, member of the Collegio, rival for the throne. She wonders who the other players have been given as their piece. Venice is a republic, a democracy even, in as much as a great many wealthy men of the city may vote for the Doge in the following manner: thirty members of the Great Council are chosen by lot. Another lot then reduced this thirty to nine. These nine members then chose forty members of their kin, who took another lot, and by this were reduced to twelve. These twelve then chose twenty-five, who were reduced by lot to nine, and these nine then elect forty-five. Of these forty-five, a lot again reduces their number to eleven, and these eleven then elect the forty-one who elect the Doge.

Is this democracy?

Why, certainly, it is democracy, if democracy is the machinations of a small handful of great and powerful men who by bribery and marriage own the others. Chance is not welcome when lots are drawn in Venice; votes are

only worthwhile when the electors know that the votes will be cast the proper way. But who would be Doge? A worthless, ceremonial position; a man in a hat, living in a gilded cage. The Supreme Tribunal, to be a Tribune, there is where the power lies! This every Venetian knows. Even the silent; even the women.

A letter unsealed. A ribbon with a ring attached invites her to read, then seal at her own leisure. She opens it.

Dear Sir, the bearer of this note will assist you in your enterprise.  
Please accord her full courtesies. Your Friend.

She examines the ring with which this note should be sealed. It bears the head of a lion, roaring as do the knockers to the Gameshouse gates. She seals the note with wax and puts it aside.

More objects from the box. A white mask, which, unlike many of the masks made for females, does not require the wearer to bite a handle between her lips to keep it in place. She may speak, strange liberation, though her face is unknown.

Tarot cards. The Fool. The Three of Coins. The Knave of Swords. The Queen of Cups. The Seven of Staves. The Tower. The Priestess. The King of Coins. On the back of each card is written a name and a place of residence.

A promissory note for five thousand ducats.

A single golden coin. The face carved on it was none she knew, and the inscription is Latin. We know it now – how we know it! – a coin from ancient Rome, but with it no note nor an explanation. What is its purpose? Perhaps it will only become apparent when other tasks have been completed? Games, unlike life, have a structure, a pattern, an order to unlock. Play, and all mysteries shall be revealed.

She laid it aside, sealed her box, blew out the candle and lay down to sleep.



## Chapter 8

She placed one thousand ducats on the table.

Jacamo de Orcelo watches it. What does he see in that purse? Ships? Chests of cloth, barrels of fish, precious spices from the East, slaves, grains? Or does he merely see casks of wine rolled across the pantry floor?

For a while they stand there, husband and wife, on the opposite side of the gold, and their faces speak, rage in the arguments that their voices have no courage to express, until at last Thene says:

- I'm going into a convent for three months to pray. You will find all things have been arranged. Goodbye.

He screams then, - Whore, hussy, harlot, where did you get the gold? Where can you get more? and tries to grab her by the hair, but she punches him. It is not the open-palmed slap of a lady of house Orcelo, but rather it is her, herself, the Jew's daughter, who hits him full in the face, and as he falls back bloodied, she gathers herself together and says, - If you want more, you will have to wait until I return.

He sits on the floor, legs splayed, rump down, and for a moment is too shocked to move. Then the little boy within him comes out, and he weeps, and crawls on his belly to her feet, and kisses her shoe and says, - I love you, I love you, don't go, I love you, where's the money? I love you.

She turns away.

## Chapter 9

The house of Angelo Seluda is by a canal. Its lower floors are – in traditional fashion – a place of business, its middle floors for the family and its topmost reaches crawl with servants, clerks and men of trade, humbly appreciative of their post from a man so great as the master of this house. It has its own well, the surest mark of status, and there is something of the Byzantine in the patterns above the windows, the carvings on the wall, scratched to the tiniest detail, which tell of an old home for an ancient name.

Thene examines it from across its private bridge and sees the statues raised to guard the entrance: Ares and Venus, hands clasped together in an arch above the gate. She feels a cat brush against her legs, curious at her curiosity; hears the push of oar through water, another supplicant coming up the canal to do homage to Angelo Seluda.

She is afraid, but has already come too far.

She loosens her fingers in their grey gloves and finds herself humming half a tune, a song she thought she had forgotten on the edge of her lips. She wears her mask, and coming to the door is stopped, challenged and when she speaks, surprise and distrust grow deeper on the faces of the lazy boys armed with clubs who accost her.

- My letter, she says. - I can wait.

She waits outside, five, ten, twenty minutes. In the time she stands there, we do not see her feet move, her back bend, her fingers ripple with impatience. Ares and Venus sweat in the face of her composure.

A boy returns, his face humbler now, and says, - Please come in.

She follows inside.

The door shuts her from our view.

## Chapter 10

Snatches of a conversation overheard through an open window.

He is Angelo Seluda, and we have observed him before in the streets of Venice on his way to prayer, arguing with merchants fresh come to port, inspecting timber and glass, giving censure at the Doge's palace, watching his rivals from between the cracks of the door. His family long ago discovered some secret sand, or some hidden colour, or mystic tincture – like all things in Venice, the detail is unclear – and took a great interest in glass. War has sometimes been unkind to this trade, but after every war there is always a great sighing of peace and, more importantly, a great many cracked windows to repair. And so on Murano his name is worth more than gold, and in the little islands that pepper the edge of the lagoon where twenty, thirty men at most inhabit and labour, Angelo Seluda is uncrowned king, Doge in all but name, commander of the workshops across the water. For too long he has laboured in the Senate, seeking advancement, but alas! He has always been a little too wealthy to escape envy, and thus his rivals have barred his advancement; yet he has never been quite wealthy enough to buy his way through this conundrum.

His hair is grey, his beard is long and, as only the old and the great do, he wears a gown even in summer which reaches to his ankles, and a chain of gold about his neck, and a purple cap upon his skull, and his most prized possession is a brooch of golden fleece given to him, so the rumour says, by a Spanish king for some service against the Turk in a battle long since fought, long since forgotten.

Or perhaps he bought it second-hand. Who can say, with a man like Seluda?

His voice now, meeting hers.

- I did not expect a woman, he says.

- Nevertheless.

- Can you play?

- I would not have been chosen if I couldn't.

- The notion of putting my fate in the hand of a woman disquiets me. I

was promised assistance from the Gameshouse in exchange for some... services. When I agreed to these terms, I had imagined more than this.

- You will find I am very suited to the task.

- May I see your face at least?

- No.

- Or know your name?

- Not that either.

- I am fighting for election to the Supreme Tribune. If I should win, I will command the Council of Forty in all but name, and what's in a name when so much power is at stake? If I command the Council of Forty, I will rule the city beyond the power of any mere Doge. I know what my rewards are and how much is staked. What do you get and why do you care?

- I win the game.

- This isn't a game.

- Isn't it? There are rules, boundaries, constraints on your action. Clear goals, tools to achieve them, a set table of rivals who must obey the same rules that you do if they wish to reach the same end. The only difference between these events now unfolding and any other game is the scale of the board.

- Games should be enjoyable.

- Levity and sincerity are not antonyms. We take pleasure in playing chess, but that does not mean we make wasteful moves. You have invested things of great weight into these coming events. Your honour, your prestige, your finances, the welfare of your family, your business, your servants, your future. Such matters can weigh heavy on a mind and cloud it to wisest judgement. I suggest that having the assistance and resources I offer, untainted as they are, will be of service to you.

Seluda is silent a while. Then

- What do you need?

## Chapter 11

She takes a room in the top of his palazzo.

The mask will not leave her face now, save for in those few, few moments when she is alone, high above the waters of the city.

She needs pen, paper.

The rest she can do for herself.

A servant of Seluda is sent to the Doge's palace with orders to wait and not move a muscle until he has heard who else will stand for the Supreme Tribunal. In all, seven names are called. She studies them, trawling through memories and faces, esteemed gentlemen half known from prayers at church or whispers on the wharves. Who of these seven are serious contenders, has something to gain? She draws circles around four names, including Seluda's, but nothing is to be taken for granted yet. Each party must be assessed, their business known, for even a minor rival who cannot win the prize on his own part may yet disrupt her activities in bidding for it.

She expects Belligno to run, and indeed his name is one of the first that reaches her ears. Whether Belligno has decided to campaign for his own gain or because he hears Seluda too seeks the prize, she is not certain, but she pays a beggar and his daughter to observe all that Belligno does and report on those he is seen with, rumours that are uttered about his name. For two days they watch, and at the end of the second day there is still no sign that anyone plays Belligno, save himself.

Faliere – jovial, smiling Faliere, who it is said prepared the poison himself that killed three of his guests at a feast some seven years ago, though equally it could have been a bad fish or a rotten egg. How can a man who smiles so boldly and laughs with such hearty appreciation of others be a poisoner? And then she looks a little closer and thinks perhaps he laughs as he prepares the brew? Perhaps, like a child making mud pies, he chuckles to himself as he stirs belladonna into his enemy's wine, chortling at the thought of their eyes widening, their hearts racing, their minds clouded and tongues hysterical?

Perhaps this same thought keeps him merry as he serves drink, and people mistake this continual self-entertainment with being a more generous spirit and think his humour is at their wit rather than his own?

Or perhaps he never poisoned anyone and knows that it is good to be both loved and feared, and so laughs and is generous to his friends and lets the rumours persist of what he may do to his enemies?

Paolo Tiapolo and Andrea Contarini are not only both strong candidates, but have the gall to attend mass together. She sits at the back of the church and observes them, on opposite sides of the aisle. They smile at each other, embrace as old friends: - Paolo, Paolo, so good to see you; - Andrea, your wife looks beautiful and I hear all is well with you? – and when the other’s back is turned they bend down and whisper to their wives and their secret companions, - *There goes that bastard. Watch him – he’s a snake...*

Tiapolo has three daughters whom he has kept virginal and unmarried for an unfashionably long period of time. The eldest is nearly twenty-four and people are already questioning if the old maid is even capable of bearing children but now! Ah – clever now, clever Tiapolo, we understand! You were waiting for Brabano to die; you were waiting for the time as well as the place when each child might be most helpfully deployed in your cause. Well prepared, Tiapolo, well did you play the game, even before the game was begun.

And Contarini? He has quarries on both this and the other side of the Adriatic Sea; his business is mortar, stone, brick, clay and those judicious men who have mastered all of the above. His children are long since married to wagon masters and marble merchants, so barely a building can be raised in the city now without the Contarini’s mark etched above the door. Foolish men mistake the master for his trade, call Contarini “Old Man Stone” and say his wit is dull and heavy as the slabs of the coffin – yet how they change their tune, these laughing men, when they want an extension added to the top of their palazzos or repairs done to the inside of their wells! How then they flock to him, our master Contarini, and laugh at his jokes which are, we will concede, exceptionally dull and surprisingly crude, made only marginally funny by the hope of discounts gained through humour shared.

These two – smiling Tiapolo and leaden Contarini – are rivals indeed, though each in their different way, and as she watches them bow before the bishops, she wonders what they make of her piece, or if they think of him at

all.

A flash of colour in the church, a smile caught in the corner of her eye. She looks, and then looks harder, astonished by what she sees. Puffed sleeves of cyan-blue, rings of silver and gold, and features familiar, manner known. Whoever is playing Tiapolo as their piece doesn't bother to hide. He sits, proud as Zeus, directly behind his piece, his pawn, his king – whatever it is you may call these would-be masters of all they survey. He does not wear his mask in church, for to do so would be an offence to the Lord and the great servants of the Lord gathered there, but step outside and he wears it, a badge of prestige and power. It is not he himself who hides behind that carved smile and gold-rimmed eyes; no, rather it is *he* – himself, the great man, the player – that he wears instead of his face: lord of his dominion, master of the game.

She watches him; she watches Tiapolo. She fears the piece more than the player.

Though he has appeared at mass, he vanishes by private barge, and for two days after she cannot find Contarini. He has moved, he is hidden, but let that not be seen as a sign of weakness, for when he needs to appear in the Doge's palace, he is there, shaking hands, and when he leaves he does so by two private boats, one which turns left, the other right into the bay, and no man can know which of the hooded men that sit within it is the man himself. Contarini fears the blade of an assassin and his fear perhaps tells us the direction in which he too shall take this game. She makes no effort to track either of his gondolas. Assassins are crude tools and should only be played when the board has coalesced into something more coherent. Contarini will wait.

At night, she lines the pieces up on her table. Faliere, Tiapolo, Contarini, Seluda. Do the other players study these as she does? Are they sitting alone with a single half-burned candle considering their enemies, their friends?

(And now we see! Three unnamed rivals spread across the Venetian night. He, the one who is proud, so proud of his cleverness and his power, so rich on the satisfaction of his game, so aloof from humanity – he drinks at the high table with Tiapolo, and will go to bed drunk and wake late, and tell strangers that he has slept with Tiapolo's wife, knowing no one will question him, and thinking it is because they are afraid.

And he, who plays for Contarini, or on Contarini, depending how you

look at the matter, watches the house of Seluda where even now Thene resides, and knows that his piece is a powerful man, and will not be happy until this rival is removed, and he feels the weight of a silver box given to him in the Gameshouse, and knows the power therein and wonders whether soon is too late to strike.

And for the last?

Why, like Thene herself, he sits alone in the shadows and considers his move.)

Faliere, Tiapolo, Contarini, Seluda.

And beneath them, a question. Why was Belligno not chosen as a piece? Why is she not playing him in this game of power and politics? His claim to the position on the Supreme Tribunal is strong, perhaps stronger than Seluda's own. Why is he not being deployed and moreover, will he be a threat, though he is neither player nor played?

Questions in the night. We shall leave her with them for her bedside company.



## Chapter 12

Let us consider a card.

Its frontage shows the Seven of Staves, but who is he?

A man who has struggled to the top, perhaps, and now fights to hold his position? A middling functionary, not a king, but neither is he a pawn, but rather he is Alvise Muna, who at fifty-seven years of age has lived longer than most who serve within the Doge's court and yet, for all that he has wandered these halls for decades and heard the secret mutterings at midnight, there is a sense about him that he will rise no higher, but remain for ever as he is: a councillor, reliable, solid, unremarkable, a little prone to bribery but not at unreasonable cost which, in Venice, is as high an honour as may be given to a man, and going nowhere more than where he stands now.

She meets him in the Piazza San Marco. He walks alone, a roll of documents under one arm, a velvet cap pulled down upon his grey, bent head, a great mole upon his chin, utterly devoid of colour, paler almost than the skin from which it grows, and when she steps before him, he moves to pass without looking, for there is nothing in these streets save business to be administered, and he would rather administer it from his office than in the presence of the people themselves.

- Signor Muna, she says, and he half turns at his name, slowing his pace. - I hold your card.

Now he stops, now he looks all around, now he grabs her by the arm and whispers, - In some other place.

They enter the basilica separately, and for a while he prays and so does she, though he is on bended knee at the front of the aisle while she sits behind, beneath gold and the eyes of Christ. Quiet is amplified in this place more than noise, for every whisper echoes and every hush that falls is deepened, deepened by the depth it has to plummet. When he has finished at his devotions, they meet beneath the gaze of St John, a lamb at his feet, a book in his hand, his eyes sorrowful at the deeds that men will bring.

- I owe some favours, he whispers. - I acquired some debts. A woman dressed all in white offered me a chance. She said you would one day come.

- What kind of debts?
  - That's my business. They are forgiven when the game is done.
  - You are positioned in the palace?
  - If you call it that. I do all the work that everyone else is too busy arguing about. I worry about the waterways, about silt and mud. I consider the price of crab, the quality of fish, the depth of new wells dug in old squares, the paving materials and safety of rooftops. Other men should do this but they have their eyes on a bigger prize.
  - Your work sounds difficult.
  - I will never be more than a slave to other men's ambitions.
  - I believe now the favours you owe to others have devolved to me. That is the meaning of this card, is it not?
  - It is, though I am no pawn to be moved across a board. My debts are my debts, but when they are paid I will risk my neck no more in any man's business.
  - I do not ask you to take risks.
  - Then what do you want?
  - A sounding of the Senate chambers. In less than a month a Tribune will be chosen to replace the deceased Barbaro. For now, I wish to know the disposition of the electors, what influences them and what they desire. These things will not be won on principal but on the greatest gain for the largest sum of people. It is only information I need now, which a man of your qualities will have well disposed. Information is not a great burden to acquire.
  - And in a month?
  - The game will end, and so will your obligation to it.
  - And my debts?
  - All debts end with the game.
  - I shall do as you ask.
- He does not see her smile.

And who is this?

The Queen of Cups.

La Bella, beautiful lady Pisana, queen of the night. She is a poetess and a good one, though her words will be burned by a vengeful bishop-turned-lover who will call her heretic and whore. She has read the works of Julian of Norwich, and calls God "mother" and Jesus "sister", and proclaims that the

word of Christ is compassion and love, and that man who would deny it is no more holy than the droppings of a donkey. Is this heresy? - No, she will say, when they put her before the judge. - For the divine is neither man nor woman, and being so I choose the name that is most kind, most loving, most giving to the goodly of earth, and say that in heaven I shall find my sisterhood.

Now she sits, ankles showing, knees showing, one leg draped across another, skirt pulled high, and turns the card that is presented to her between her fingers and smiles.

- I used to be a player, she says. - I know your game. What sad times that I am now a piece.

- Sad indeed, Thene replies, barely wetting her lips with the fine wine that was offered. - How did you come to this pass?

- I wagered more than I had to give. I gambled the life of my child against fifteen years of a woman's youth. But my child died before the game was completed, and there being no mercy in the house, I lost my place. I am not angry now – those are the rules, this is the game. The game is greater than I comprehended, and has been played longer and on boards far wider than this you play now. Had I known that, I might not have laid any wager at all. Yet here we are.

- Here we are.

- You want something from me, no doubt. I am a powerful card in your hand, yes? The Queen of Cups, no less! It is apt, I suppose, and good to see that the Gamesmaster has not lost her sense of humour.

- I hear your women sometimes are about the house of Orio Faliere.

- You hear correctly, but they never attend the old man himself. He has interest in neither women nor girls – not even pretty boys seem to arouse his icy flesh.

- Who then do your ladies sport with?

- His sons. His servants. His men-who-hang-about-hopefully. The vast majority of the great houses of Venice are peopled with this sort, and they all seek an outlet for their disappointments sooner or later.

- They are of some use to me, but not so much use as Faliere himself.

- You are playing a game for...what? The Supreme Tribunal – is that your prize? It is, isn't it?! I had wondered if the Gameshouse would intervene. Which player do you play? Belligno? Tiapolo?

- I do not think I should say.

- Perhaps not, though the card you hold binds me to you for the duration of the game, and there is much discretion in my business. Let me ask you this then: how many players do you know of?

- Four.

- Four! And of those four, I can assure you, luck will have been uneven in her favours. Ask yourself, why has the Gamesmaster – or mistress I should say – singled out only four? The house has its purposes, and you must never forget that if you desire to win.

- Perhaps when I have won, I will enquire further.

- When you win, you will not enquire at all. The victory – the victory is all! Should you win, you may not wish to jeopardise your new status with reckless questioning. So it is that comfortable people settle into a deceiving life, finding truth somewhat unpleasant. But I like you, my lady. I am glad that you hold my card. If you wish to deploy me most advantageously, I would not suggest Faliere. He is too cold, too aloof, too dead-to-the-skin. Seluda now, he is fiery for every kind of flesh, though you would hardly think it to look at him; Belligno and Contarini both have wagging tongues, and other parts besides.

- They also have other weaknesses which I might explore. There is a rumour that Belligno had a son...

- Ah yes, the foolish boy who went to Milan!

- You know something of this?

- I know that he was reckless with his love and wrote ballads and odes for nearly every lady of Venice. The husbands of these ladies doubtless would have had something to say on the matter, but in this city Belligno protected his boy from their ire and so he became more love-struck and even more foolish.

- And vanished?

- Not in Venice: in Milan.

- Why did he go to Milan?

- His father was a little embarrassed, I believe, at the son's activities.

- A little embarrassed?

- Even Bellignos feel shame when the boy is too drunk to tell the difference between pretty girls and pretty boys, and takes all equally.

- So sent the boy to Milan?

- This was two years ago, maybe more.

- He never returned.

- No. He never did.
- And what does the father make of all this?
- He believes his boy is dead.
- Do you believe that?

The Queen of Cups hesitates, lips curling into her mouth, tongue running along the inside, head turning a little to one side.

- Why do you play, my lady? she asks at last.

Thene hesitates.

- Come, come, chides the other. - We are sisters, and I am in your hand. I was a player; I may be of some greater use to you than you first perceived. Why do you play?

- To be free.
- Of what?

- My husband. My family. My blood. My name. All of it. To be... powerful. Nor do I say "power" for its own sake, but rather I would say for power-as-strength. Power as the strength to be known for myself, to live for myself, to be – in a manner that has until now been denied to me – myself. That is why I play.

At this, Pisana tuts. - That is a very bad thing for a player.

- How so? Surely a good player has cause greater than themselves to play?  
- Not at all. A cause will corrupt your perception of the board, lead to decisions made in sentiment which should have been made in thought. There is only one reason, only one, why you should embark on this game. Would you like to know it?

- Yes. I would.

The Queen of Cups leans in closer, whispers, her lips brushing the ridges of Thene's ear. - You play to win, she breathes. - That is all.

So saying, she sits back, smiles a pleasing smile, giggles like a girl and says, - We were discussing Belligno?

Thene takes a moment. Relaxes her hands. Looks a little to the left, a little to the right, then meets Pisana's eye again. The moment that was might never have been. - Do you believe Belligno's son to be dead?

- Yes. I do. They say he was unwise in his affections in that city. Those husbands, fathers, brothers who in this city might have permitted him to have his amorous adventures in fear of the father, in Milan felt no such concern. Belligno could not protect his boy once he had crossed the lagoon, but both father and son were, I think, too foolish to consider this.

- So the son died?

- Vanished, rather. Though what the difference is, save for one of suspended hope, who can say? Do you want me to make enquiries? I have some friends in Milan.

- No. Thank you. I think it perhaps best that I use other resources for that enquiry, and employ you on matters more conducive to your trade. Faliere—

Here the Queen of Cups huffs indignantly; Faliere, Faliere, what good is he to her, or she to him? Yet Thene will not be swayed.

- ... keeps himself isolated from all things, is never seen beyond his own four walls, is guarded constantly, confides in no one. He is the piece that must be broken first, for he will be the hardest to break.

- I do not think female tenderness is your most likely tool to achieve this.

- A man may be approached by many means. Money, servants, spies, traitors – but Faliere is cold to them all. However, as you point out, his household is not. He cannot win without calling upon the resources of all he now possesses, and he cannot defend every part of his kingdom at once. An unlikely assault from an unexpected source, targeting his pieces and not him, seems one of the few viable options available, and while I have enough money to bribe some in this regard, you are the Queen of Cups. You would not have been given this title were you not something greater than the usual sort.

- What do you know of the “usual sort”?

- More than the men, Thene replies. - Unlike men, I look at what is, rather than what I wish to perceive. Tell me – if Faliere is so cold to women, then what is the condition of his wife?

At this, Pisana smiles.

- There, she murmurs, - *is* an interesting question.

## Chapter 13

A strategy.

Every player needs a strategy, but plan too precisely, commit too closely to only one path, and what danger there lurks! For you are not alone in this game – others will act against you as you act against them – and so softly, softly on.

Many words trouble her, the laughter of the Queen of Cups echoes in her mind.

*I was a player once.*

*Play to win. That is all.*

She shakes her head a little, pushing the memory of Pisana's breath from her thoughts. A plan is forming now in Thene's mind, but she is wary. First information, then the kill.

The Knave of Swords sits, one leg upon the table, his hands folded behind his head. Is it possible to swagger while sitting? If so, he succeeds.

His beard is black, darker than his brown hair. His nose and eyes are little hollows between the roaring mass of hair that shadows his face. He dresses in an extraordinary patchwork of fabrics, French and Bavarian, Flemish and Portuguese, his tailor a drunkard who loves to travel.

He says, - I fought a duel. My sword broke, and I lost. My sword never breaks. And here we are.

- I hold your card.

His arms open as if he would bow from where he sits. - My lady, he says, though he does not stand, does not remove his foot from her table, does not alter the fixed smile that waits without laughter behind his facial hair.

- Would you like me to kill someone? he asks.

- No.

- Why not? I am good at killing.

- Assassination is a crude move. Kill a piece too soon and the other players are made stronger in its absence. While there are four players there is balance, forces pulling every which way, resources stretched. My piece

seems...perhaps weaker than I would like, but this could be an advantage. Let other players expend cards on battling each other, the strong tearing each other down, until they are weak enough that I may strike. An assassination now would destroy that balance, and though one day the balance must break, it is too soon for that.

- I'm better at fighting than I am sitting around composing Greek verse.

- Contarini has been behaving in an extraordinary manner. He does not sleep in the same places more than two nights in a row, sends decoys to hide his every move, writes letters in code and generally speaking behaves in a manner more suited to a criminal in the night than a candidate. I know that this is to protect against any interference from players such as myself, but I believe that in doing so, he has created a weakness. Being constantly on the move and with security so high, he must of necessity devolve some of the everyday running of his affairs to lower men of his household. It is this that I wish to explore. Speak to his stewards. Buy them drinks, share tales of adventure, walk drunkenly home with them through the night. Find out from them not where Contarini is, but where his wealth is. Like the rest of us, his position depends on finance – if we can empty his chests before the election, he will be no threat.

- Drink and politics?

- I would have thought some of that would appeal.

- You hold my card, he replied with a shrug. - Not my decision how you play it.

And as she walks through the streets in the night...a sense.

A suspicion.

A question?

Is she being followed?

The thought, made sharp by circumstance, runs with her all the way to the Grand Canal.

The rules have promised her safety, but what does that mean now? Nothing, perhaps. Everything. Something. A question she cannot answer, a fear she cannot know, she picks up her pace, not running, not that, but moving in search of light, people, alleys too tight, buildings too high, a church ahead – to this she flees, slamming the door behind her, candles, the smell of incense, her heart too fast, too fast in her ears, in her eyes, in the pulsing of her throat. A church is not safety, though it may be stillness for a



while. She stops. She slows her breath. Slows her fingers, her eyes, her thoughts.

She is a player.

She is a player.

She is *the* player.

Victory will be hers.

She turns to the doors and steps out into the dark.

Examines the shadows – see her there, so proud, so straight! There, There, there is no fear now: there is only the player. She watches and defies the dark to do her harm; it is *her* dark, her night, her city; to her will it shall bend, if it bends to anything at all.

We watch her depart.

We watch.

## Chapter 14

Alvise Muna, the Seven of Staves.

- Tiapolo bribes everyone, he whispers. - He has promised his daughters in marriage to nine people already – nine! They say he has pledged over ten thousand ducats to the election so far, with a promise of land, glory, wealth – anything – to anyone who supports his cause.

- And does he succeed?

- A great many men have accepted his gifts, but no one says his name out loud.

- And why do you think that is?

- He makes promises he cannot possibly keep. His spending is unsustainable; it is...*crude*.

Muna's lips curl in disdain at the word. He says, - His people threaten those who do not speak in his support. It is not how we play the game. A man who receives the precise sum of gold that will discharge his debt to a clawing physician is more grateful and more personally bound than he who receives some greater, larger sum paid without consideration.

- But if the election were today?

- Tiapolo would win because no one else has yet made their move, and because the Council of Forty knows the value of a weak leader too, one who might be easily lead.

- And if it is tomorrow?

- That depends on what you do next. A loyalty that is purchased for coin lasts only as long as the next offer.

- You say he has people.

- A man in court that I know for certain.

- Do you know who?

- Someone powerful, high. Yesterday Belligno's man was denied access to the Council of Seven. That has never happened before.

- Someone on the Council itself?

- I imagine so.

- I need to know who.

- How do you suggest I find out? Ask in the palace, “Is anyone else sworn to serve a stranger with a card, a house with no name?” I don’t think so.

- Extraordinary behaviours stand out, breaks in pattern. I must know what cards the others are playing if I am to counter them. But if you think so little of Tiapolo’s efforts to win support, who would you consider next in the running?

- Yesterday it would have been Belligno, but he lost votes this morning when word came of a ship of his floundering at sea. We do not like people who lose vessels.

- So today?

- After Tiapolo...Contarini is the most spoken of, and with the greatest respect. The bishops have declared for him, and their coffers carry as great a sway as any word of the Lord.

- Contarini, not Faliere?

- Faliere is still unknown, as is Seluda. Both seem to be waiting to make a move.

- Faliere trades with Constantinople, does he not?

- Indeed. He was one of the very first to speak to the infidel when peace was declared. At the time he was derided for this, called a traitor and a heathen. But those unwise councillors who mocked him then come begging to his door now for passage to Egypt or a bar of Syrian soap.

- It does not affect his standing?

- Honour is easily bought, and Faliere is very rich.

- The bishops, you say, are for Contarini?

- Yes.

- Thank you.

- Are you winning? he asks as she turns away.

- Not yet, she answers. - Not yet.

Contarini, Contarini, how infuriatingly hard it is to find information on Contarini! What is his game? What does he do with the bishops, this stone merchant, this man of stone? She looks and she cannot yet see it, though at least now she has some idea of the direction in which it turns. She pens a note to the Knave of Swords saying, - The bishops. See what it is Contarini does for the bishops.

Then there is Faliere: his fingers touch only paper and steel, nothing warmer, and it seems that his soul is made of the same stern stuff. The Queen

of Cups is about her work but then again, there is nothing in the rules of the game that says Thene herself may not make some enquiries. Not at the top – no, the heads of the Faliere house are too afraid of their master, too tightly knit to him, to ever betray his trust.

To the bottom then, to those quiet people with flapping ears who everyone ignores, the necessary souls who are no more and no less than a piece of floating furniture.

A gondolier, his legs upon the prow of his boat, his hands behind his resting grey head, who laments – how he laments! – that his day is spent waiting for Orio Faliere to summon him to his trade, how days sometimes go by and no, he does not set forth, he does not do his duty but rather waits and waits and waits, forbidden from leaving this place on the chance that someone in the house needs his services, but he could be elsewhere, he could be fishing...

- But are you not paid to wait? she asks.

- Yes, I'm paid to waste my youth in this place, waiting on whims, but I could be paid *and* fishing, instead of paid and waiting!

- ... I see.

This unfortunate gondolier, so tragically trapped by wealth into waiting on his master, tells her that almost nothing has changed in Orio Faliere's house since the death of Barbaro and you would not think that his master was competing for the post at all, save for in one matter – that last night a masked stranger, a man, came down to the boat and requested that he was shipped to the Doge's palace where he stayed for some twenty minutes before returning and being returned again to these halls. The masked stranger said no more than the place to go to and the command to wait, and on his return didn't even tip.

- How much are you paid to wait? she asks.

- Not enough, he grumbles.

- How would you like to earn a little more?

These streets, these streets!

Is she afraid to walk them?

(Yes. She is. We know this; we know it in the deep beating of our hearts; she looks and she is afraid.)

They are her streets, they are the streets which gave her life, and it is not fear of the shadows nor fear of the dark that walks beside her but rather more,

worse, greater – a fear of the past, which does not leave her.

But she has a card in her hand, the King of Coins, and it must be played soon if results are to come in time for the election, and to play it she must cross the bridge into the ghetto while enough daylight shines so she can still get out.

The ghetto is in Cannaregio and there is, architecturally speaking, nothing much to the casual eye to set it apart from its surroundings. Like so much of the city, it has absorbed the styles of both east and west: a large square at its centre, tiny alleys all around, sloping cupolas and sharp corners, clothes drying from lines strung between every window. And yet look, look a little closer, for here there are no crucifixes but rather candles burning in the menorah, and there are those who live a little too close together in space that should have been expanded many years ago, but instead the floors have been lowered so that each room feels a little compressed, and where only five storeys might have inhabited the warehouse by the water, here there are seven. Now listen, listen, and you may hear not merely Venetian spoken, but the Spanish of the Sephardic Jews expelled by a Christian queen, or the prayers of those who fled from the Holy Roman Empire when Protestants mistook them for friends of the Catholics, Catholics for friends of the Protestants. They do not pray together, the east and the west, but rather each turns to their own synagogue, whispering that though they are all of one family, one blood, yet *he* does not practise to the same rules as *she*, and it is bad form to shake the hand of a man who has shaken the hand of a man who is a Christian.

So though compressed together, yet even in the ghetto – or perhaps especially – it is easy to be a brotherhood divided.

Of these people, one at least is universally known, and if not loved, then certainly no one dares speak of him with anything less than admiration. He is called Saloman. They stand together by the gates to the ghetto, watching the Jews and Jewesses of Venice busy about their daylight business, while the day permits them to work. His card is apt, she thinks, for he is the King of Coins to more than simply herself. Only four professions are permitted to the Jews of Venice, and one of them is moneylender, in which part they are derided, cursed, spat upon and envied.

- There is a cycle of humiliation, he explains. The Christian, to do himself up, humiliates the Jew, calls him dog, beast, devil, imprisons us at night, bids

us wear yellow on our sleeves, tells us to eat pork and sleep in the sewer. But we fight with all that we have to become greater than our surroundings, and so we lend money and cure diseases and practise those philosophies that the Christian in his decadence does not. So they come to us for help, and then what is their predicament if they need the service of a dog and a devil? Does this not make them lower than us? And shall they not therefore pull us down in seeking to feel great again?

- How contrary it all is, he whispers as if she is not there. - How easily wisdom buckles before pride.

- Is it money you want? he asks, all business now: business, business, business. - Though I am your card, I can only lend cheaply, not gratis. Players usually want money.

- Not money.

- What do you want?

- I need to win Belligno to my cause. Though no player moves him, yet he is too powerful a piece to be ignored.

- You want to bribe him?

- No. I want you to make some enquiries in Milan.

- Ah, you are listening to rumours! The story about the Belligno boy, yes? They say that he went with a woman whose brother, it transpired, was not of a kindly disposition in these regards. Some say Seluda sold the boy out; others say he was just stupid. Me, I think he was probably stupid. Most boys are.

- I am told you have connections across all of Europe.

- And most of Africa too, but even I cannot find a dead man.

- Is he dead?

- He has been gone for two years and his father made many enquiries.

- I heard that the Milanese were vengeful people.

- Death is vengeful.

- I think we both know that death is a lesser evil in Milan. You can find answers?

- You wish me to speak to my cousins, rather than spend my coin?

- A bit of both, perhaps.

Then he turns to her, surprise on his face. - Do I know you? he asks. - Your voice...there is something familiar in you. When players are dealt my card, they see only the Jew, the Jew who lends money, the dog to be hounded by other dogs. You – you play me in a different way. It is unexpected.

- Can you do it?

- I can try.

- That is all I ask.

And as she turns to go:

- I know you, he breaths. - You hide your face but I know your voice. I knew your mother. She was a wonderful singer.

- I am a player, she replies. - The rest is nothing.

She is gone.

At night, we sit beside her, unseen, warmth from the candle. She considers Andrea Tiapolo, remembers him in the basilica, his player sat behind, puffed up and proud. He is moving too fast, playing his pieces too fast. He bribes too many, not realising that the key to success is to learn who the few great men are whose minds must be swayed, and focus resources on them rather than expend largely on the lesser loud men of the Doge's palace. He has shown his pieces too soon, but here is the question: does she deliver the killing blow to Tiapolo's campaign, or wait for another player to do so? Faliere bides his time; Contarini is moving slowly and carefully, but move he does. And what of Belligno, Angelo Seluda's greatest rival? He acts alone, is not a piece supported by a player but rather moves independently, and again the question – *why* is he not a piece? His moves are strong, he would be an excellent piece to be played, yet the Gamesmaster did not choose him for the game.

Yet, like the Queen of Spades as she emerges from within the shuffled pack, though he is not played, yet he still is a player.

She waits and hums her mother's lullaby under her breath, barely noticing the sound.

## Chapter 15

The day that Thene spots – absolutely spots – another player’s piece, she is delighted. Less delighted when she sees what he is: Abbot Padova, dear friend of the Patriarch of Venice, dearer friend yet of the Doge himself, for it is said that when the Doge’s wife was sick, the abbot laid hands upon her and within a day – nay, perhaps within an hour! – she was up again, about her business.

This Abbot Padova she sees now at prayers, whispering when the liturgy is done in the Patriarch’s ear, and as he whispers, Contarini watches him and smiles, and she knows that Padova is his man.

And why not? she muses.

If she had a piece like the abbot to play, she would deploy him to the very hilt.

She flicks through her cards, looking for the answer.

The Priestess.

She says: - Perhaps you do not consider it appropriate that a nun should be a piece in your game?

- I have no thoughts of appropriateness or rank, or any matter other than victory, Thene replies as the two of them walk side by side through the little chapel of the nunnery where the Priestess resides. It is not on the mainland of Venice itself, but on an island where the dead are taken to be buried, a steep little protrusion of green from the blue waters of the lagoon where the funeral barges wait in silence at the water’s edge for the priests and diggers of that place to carry their shrouded cargo into black soil. Dark-spined trees hang overhead, gravel crunches beneath their feet and birds sing between the branches, oblivious to the solemnity of this ground.

- Quite right, murmurs the Priestess. - A piece is a piece; the game is the game. It is the separation of humanity from the enterprise that will permit you to win it. That being so, what do you desire of me?

- I hear that the Church supports Contarini’s candidature for the Supreme Tribunal.



- The Church doesn't concern itself with such matters.

- Come, you and I both know that isn't true. Abbot Padova is very much Contarini's man, and I have no doubt that he is being played.

- Indeed? Well, there are more than some of us, perhaps, who made... arrangements with the Gameshouse we might someday regret.

Thene hears the thoughts in the Priestess's voice, feels the sorrow, sees her eyes drift towards the still waters of the lagoon, and though the offer is sweet and her curiosity blazes, she does not ask the question, but rather swiftly moves through it, for she has business to attend and is beginning to learn that a piece in this game is not as simple as a counter on the board, for these pieces have secrets and prides, and though they are hers by the rules of the game, yet they too must be shaped into something more.

- I need to know what it is that Contarini has offered the bishops to sway them, and what it would take to change their minds.

- And you expect me to find out?

- I do, Sister. I think you are trustworthy. I think your honesty and piety are written in your face. I think you are regarded as spiritually notable but politically insignificant. I think you will be able to find out these truths very easily indeed.

- I hope you have been dealt better cards than me, she replies. - Though I will, of course, do as you ask.

- Thank you, Sister.

And then, as she makes to go:

- May I ask – how did you come to know of the Gameshouse?

Thene hates that she cannot stop herself from asking, then forgives herself at once, concluding that the value of the question perhaps – but no, it cannot be – but *perhaps* even outweighs the glory of the prize for which she plays.

The Priestess stands still, considering this question, considering her answer, whether it is apt to reply at all. At last she says, - I have seen four or five players set upon different matches who have asked me that question. The first time I was played, I was the Two of Cups, a novice in the order in Rome. The player asked me to perform a task which I could not achieve and I was nearly expelled, and he, having played me badly, lost the use of me as a piece and eventually the match. Then, the game was one of cardinals, and though I was not a player, I could see the pattern of moves well enough to know what the prize was. Ask yourself this, my lady: you play now to crown a king in Venice, and this is, I think, your very first game. Imagine the stakes that more

experienced players must work for. Imagine the scale of their ambition. Though I am only a piece in your hand, I am powerful enough to take some interest in these matters, and of enough curiosity to wish to know how the Gameshouse makes its moves. I think anyone who considers themselves wise would do the same.

- You are not tempted to play?

- And risk losing? No. It is enough for me to know the board and see the direction that the pieces flow. I will not wager on it.

As her ship pulls from the island, she sees another, taller, greater, a pennant proud on its mast, heading out towards the open sea. It is a ship of Faliere, though where it is going, riding so high in the water, she cannot tell. Her lips thin ever so slightly behind her mask – her ignorance frightens her more than any certainty of Faliere’s schemes. What does this man plot, who is so aloof from the machinations of the city, so far beyond the reaching of the game? She does not know, and is for a moment terrified.

And as she returns to shore she sees black fires rising from the harbours.

Men run, buckets, buckets, the buildings fall, the smoke rises up in a plume then spreads out into the sky at a certain point, as if passing some invisible barrier between the compressed, buffeting world of man and the expanse of heaven. If we stand close – too close! – the heat tears at our faces, at our skins, our lips crack, the blood pulses in our toes; retreat, nothing can save this now, and let us stand with the children who gape at the timbers cracking, the walls coming down, who watch the sparks of this blaze spin and flick towards heaven and say, - Mummy, it’s pretty – can we see another one?

Onshore, the messenger confirms what she already knows: the warehouse was one of Tiapolo’s. It was supposed to be empty, all goods shipped out three days ago but look, there is the old man on his knees, weeping, weeping, all is lost and it seems that the rumours were a lie. The warehouse was not empty at all, but rather filled with a secret stash of pepper for sale to an Englishman who had promised five times its weight in gold and now – now! – all lost in a sweet-smelling smoke. Tiapolo will be ruined, some say, but no, he’ll come back, his kind always do.

Thene does not stay to witness the old man on his knees, or to observe the masked man who stands behind him, a silver box empty in his hands, who

turns at last and walks away.

- Of course he can't win, tuts Alvise Muna as they walk together beneath the low arches of San Marco at the setting sun. - Tiapolo's entire strategy consisted of bribery and intimidation; it was already suspected that he couldn't pay his debts and now he definitely cannot enforce his threats. One day he might be a competitor, but not today.

Not today.

There are only three contenders now: Seluda, Contarini, Faliere. Belligno still moves on the margins, but she cannot think he will last long.

Which of Tiapolo's rivals delivered the blow? What cards did they play?

(Ah, the King of Swords! Char still clinging to his fingers, the smell of oil about his clothes; his card played, his debt discharged, he turns away from the blaze - until the next game.)

She has bided her time long enough.

Time to move.

## Chapter 16

When they first invite Pietro Zanzano and his wife to dine, a message comes back pleading a headache.

When the next day they propose the same again, the messenger returns that alas, they have prior commitments.

On the third day, she visits the house and will not leave until she has seen the master personally.

He is busy, irritated, his grey hair sticking out beneath his black cap. He is something of a rarity in Venetian politics – not only does he have a great name, but the wealth which bought that name has grown, grown over the centuries where so many others have declined. If there was ever a quality close to godliness in Venetian eyes, it is this, for how rarely do economics and honour collide?

- Madam, he says, barely bothering to look at her, - I cannot visit your master's house. My wife is ill-disposed.

- Sir, she replies, - my master is most sad to hear that, but nevertheless some private conference will be of great use for us all.

- Doubtless he wishes me to do some favours for him; I cannot of course interfere in this process.

Hearing this, she smiles beneath her mask. It is the first time we have felt this, and it is so unexpected that we want to freeze this moment, capture it like a portrait, a second that was, and shall never be again.

Then – then!

She removes her mask.

So long we have seen her in this guise, we have almost forgotten that she is human. Shall we use the word “beautiful”? Beauty is a thing that changes with the eye that sees it, but any woman, any living creature, is surely more beautiful than a mask which hides her and so yes, we shall now declare that from the moment that was to the moment that is, she is alive, is living and is beautiful.

Zanzano looks up and perhaps he is not as impressed as we are by this sight. Or perhaps he is like the mask that now she holds in her hand, a face

without a heart.

- You have already been made an offer, she muses out loud. - Very well. I will not do you that disservice to suggest that my master can beat the proposal that is already before you from Faliere – it *is* Faliere, I assume, who has approached you?

He does not move, and she is correct.

- It is a good move on the part of Faliere, as doubtless your voice holds great sway over these matters and you have power enough to decide, if not the vote, then a deal of it which is undecided until you speak. I will not do you any great dishonour to press you in this regard. You are a man of integrity; I wish you good luck.

So saying, she leaves.

And when she returns home, what of the mask shrouding her features?

Do we detect anger in her voice, or is it merely the intensity of a plan that now must fall as she demands, else all is lost?

We cannot tell. Our judgement here would be too subjective.

Yet here she speaks, and what she says is:

- *Faliere*.

And it is a statement, and a challenge, and a move that is yet to be made.

## Chapter 17

The birds are still singing on the island of the dead, the sun still shines as fresh coffins are lowered into the crowded earth. Thene walks by the Priestess's side as the other says:

- Contarini has a relic in his possession. The elbow of St Simon.
- Surely there are at least twenty elbows of St Simon in Venice already?
- The bishops seem to believe that this one is genuine – or rather...

Thene smiles to see the Priestess smile, for it is such a rare expression across her features that it reminds Thene, in a way she cannot describe, of herself.

- ... I do not know where Contarini found it: he did not have it three weeks ago and no vessel has come into port with any such thing about it. Indeed, the whole thing is being kept very close.

- I can make a few guesses as to where this relic came from, murmurs Thene as they walk together by the water, watching the clouds, the water, the city, the woman and the nun, the player and the played.

- Contarini has offered not only to hand over this relic, but to build the bishops a sacred place to house it. Doubtless the contracts for this exploit would be...very lucrative...to many individuals in the city.

- Ah – I see! He wins the bishops' vote by offering a little theological temptation in a golden box, then wins over the support of half the Senate by proposing building works which will keep them in coin for fifteen years yet to come. But by securing the Church's support for this venture, he doesn't even have to pay for more than the initial gilding himself if he can convince Rome to contribute to the construction of a reliquary while turning a profit on the contracts to construct! It is wonderful!

- You are pleased at this?

- I enjoy how so simple a move can trap so many pieces. Bishops, builders, men of faith, men of money. No wonder they have declared this sacred elbow or whatever it is to be the genuine matter, no doubt curing all manner of diseases. It is in the interest of everyone to find it so. Where is the relic now?

- No one knows.
- The bishops are committed?
- This enterprise will bring them wealth and prestige, which to the greatest in this church are of vastly more interest than salvation, sad to say.
- And for the same reason, much of the Senate will follow. Then we must see to its failure as quickly as possible, for the sake of their souls as much as our enterprise. Thank you, sister, for your assistance.

## Chapter 18

And together in the dark, their voices hushed in secrecy, a veil across one woman's face, a mask across the other's, firelight in the heart and the sound of men, drunk, in the street outside, the Queen of Cups, Pisana, lady of letters and lady of the night says:

- Faliere is so cold I begin to question whether he is even a man, even human, or just some animated statue that sometimes shits and sometimes spits and shows no more than those human functions.

- I take it you have had little success infiltrating his house, murmurs Thene.

- He has doubled his guard, thrown out anyone he doesn't trust, sent his children away from the city.

- How prudent of him. But his wife?

- Ah – his wife. (And here, through her veil, we feel rather than see our Lady Pisana smile, for she learned long ago to find joy in those few joys that life can give, whatever their calling, whatever their form.) - Poor Lady Faliere: with a husband made of clay, what can she do?

And then, her enthusiasm for the thing itself breaking through her delight at the game of hiding it, she leans forward, the veil stirring around her lips at her breath, and whispers:

- She has taken a lover. A lady in San Marco; a very beautiful lady at that.

- Does Faliere know?

- If he does, he has done nothing.

- Tell no one. Protect the wife and her lover. I need their relationship to continue until election day. Do not let anyone find out.

- I like you, lady. You have a romantic bent.

- Do not believe it.

- Be careful not to lose yourself too deeply to the game. Emotion is a weakness, but players are still human; so are pieces. If you forget the meanings of love or fear, you will not be able to see the board clearly.

- I know the meaning of fear.

- And love?



Thene didn't answer. Pisana nodded to herself and said, - You are the player I hoped you would be. She told me you were good.

- Who?

- The Gamesmaster.

- The Gamesmaster spoke to you?

- Yes. When she gave me my card, told me the conditions of my arrangement. You do not think I was ever just a piece, did you?

- What did the Gamesmaster say?

- What is it worth to you to know?

- You have a request.

- Rather a favour, let us say. If you win this game – and I think you shall – you will become a great player in the higher league. That could be of use to me. We could reach some understanding, you and I.

She thinks about it for a moment, then says, - No. Not yet. This is the game; I am the player. You are a piece, and I must win. Perhaps, when that victory is won, we can talk again of other things.

- As you wish, my lady. As you wish.

And so the Queen of Cups is gone, as are we.

## Chapter 19

The coin.

Thene turns it over in her fingers.

There are only three cards in her pack left to be played. The Fool, the Three of Coins, the Tower and this strange Roman coin, old yet not old, no reason, no great value – what is the purpose of this? How is it to be played?

She lays it aside and goes to the Gameshouse.

The warmth of fire, the distant sound of music, the taste of drink, fine food, the watching umpires all in white, faces hidden, hands clasped, welcome, welcome, welcome to the Gameshouse, all things are possible here.

How is this house standing in this place? How can it be here, where it was not a few months ago? It is as if the street itself shuffled ungainly to the side to make room for it, buildings all around squeezing a little tighter, and yet she has wracked her brains and she cannot remember any building works or hearing any rumours of this place until the day she came to its lion-headed door.

She has questions, but knows the answers are not yet hers; not until victory.

Games.

They focus her.

Thoughts sharpen.

The complexities of the world are simpler here.

Black, white.

Forward, back.

Win, lose.

She plays, her mask still on her face, and she wins without thought, without passion, without enthusiasm for the victory, but with an intensity that speaks of another game, another Thene, working behind the mask.

We watch her, and she does not see us, so intensely her mind turns to the game, until...

...another player sits opposite her at the chess set.

He wears a mask that is nearly the twin of hers: white, soulless.

She looks and starts – a huge reaction for her – towers topple, earth shakes, she starts in surprise but hides it at once and perhaps it was not even seen, save by us who have so long been in her company.

The other, the player, says:

- Shall we?

She gestures her acceptance.

They play.

A while they are silent.

Pawns fall, knights scuttle, bishops are swapped for bishops, queens break from cover, kings cower by the castles, quick moves and silent periods of contemplation, until at last, without very much business about it, the other, the man, says:

- You will lose, my lady.

- She looks up from the board into his empty face, then back down at the board and is silent a while. - The position is balanced, she replies.

- No, he answers. - It is not.

Again she raises her head, and his eyes are blue, so very blue where they meet her own. Who is this man? She can recognise, even behind the mask, the face of he who played Tiapolo, and knows that player to be no threat. Is this stranger now Contarini's man, the player who pulls his elusive puppet's strings? But no.

No.

She knew at the moment he sat, she knew without the need of words what he is, who he is, his purpose tonight.

He plays Faliere, and though the board between them is even, the board that matters is not.

She knows, as she has known for a while, that he is winning. He has won Zanzano, and though as matters presently stand, she thinks the Senate is for Contarini, yet Falliere has many cards yet to play, and he is waiting to make a great move.

- What would you do? she asks, almost surprised to hear herself speak. - To win, what would you do?

He doesn't pause to think about the question.

- Anything, he replies. - Anything.

- So would I, she says, leaning away from the board.

Then, - We should stop this, she says, gesturing at the game between

them.

- You said it was evenly balanced.

- The game before us is, but we are now playing another by different rules. I dislike the asymmetry of it.

- No one said the game was simple. If you don't feel ready for the challenge...?

- Do you ask that because of my actions, or my sex?

- I merely ask.

- You are wrong.

- Am I?

- In one regard. You say that I am losing, but you are mistaken. At this point in time, you and perhaps Contarini are ahead in the count, winning the election. I am not. But, sir, my time has not yet come. Do not assume that you have won until every player has made their move.

- I assume nothing. And yet here you are, my lady, alone in the Gameshouse while your drunken husband whores and gambles alone in the house you wish to leave behind. You assume every air and speak the speech as if it were doctrine, but you are still only the Jew's daughter. As for the game between us...shall we call it a draw or would you like to test your mettle tonight in preparation for tomorrow?

Her hands are soft in her lap. Her voice is light as breath. She has mastered both these things from a long time ago.

- Let us call it a draw, she replies. - I think the joy may have gone from it for now.

Alone.

In the dark.

Walking.

She is angry.

So long she has been angry, and so long she has bitten it down, becoming nothing at all but tonight there!

It rises.

It rises.

She rages!

Rage!

Rage.

Until it goes.

And then she is alone again, and with the buoyancy of anger spent, she feels small and lost in this world.

## Chapter 20

A moment in which we look inward.

Let us make an inventory together as Thene walks through the palazzo of Angelo Seluda, her piece, her king-in-waiting. We count up servants, slaves, nieces, nephews, cousins from the countryside, wife, two daughters, a son, physician, nurse, accountant, couriers, sailors, merchants and knaves. Dozens of people flitter in and out of the house of Seluda every day, and no one seems to keep an account of their activities.

She asks herself a question:

What wouldn't I do?

To win.

Nothing. There is nothing.

In the evening she stands before Seluda at his table weighed with messages and papers and says:

- The prostitutes must stop.

He splutters some denial.

- I have spoken with certain ladies who make little effort to disguise their purposes in this place. They are a risk to the security of this endeavour. I have other requests.

- Requests?

- Suggestions you would be wise to consider. Too many unknown people come in and out of this place; too many letters are sent by too many men; too few precautions are taken. I have spent the last few days gathering information on your rivals, positioning pieces to be of service in your cause, and I have no doubt that others are doing the same. You are a threat to them as they are to you; therefore they will be acting against you. From now on, greater care with security must be taken.

- This seems...

- ... do you want to win?

- Yes.

- ... then as I say, I have some suggestions. We must guard your

warehouses, protect your ships. Your power is money, prestige, the friends you have, the contacts you've made. We secure your wealth, remove it from anyone or anything which might be a risk. If you have supported gambling nephews, that support now ceases. If you have loans in play, recall them now. You have men-at-arms who you trust? They secure this house, your family, your gold. And no one captain works alone: two captains together, that they might watch each other, guarantee the other's loyalty. No messages are sent unnecessarily, and when you do dispatch a note, your messengers do not wear house colours, decoys are sent and secrecy is maintained. In the Doge's palace, we must look who to bribe and who is a lost cause already; this election will be won with money. Do not trust people who are too easily swayed; they may be swayed by another's cause. Every night tonight you will dine with groups of your dearest friends and your more questionable allies – but if you have eating habits, you will now change them. Simple dishes, you must eat foods you dislike, drink modestly, commit few indiscretions. Anyone who you do not fully trust, send away for the coming two weeks. Anyone or anything which could be used as leverage against you, we also retire. A castle is as strong as its weakest point – I cannot win the game for you if you are defeated from within.

- You talk like a general, like Tacitus himself! he says.
- I am a player, she replies. - I know the value of a good defence.
- What you propose is very costly.
- Do you wish to win?
- Of course.
- Then invest in victory.

## Chapter 21

A letter from the King of Coins arrives at last! We have checked for messengers every day, never running, never in a hurry – we would never be caught being so undignified – but at last, *at last* it is here, on the cusp of that moment which would have been almost too late.

She forces herself to open it slowly. Splits the wax. Unfolds the paper. Holds it close to the flame. There is strength in being slow; intelligence in never rushing. She must be strong.

The King of Coins says that he has a cousin who has a cousin who has a sister whose husband's brother was married to...

...you know how it goes...

Someone whose word he trusts – this is the heart of it – helped wipe up blood from a cellar floor in Milan some two and a half years ago. The boy who bled was a Venetian who had made an unwise accord with a woman whose brother was not of good humour in this regard. The boy died; the sister sent to a convent. They say the boy's remains were thrown into the river, but that is not the whole story, for the water in Milan is sluggish and no sooner were the remains dumped than they were pulled out again and the unknown corpse was buried in a patch of unsanctified ground where now wild garlic grows. - Now I know a man who knows a man who has a cousin who has been known of a quiet night to dig up corpses from their fresh graves and carry them to the scholars of the city, who all in secret dig through guts in search of mysteries, and prophecy a new age of blood and bone. Upon hearing some tale of your lost boy, I asked this friend to make a little enquiry, and he pulled a corpse from the earth that had upon its flesh, a most terrible tale to tell.

Yet they say that the body wore a ring upon its finger that bears a seal.

Would you like to guess to whom that ring belonged?

And then Seluda says – no, *roars*:

- *Never!*

She stands before his ire, hands clasped in front of her, shoulders pulled



back, and says simply, - If we are to win this battle, we will need the support of Marco Belligno.

- He is my bitterest enemy, a whoreson, an eater of dung...

- He is also an important piece in this game, one which has been sorely neglected by the other players. I do not think he can win by himself, but he commands a significant faction which, if it can be swayed to our side, will help secure the day.

- I will never work with that man. I will never—

- You need not speak to him; I will handle that. The important consideration here is what you are willing to agree.

- Nothing. Nothing. Nothing!

- Then, sir, I do not think you shall ever be a Tribune.

- You are a player! You are supposed to make this happen!

- I am only as good as the cards that are dealt me.

- A player should be able to win off any hand.

- We both know that is not always the case. There are those in Venice who consider you an outside candidate, and marvel that your name is even considered. I have a great deal of work to do to put you in a position where you can win this. Belligno is the ignored partner in this – I can use him.

- What about Zanzano? He's a friend, he's a good man...

- ...he has been bought by Faliere.

- Then buy him for more!

- I do not think that will solve the problem. He is, as you say, a good man. The definition of "good" is such that it is best encapsulated by the terms of being a man who, having taken a bribe, will not take another that runs contrary to his original contract. Nor can I believe that it was purely wealth that was offered him, since he has such an abundance of his own, but rather something more subtle we have yet to determine. Other players have cards they have played as well as I.

- We need Zanzano's support...

- And we will get it, but not by flattery or bribery. Rather, if we are to secure the support of Zanzano we must demonstrate that Faliere's tenure, profitable though it might appear, will do greater harm than good to interests other than the lining of his purse. The only thing which Zanzano prizes more than money is honour – that therefore is what we must target and the tool we must use. Securing the support of Belligno is honourable if done correctly, and the policy I wish to pursue.

- I will not speak to that man.

She considers, a question which she does not want to ask, has no interest in yet which rears its head and will not leave her until it is uttered. - Did you betray Belligno's son? she asks at last. - Did you betray him to Milan?

He is silent a while, and in that silence is a great answer and a great deceit that, just this once, has the good grace not to be uttered. - You're a player, he says at last. - You must know something of grief, if you would use the grief of my enemy to make him my friend. Tell me then, my queen of stone, do you know something of anger? Of rage and jealousy? Or are they merely tools, as the chisel is, which you use to carve your victory like a mathematician, all lines and no heart?

- I know grief, she replied, - and rage. I know them so well that I think they have burnt a part of me to ash, leaving only the shape of what they were inside me, and not the feeling itself. I do not care if you betrayed Belligno's child to his death. I care that you cannot be caught at it.

- There is no proof that I did anything, he replied. - There never was.

- Then that is enough.

## Chapter 22

And then she stands before Marco Belligno and says:

- I need you to cast your lot in with Angelo Seluda.

Belligno, the fish merchant's son, who has married his daughters off nearly well enough that people no longer dare mention his origin (at least, not to his face) cannot hide his astonishment.

- Are you mad?! he exclaims. - Are you looking to die? Do not think that because you are a woman I will not split you in two where you stand, *are you mad?* Now I know the old man cannot have sent you unless he despises you and hopes that I will do his dirty work, destroy you where you stand, in which case you are betrayed, or you are not and he is mad, you are mad, all things are madness!

- You are not going to reach the Supreme Tribunal, she says simply. - Faliere and Condarini have the election too closely held. The most you can hope to do is push your support one way or the other for a suitable consideration. Faliere and Condarini will not bother to bribe you because they assume that Seluda, being your enemy, will take action against you instead. Either way, and however you view the argument, your support – your considerable yet insufficient support – is something that must be either won round or destroyed. I wish to win you round.

- I would *never*...

- I believe you lost a son?

Silence now. He is silent, though whether he will burst or whether he will stumble, who can say? She pushes on.

- The rumour is that Seluda sold him to a Milanese man who believed your son had violated the honour of his sister. I do not believe that Angelo Seluda had the opportunity, though doubtless he had some motive in this. Regardless, no one would confess to having kidnapped and murdered your child, and so you must persist in ignorance. Ignorance can be worse than knowing, can it not? I had an agent make some enquiries. He has a cousin in Milan who is physician to certain well-placed gentlemen. I can resolve this matter for you, should you wish it done.

- Resolve?
- Should you wish it so.
- My son...is dead.
- Yes.
- You know?
- Yes.
- You can prove it? You can prove that he died?
- Yes. And I can deliver to you his remains, with proof that they are his, for proper burial. And I can give you the man who killed him.
- And for this you want me to sacrifice my family honour, my family name?
- No. For this I ask that you make peace. There is a great deal of profit to be made between you and Seluda. Divided, you are easy prey to the machinations of Faliere and Contarini: they know that while you war together you cannot war against anyone else. Peace will bring great opportunities, and more. More, that only peace can bring.
- And for a moment, it seems as if he is considering.

## Chapter 23

At night, as she returns, she knows she is watched.

This time she stops in the middle of a square and turns and looks, and does not see the watcher but a glimpse of coat, a slither of boot as her follower turns into the shadow. She stands straight to show them that she is not afraid. Her mask is bright in the moonlight, and for a while there she stays, waiting, until at last the cold settles on her and she turns and returns home, and is followed no more.

## Chapter 24

Belligno sends word.

Bring me the body of my child, he says, - and bring me the man who wrought his death, and I am yours.

The man who wrought his death is in Milan, but she has planned for this too, and knows just the card to play.

Galliard Viole, the Fool. He is a Frenchman who, having discovered himself unremarkable in France, travelled to Italy where the novelty of his being French might be at the very least somewhat more entertaining to the mighty. A short man, he is neither excessively witty nor particularly droll, but has mastered some of the essential arts of being a courtier as heaping liberal praise on the mighty and heavy scorn on those whom he predicts will shortly fall. Indeed, it is this latter characteristic – the ability to lose friends wisely – which has doubtless kept him alive as he journeys, ever hopeful, through life.

She meets him by the pier to Forli, hands him one thousand ducats, a sword and a pistol.

- Ah, Milan! he exclaims joyously. - A beautiful city, if somewhat humourlessly run! I have missed its women.

- You do not strike me as particularly foolish, she confesses as he pulls his cloak tighter about his shoulders.

- Do I not? he asks brightly. - That is very strange. I played in the Gameshouse when I was young, and cheated in order to win. The very same night, the umpires found me, and took me before the Gamesmaster, who said that I had broken the laws of civilised men and would pay the highest forfeit and become a servant to the house for a term of one hundred years, until my lesson was learned and my debt was paid. I laughed in her face and told her that she was a ridiculous, over-puffed old lady in a stupid dress, and the next day my wife died, and the day after that my only child, and on the third day my father fell ill, and on the fourth I knelt at her feet and kissed her white pointed shoe and begged her to stop, told her I was hers for ever, and she asked if I knew now what it meant to be a fool. That was seventy-three years ago. In twenty-seven years, I think she will let me die.

Thene stares astonished at this man, and for a moment does not know where she stands, or what she does, or even who she is to have come to this pass, to be standing now hearing this tale. Is she not Thene, the Jew's daughter? Is this earth not the earth, is the sky not the sky, are those centres of her world no more than the afterburn of the setting sun, a reflected illusion on the horizon?

Then the Fool breaks out into a great guffaw of laughter, slaps her on the back and says, - You are delightful, dear lady, simply delightful – thank heaven for Milanese girls!

And like that, he is gone.

## Chapter 25

We remember this man, do we not?

Too easy, too easy for a player, lost in their own cleverness, to forget the moves of other clever men!

A great face of hair, two tiny eyes and a little nose, the rest lost beneath black beard and swagger. He is a proud man, this Knave of Swords, for who would not swagger who had seen death as many times as he has and lived to tell the tale? There is no monarch in this world, no pope or prince that can command him, for he – why, he has seen the fall of men and heard the growling at hellish gates and defied them all.

He was sent to the house of Contarini, that most elusive of all the pieces, a man whose fear is almost greater than his sense – or perhaps rather, as time may show, perfectly matched to that scale of disaster that yet hangs over him. We have watched him on and off these last few days as he spoke to captains and sergeants, made enquiries about doors, noted quietly to himself each motion of every messenger, each movement of every spy, each coin that falls upon the ground at Contarini's boot. Contarini, Contarini, you are being most cleverly played by that unseen man who stands behind the shuttered window. Tiapolo is lost, Seluda has yet to make its move but you, Contarini, you have united Church and state in the name of making money. Few things are as likely to win an election as this!

A message comes to our Knave of Swords, word of a relic hidden somewhere about Contarini's belongings. Destroy the relic, you destroy the excuse the bishops have to make their towers of gold, you destroy the profits that strangers will have in building these palaces to theological expense.

So the command comes down – find the relic. Destroy it. Let us stop Contarini's greatest play before he makes it.

So our knave searches, making most discreet enquiries and abasing himself before the might of others. It doesn't bother him, a proud man, to grovel before men he knows are lesser than he. His cleverness exceeds theirs, is clearly shown to exceed theirs with every lie he tells and quiver he makes – how clever indeed that a man so proud should slobber so extemporarily!



When the end comes, it is without warning. He did not see it coming, did not dream that it was coming, but a stranger whose face is hidden by a mask held a card in his hand, the Sun, whose light shines into every corner and beneath whose gaze all things are revealed – why yes, even our ally, our friend, our rogue sent into another’s den.

He stands upon the bridge, feels a hand upon his arm, hears the words, - May we speak?

He turns, and the club that strikes his skull breaks both his jaw and two of his teeth in a single bounce. It is a crude weapon, perhaps fashioned from a cabinet-making project that failed, or chipped from the branch of a rotting tree. Can its owner not afford anything better?

(Yes, he can, but he waited too long to acquire his wealth and invested too much pride in poverty, so now that he flaunts his tatty clothes, his thin shoes and in his proud humility, it is perhaps fitting that he now serves as our sergeant’s nemesis.)

They beat him, our Knave of Swords. They beat him so no one can tell between what is swollen and what is broken, whether his features were ever really human. All red, red, the water runs red beneath him, his clothes are saturated with it, so that red seeps from velvet, and now they take him without word, without ceremony, to the house of Angelo Seluda, and three men hold him up while a man in a mask looks towards the high windows of this place, and waits.

He waits until she appears – Thene, her mask as empty as his – and sure now that he has her attention, turns to one of the men who has helped carry our wounded knight to this place. This man pulls a small axe from his belt, of the kind that might be used to cut away heavy ropes from a ship under sail. Down the axe falls once, and twice, and away they go, leaving the Knave of Swords on the cobbles before Seluda’s door.

They carry him inside, and she herself descends with a hessian sack. She picks up his right hand by the tip of the little finger, not looking at her work, then picks up his left, pinching it tight, thumb on the soft palm, finger on the still hairy top. The blood drips through the sack as she walks, and she tells herself that it is but flesh, is but meat, that bounces at her side.

Earth, sea or fire? For a moment she cannot decide, before at last throwing the bag into the ocean, weighted with a stone. It is blissful how fast the waters claw these fingers down, and how little blood is on her hands as she washes them in the fountain before the church.

When she returns, the Knave of Swords is dead.

The blood loss was too great, the shock, the pain – or perhaps with his last glimmer of awareness, as the mercenary saw his hands struck from his body, he resolved that life itself was not worth the living, and let go of it with the same force of will which, until that time, he had lived it.

Seluda says, - Who was he?

- A piece, she replies. - He was a piece.

- Why did they do this?

- I sent him to the house of Contarini to find an object. The player who runs that piece has sent him back.

- I thought players didn't hurt other players.

- You are correct. Nowhere in the rules does it say what may happen to our pieces.

Angelo Seluda is silent at this. We do not think he is a foolish man, and if he did not know before what it is to be played, perhaps he does now.

She retires to her room; does not look back.

## Chapter 26

The coin turns, the coin turns.

She rolls it between her fingers.

The coin turns, and she does not understand.

## Chapter 27

She returns to the Gameshouse.

Faliere's player does not come there any more, nor does Contarini's. The game is too advanced for them to dally with lesser matters.

She does not spare much thought to Tiapolo.

- You play? he asks.

We know this man too, do we not? Silver in the sleeves, a face that is too tired to be young, too soft to be old. It is as if the age has been rubbed away from him, leaving a featureless surface behind which smiles from habit, not from humour. We called him Silver before, the man who challenged her to play, and now he sits opposite her once more but does not move towards the pieces or the dice, but rather asks again:

- You play? Here, still? I thought you were engaged in higher matters.

- I find that the games played here helps focus my mind.

- You should be careful. Others will watch you, learn your style, your techniques. Even in a simple game of dice, your character can become visible, and certain deductions will be made.

She smiles at this and says nothing, and he is surprised.

- You...*want* to be seen?

Admiration, incredulity, disbelief, wonder, delight – why, all these things we may hear in his voice, strange to the sound. - You want players to observe you playing?

- Would you like a game? she asks.

- What would you propose?

- Cards. For every hand you win, you may ask a question. And for every hand that I win...

- I understand.

- Then let's play.

She divides the deck.

Deals the cards.

At first, she is rusty, slow to find the pattern of it, and he asks five, six,

seven questions in a row.

- Are you winning your game?
- No.
- Can you win?
- Perhaps.
- Do you like your piece, the king you must get a crown for?
- No.
- What do you want, if you win?
- Freedom. The freedom that only victory can afford.

We would imagine, would we not, that after losing nine hands in a row, she would be disheartened, she would fold, but on the tenth hand the game turns, fast now, and with a brisk efficiency she starts reclaiming the cards, taking hand after hand as quickly as the questions come. So now she asks:

- Are you a player in the higher league?
- Yes.
- How long have you played?
- I think...centuries.
- Are you lying to me?
- No.
- Have you been sent to influence, help or hinder me?
- That sounds like three questions.

- I think, if you listen, it is only one, but should it be a concern for you I can break it into three separate parts, win three separate hands and get the answer either way.

- Did you let me win? he asks. - Did you play me?

- You will have to win another hand before I answer that. Now – my questions, please.

- No, no one sent me to interfere with you in any way. I saw you alone and wondered if you would like to play, and here we are, playing still.

- Does the Gameshouse exist outside Venice?

- Yes, but I think you need to find a better way of asking the question that you wish to ask.

The next hand she plays too quickly and loses, and is barely able to hide the intake of breath, irritation at herself, that slips through her lips as he takes the hand.

- Did you let me win our first few hands? he asks.

- Yes.

- Why?

- The questions you ask are indicative of who you are, and the information you hold. It allows me to formulate my own questions more successfully.

At this he laughs, throwing his cards onto the table and leaning back. For a moment he sits there, shaking his head, arms folded, legs crossed, until at last he says, - Lady, I do not know precisely what the situation is with the game you play outside these walls, but let me say that if you are playing it as well as you play me now, you cannot help but win.

- I have more questions, she says, indicating the cards between them.

- I do not think we should play this game any more.

- Why?

- A game should be balanced, and there should be joy in it. I see neither any more. But you are eager, I think, for more answers, and it would be churlish of me not to give them. So I propose an accord, a deal struck between us alone.

- What deal?

- Not here, he replies. - I will visit soon, somewhere else, and we will discuss fairer terms.

- Do I have your word on that?

- You have seen me play. Would you value my word if I gave it?

She does not answer, and when we look again, both she and he are gone.

## Chapter 28

A man in Milan.

He is no longer young, but has applied every trick he can to appear so. He wears a wig to thicken out his thinning hair, his stockings are tight, his shoes are curled, the colour of the cloth that tugs against his hips is vibrant orange, a garish, tasteless thing that no Venetian would approve of. He has a cap upon his head from which silver feathers sprout, and he wears no fewer than eleven rings upon his fingers, though secretly he knows only three are gold all the way through.

His name is not important, for he is less than a piece in this game, but we must take a moment now to sympathise with his coming predicament, for he is a man who had a sister, and that sister loved a boy of Venice, and he on learning of this slaughtered the boy and threw him into the river. For two years perhaps, he believed he was free from this crime – though he would not call it such, not crime, no, *justice*, justice for his sister, for his family, for his honour, *justice* – but now retribution comes.

It comes, it comes, and it wears the face of Galliard Viole, our foolish Frenchman, who approaches this stranger in the street and says, - Friend! Friend, my old friend, my brother, it has been so long! Let me buy you a drink!

He buys a drink, and another, and another, and soon both Fool and friend are mightily drunk, holding onto each other, kissing each other's cheeks, roaring with merriment when their staggering tips one or both over to the ground, for how funny it is to be in good company! How noble it is to be loved, how great is the bounty of man, how little matters material things when there is the joy of humanity, of fellowship, of the communion of souls!

Thus proclaim Fool and friend both, and keep on proclaiming it, right to the moment when our unfortunate fellow realises that he is far from home, in a street where no torches burn, and turning to the Fool mumbles:

- I think we should have turned left...

...before he is soundly beaten about the head, bound, gagged and thrown into the back of a midden cart.

## Chapter 29

Alvisa Muna exclaims:

- How did you do it? How did you persuade Belligno to switch his support? And to *Seluda*?!

- I had a piece find the remains of his child, slaughtered by a vengeful brother in Milan. I offered a great deal of money. I promised peace. But I do not think it will be enough to win.

- Contarini still holds the support of the bishops.

- And Faliere?

- A ship came into harbour last night carrying his colours, and a stranger from Constantinople.

- Did the ship ride high or low in the water?

- High. The stranger was its only cargo. Zanzano has declared for Faliere too, and he brings with him the cloth merchants and most of San Marco. But Belligno gives you the docks, the fishermen, the fish market. *Seluda* will be noticed now: it was an extraordinary move!

- Perhaps an unwise one. If he is noticed, he is more liable to be attacked.

- You are ready though?

- I do not know what cards my enemies might play.

- But you know your enemies, yes?

She considers this question a moment, then nods. - Yes, she replies. - Now I do.

That same day, a whisper goes through the town.

Faliere has negotiated with the Grand Vizier of the Ottoman Sultan himself; Faliere has struck terms. Faliere has been granted such concessions to trade with the infidel that if he were to declare now that the Turk had turned Christian, it would be believable, so impressive is this coup!

That night, Faliere and Contarini attend church together, and sit on opposite sides of the aisle. They do not shake hands when the ceremony is done, nor do their wives smile and embrace, but stiff and separate they go their own ways, and people bow uneasily as they pass, trying to direct their



homage to neither man specifically but both in equal measure. Tiapolo sits far at the back, his three daughters around him. They say, the whisper goes, that the eldest is to be sent to a nunnery. None of the suitors that Tiapolo has found for her are interested any more.

Thene watches these daughters, their eyes down, pieces that were played upon, and for a moment remembers what it felt like to weep.

## Chapter 30

She finds him at the Gameshouse.

- You are Tiapolo's player, she says, sitting beside him.

He looks up from the card table, two fingers of his right hand pressed against his closed lips as if to trap the breath within them. He doesn't wear his mask now, and his eyes are red in the rims, black around the lids from too much work, not enough sleep.

- And you're Seluda's Jew, he replies sharply. - What do you want?

- You've lost the game, she answers. - You played too fast, too soon, too strong; you had nothing left for the end.

- You're here to laugh? he exclaims. - Is that what you want?

- No. You still have cards to play, a piece at your command. Tiapolo cannot be Tribune, and you cannot enter the Higher League, but we may still do a good turn for each other.

- You suggest...an *alliance*?

- There is nothing in the rules to prevent it.

- You've just said I've lost.

- And you have. The question is whether you lose everything.

A shadow follows her through the city.

This time she does not run, does not stop, does not wait, does not fear.

She remembers now how good it is to refuse to be afraid.

She stops on the Rialto. Even at this hour, merchants and hawkers are bartering their wares, and crowds jostle for space across the waterway. Architects and detractors predicted that the bridge would not stand for more than ten years, so absurd was its design of arches and white stone, but here it is two decades later, as implausible and defiant as Venice herself.

She waits, and Silver comes, no smile on his face.

- Shall we walk? she asks before he can speak.

They walk.

## Chapter 31

- First Belligno, now Tiapolo throws in their lot with you? he asks as they move through the night-time fires of the city. -You have an unorthodox approach to victory, turning your enemies to friends.

- My approach to victory is that I intend to win. The rest is merely tactics. You mentioned some sort of arrangement? Answers to questions?

- You have more questions than I do, I think.

- And yet you are still interested in me, she replies. - Though I think you are fascinated by my mind rather than any other parts.

- To speak truth, my lady, I think you are going to win.

- Am I? Faliere still controls trade with the east; Contarini still commands the power of the bishops and the builders of the city. I have gained ground, but not enough to guarantee the win.

- But you still have pieces left to play, do you not? A coin, for example – do I guess correctly? I do! When I looked at the board and saw that Seluda had been dealt as a king rather than Belligno, I did wonder what cards might have been given to his player.

- You will have to explain that to me.

- I will, but we must make a deal.

- What manner of deal? I will not compromise the game.

- Nor shall I ask you to.

- Then speak. What manner of deal?

- One day, perhaps in week, or a month, or a year, or ten years, or more years besides, I will need a favour. I will be in a certain situation, a peculiar difficulty, and at that time I will ask you to lie to someone of whom you are afraid. Do this, and I will answer any questions you have, to the best of my ability.

- The deal you propose is skewed. I have an idea of what I gain from it now, but no conception of the scale of what I might lose later.

- Nevertheless, these are the only terms I will accept.

We walk a while in silence. The city closes in about us; we go further and further from the Grand Canal, from the busy paths of the city, into the dark

places, the narrow places, the alleys and the caverns formed by overhanging houses, across waterways too tight for the gondola, too wide to be called a gutter, past shrines to weeping saints and martyred heroes, braziers where the beggars huddle and the cold ladies of the night warm their whitened fingers. We walk, we walk through streets never changing, where blood is as old as stone, ancient blood of ancient families whose grandparents were fed on the water of the lagoon that shall one day be sprinkled on the brow of the newborn infant that shall carry on the name, in the house, in the street, in this frozen city of Venice. We walk, and no one knows our significance or our strength, no one but the knowing, who we greet as familiar strangers, unsung friends. We walk.

Until at last

- All right, she says, and stops herself, and thinks a moment longer. And then, - All right. We have a deal.

- Then ask.

- Is the game I am playing fairly balanced?

- No.

- How do you know?

- If it was a game of equals, Belligno should have been assigned a player, not Seluda. His position was stronger, equivalent to Tiapolo, Faliere and Contarini. Seluda was a weaker piece. Equally, the man who played Tiapolo was not yet ready for the higher league. His tactics were poor, his intentions unclear. The choice of pieces inherently biased it in favour of Faliere and Contarini.

- Why?

- The Gameshouse is...old. It is not bound to any place, but rather has doors throughout the world. This game in Venice is one of hundreds, maybe thousands, being played in places you cannot dream of, and only an entry-level game at that, a little skirmish on the field. The house deals in empires and kings, in armies and Churches, and its players are some of the oldest and...perhaps not wisest, but shall we say most determined...people I have met. With such a purpose, and spread so wide, it should not be hard to consider that a body of this sort could influence events. A piece like Tiapolo is given a player who cannot win; a potential Tribune such as Belligno is not, and through this disadvantage is denied an opportunity to secure his place. We tell ourselves that the Gameshouse has no objectives beyond the playing of the game, but I have lived long enough and played enough games to

question this. The nature of the game changes the world, and though I cannot swear to it, I would suggest that the distribution of cards, which should be random, is also skewed to produce an outcome that is more fitted to the Gameshouse's will rather than the player's abilities.

- To what purpose?

- That...I cannot say. It is not a question players – even the oldest – like to ask. Perhaps only the Gamesmaster knows.

- I have been dealt a coin.

- Yes. I thought you might be.

- What is it? It is out of place in the deck, a mundane thing, not a piece that I understand.

- May I tell you a story?

- Is it true?

- It is often repeated – will that serve?

- Tell me.

## Chapter 32

It is said, (so Silver began) that there have been only three Gamesmasters in all the years in which the Gameshouse has existed. I know nothing about the first, but the second was a woman, dressed all in white, her face hidden as was her purpose. The Gamesmaster is the head and source of all the games that are played. Her rules are absolute; her judgement is final. She does not play herself, but rather devises and controls the games that others play – except very, very occasionally. When Rome fell, it is said that the Gamesmaster was challenged to play such a game that empires shook with it. When Luther pinned his articles to the church door, it is suggested that the Gamesmaster watched, and that these things which to us seem no more than the turning of the world are – to the ones who wear white – moves upon a board bigger than any of us can see. Whatever the truth of that, what is generally accepted is that the Gamesmaster has been on a few occasions challenged for her crown by players such as you or I. No one knows the game that they play, the master and the rival, and only one such match has there been in all the years that I can remember. It was a game played between a woman of Normandy and the Gamesmaster, and it lasted nearly seven years. During this time, the operation of the house ceased and all things were turned to this single conflict. Wars raged across Europe and throughout Asia. Temples fell in Africa and the New World; peoples rose against the lords of India; plague spread and the wild horsemen rode freely through burning lands – but were these events connected? Were these the signs of a battle fought for the Gamesmaster's throne? I don't know, and wish I did.

Whatever the course of the game, after seven years the challenger vanished. Disappeared. And within a day of her disappearance, the Gameshouse opened its doors again as if nothing had happened. A great many assumed that she was dead; others suggested that she was claimed by the Gameshouse in defeat: her body, her mind, her very soul, sucked into the endless corridors of the place to be bound for ever in service to the house. One or two – a very few at that – suggested that no, she had not lost at all, but won, and in victory she had become the Gamesmaster, as bound to the house

as surely as if she had lost and been enslaved, for the Gamesmaster may only die when defeated, only leave their office by the same rules that they enforce on the board.

But you are wondering what all of this has to do with your coin, yes?

The woman had a husband. The fashions of the time would have it said that the husband had a wife, a lesser creature to complement his greatness, but in truth he was compared to her, an amateur at the game, as I think your husband is now. He was a besotted fool with just enough wisdom to know to trust in the more vasty intelligence of his wife. For seven years he let her play the game, never fully understanding its scale or import, until that fateful day when she vanished, whether to death or slavery or victory he did not know. All he knew was that the Gameshouse had taken her and, incensed and suddenly awake to that which had been obvious, he hammered on the silver door which leads to the halls of the higher league, begging and threatening for answers as to the fate of his wife. No answers were given, for he was an average player in the lower league, and the rules of the game would not permit him access to those who might know. For years he struggled to find answers to his questions and achieved nothing, for no matter how good he grew at the game, the house would not welcome him to the higher league. At last, desperate, now ill and his wealth lost, rumours came to him of a place in a far-off land where an ancient magician might be able to help him.

Selling the last of what little he had, he journeyed east to a land of high plateaus and long grass, where trees barely deign to grow on the grey mountainside and there are a great, warlike people dressed in furs and armed with spears, who their neighbours call barbarian and who laugh to hear themselves so called, knowing that “barbarian” is their strength, is their fierceness and their rage, and rejoicing that others have wisdom enough to perceive it.

There, his beard grown long and his shoes turned to tatters, at the end of his strength he followed a little stream down to a hidden valley, where great bonfires blazed and people danced in honour of thunder and rain. The people who found him had no word for law – no, not even its concept. Strength and life were the only notions they understood, the only justice that they comprehended, and to enforce anything else by these means was to waste strength itself. They laughed at this stranger then, this ragged creature come to their home, robbed him of what he had left and cut him to see if his blood was red like theirs (and it was) and took him before the strongest and

mightiest of their kind in case he had some opinion on the matter and so as not to offend him by making a decision for themselves.

This strong man, this mighty man – how can I best describe him? His beard was black, his hair was straight, his eyes were ocean-green, his skin the colour of walnut but burnt too, reddened by the wind and the sun to a sort of sanded roughness. He was not particularly tall, but had that splayed manner about him, an easiness of leg and arm that sprawled in every direction, confident of himself and his little kingdom, and when the bloody stranger was pushed before him, he looked on this man with no more interest than a soothsayer might look upon an inauspicious sacrifice.

At last he spoke, and the man was astonished to hear his own language pronounced clearly, so far from home.

- Why are you here? asked the king of the valley.
- I've come looking for help, replied the man.
- Help? Help yourself. Why ask me?
- I'm told you know something of the Gameshouse.
- Do I look as if I do? Do I look as if I care?

At these words, the man drew himself up a little more before this king, and said, - No, I cannot see any sign of it in your face, but you did not stop to question what the Gameshouse is, but derided it at once, and I think you are therefore the man known sometimes as Bird, and an enemy of the house and the one who rules it. Am I right?

- You bore me, replied the man called Bird. - Your words bore me.

At this he turned away and his subjects leapt on the man and seemed as if they would tear him to pieces, eat him even, until he cried out:

- The Gameshouse stole my wife!

Hearing this, the king of that place turned back a little, though he showed no sign of sympathy, and all his subjects slunk away a little, disappointed to be denied their sport.

- So? he asked. - What is that to me?

- I am ill and poor, replied the man. - I will die, I know it, before I can find the truth. The only way I know to find my wife is to become a great player; the only way I can play is if I have more time; the only way I can win time is by being a great player! So I am trapped, and so I shall die and never know the truth of it. Help me. I had some money but your people took it...

At this he held out the only coin he had left, ancient and small, a little Roman thing shaking in his palm.



- Money? replied Bird, his voice rolling with laughter and rage all at once.  
- Do you think I care for money? Do you think I care for the things of men, for coin and law and truth and kings and husband and wife? These are the false things, the made-up things, the not-of-the-wildlings things that mankind cages itself with. Do I look caged to you? Do I look like a prisoner?!

Incensed, he grabbed the man by the throat so that in his choking half-state he could not speak, could not stammer out some denial, some defence, but rather then thought he would die.

A moment there he hung, this poor would-be player, his life in someone else's grasp as whose life is not? As whose fate is not suspended in that place between a stranger's whim and the universe's contempt?

Then suddenly Bird let him go, and his humour brightened as he paced a little, smiling at some new thought. The more he thought it, the more it entertained, until suddenly he stopped and laughed out loud, as great and rich a sound as the man could have eaten it. Then he bent down, picked up the discarded coin and, pressing it into the man's shaking fist said, - A game. Very well, little man, a game.

- What game?

- Something near your level, something that would displease the Gamesmaster, but still a game with rules and consequences. Toss the coin. Call a side. Get it right, you'll live, and long enough to play your game, or rather to play her game, the game of the Gameshouse. Choose wrong, you die. A pretty sport, is it not?

- It's chance, not a game.

- All things are chance. Nature is chance. Life is chance. It is a human madness to try and find rules where there are none, to invent constraints where none exist. The only thing that matters is the choice. So choose. Choose.

And the man did.

## Chapter 33

- Who is Bird? asks Thene as we walk together through the night-time of Venice.

- Hard to say, Silver replies. - He is neither a player nor a piece; nor does he exist within the Gameshouse. I heard a man from the east once posit a theory – a sweeping, spectacular theory! – that as the Gameshouse exists, so there must exist Bird. There must be an answer to the rules, a house of misrule and chance to balance against the precision and order of the game. However the argument waxed of the philosophical to my ear, so I didn't pay much attention to it.

- You are saying that it's Bird's coin that I hold?

- I am saying that a story tells of a coin which, when thrown, may hold death on one side and life on the other. In a sense such things are anathema to the Gameshouse, for there is no skill, no intelligence or craft in such a judgement, merely the outcome. Then again, it might be argued that such a thing is the purest game there is, unsullied by complexity and true to life, where chance will not change her colour for the wise man or the fool.

- As a player, should you be telling me this? Should you instruct another in the value of their pieces?

- Does it say in the rules that I cannot?

- No.

- Then I can. Players rarely help each other, as I am sure you will learn. Every player who lives too long becomes a rival who must be challenged or displaced. But as you yourself so aptly demonstrate, there is great power to be gained from turning an enemy to a friend.

- Am I an enemy?

- You are a player, as I am.

- But you are playing another game, are you not?

He does not answer. She tuts, a little shaking of her head. - Come now, come, she says. - You said you would answer my questions; I am still asking them.

- Yes. I am playing another game.

- And am I to be a piece?

- Perhaps.

- One of my pieces died the other day.

- I saw.

- I had not thought...it had not occurred to me that...silly, now that I think about it. As you say, there is no reason in the rules why a piece may not die, why another may not kill. I simply had not considered it. I had not...but it is done. The game goes on.

- There.

He has stopped, and so do we, and as we stop so it seems does all of Venice, the night running cold, the walls bending to listen, listen, conspiracy is afoot.

- My lady, he corrects himself, trying to find the words again. - Do not think that people do not die in this game. Do not flinch now.

- I won't, she replies. - I understand, and have understood from the very first, why a king may want a player to play upon him, why Seluda, Faliere, Tiapolo and Contarini have agreed to be pieces in our hands. Their ambitions are coloured by feeling, desires and commitments; they hear the cries of loved ones, see pain in their friends. A man dies and they must grieve, repent, question their intents and its consequence. Victory for them is a means to ever-changing ends, to fortune and honour, comfort and prestige, and the tools they deploy are daughters, sons, companions and things of value which were hard to earn and once used, cannot be won again. This tangle of things clouds simple intent, and intent should be only this – victory. Victory and the prize. We are players. They are the pieces. Winning is all.

So saying, she turns away and we are...

...what are we?

Are we perhaps a little sad? Have we, who know the turning of the times and have heard whispers of a future not yet named, developed some semblance of sentimentality that clouds us to the truth of things? Do we wish to be victorious *and* humane? How foolish we have become in our old age. How unwise. We must purge this sentiment from our souls and remember again and again: it is the victory – it is the win. The rest is only a cage.

The coin turns.

The coin turns.

And she is gone.

## Chapter 34

Five days to go.

Where did the time go?

They are balanced now, she thinks. Faliere in bringing the promise of trade with the east has won a great many men from Contarini's cause, and not even the voice of the abbot on one side, or Zanzano on the other seems to settle the debate. There are some who are pledged and will not turn, but many, many more votes now ready to be captured, and she has Tiapolo and Belligno at her command, their power turned to Seluda's cause.

Not quite enough – not yet. She cannot quite win yet. But she can see how victory might fall out.

Only two cards left – the Three of Coins and the Tower.

The Three of Coins is a beggar, small and overlooked, who lives on the charity of the Church. He seems like nothing, but he too has his part to play.

Not on this, though. Not when the Tower is ready to be deployed.

Thene meets with him and the Priestess both. They sit upon a barge in the middle of the bay, eating fruits and drinking water as Thene says:

- Even if we find this “elbow of St Simon” or whatever nonsense it is that Contarini is peddling to the bishops, we have the problem that the Senate *wants* Contarini to be right. They want to have a sacred relic come to Venice, and they want to have an expansive and expensive building project that will line their pockets to house it. Stealing or destroying the object is not enough: we must impress upon the bishops and their supporters how such an enterprise may leave them inconvenienced, not aided.

The Priestess is silent a while, agreeing but offering no more, for what can she do to rectify this? What is there to be done?

So our eyes turn to the Tower, who is known as Foscari and at six foot three stands so high and has shoulders so broad that it is a miracle any gondolier would take him on his barge, fretful that the slightest sneeze of this great frame could upset his boat and tip them all into the sewage-chased water. A sometime military engineer, he lost his left arm in an unnamed war,

one of the endless skirmishes of the city states, an incident which was denied by both sides as soon as it had been fought, for no one in Italy likes to go to *war* with each other; rather their battles are merely misunderstandings over piddling matters of territory, honour and pride, and the men who died were adventurers on the road, not soldiers, not men of any military sort of the kind commanded by princes, for who knows if yesterday's sworn enemy will not tomorrow be your son-in-law? Such is the necessity of turbulent times.

- I believe it is in our interest to create a need for alternative works, Thene continues. - Ones in which Contarini does not hold the greatest power or interest.

- What do you suggest?

- The Patriarch has a very nice house, she replied.

Silence.

Foscari the Tower seems uninterested, his gaze turning outwards to a pair of flies that are skimming across the water, tangled in each other yet still somehow staying in the air, wings beating with furious vigour as they rise from the water. The Priestess sits and despite herself, despite her decorum and training, her mouth hangs a little ajar and she blurts out at last:

- You wish to *burn* the house of the Patriarch?

The Tower smiles at nothing much; his gaze still elsewhere, like a child who has heard the parents argue and knows if he can just keep his peace, their argument will end well for him.

- Only a piece of it, Thene replies.

The Priestess sits back, shaking her head, hands flickering up then down from her lap, like a butterfly unsure of its flight.

- The Patriarch is very rich, Thene continues softly, - and a man who is chosen by the Senate more than by God.

- You can't know that, retorts the Priestess, sharper than perhaps she intended. - God is in the hand of the men who vote, and the tongues of men who speak, even those who speak ill, for all will come at the last to serve his holy spirit.

- Even us? asks Thene. - Even this?

Silence again.

Then the Tower turns his great, bearded head and looks up at the sky, seeing in its running clouds perhaps some infant fancy – the back of a dragon, the legs of a horse, the spirit of a dolphin that is blown away – and he says,

- Do you want anyone to die?

- No.

- How big do you want the fire?

- Not so big that the house is considered irreparable, nor in such a place that it may spread too far.

Perhaps this is disappointment we see in the Tower's face, and if it is then here we begin to know that, for all his childish simplicity, his innocent airs, this is a man who has had his fingers round the throats of his enemies and enjoyed it. What was it, we wonder, that bought him to the Gameshouse's service?

(And here it is, the secret hidden, for Foscari once looked upon a town that would not be taken, a place high in the hills, of sloping yellow streets and cracked red roofs, whose very steepness seemed to stretch it out like a map on the landscape that the attackers might see every road, every corner, every home, and mark with the tip of their little fingers which one now was set for destruction. In this place, at this time, with victory assured, Foscari reached out to the cannon which were his lovers, his friends, his power, his all, and as he set to light the flame, a woman dressed all in white stepped to his side, caught his wrist and said, - Don't.

- Don't, she said. The powder is too heavy, the metal too old. This cannon will burst when you fire it, and kill you for sure.

This warning given, she departed, and he, being a proud but superstitious man, ordered his lieutenant to light the fuse, and stood well back, and he was finding dried drops of blood from the man's shattered body in the folds of his doublet for months after, and when the white lady came again to his door he knelt at her feet and said he was hers, and she said, -I know.

Such is the story of the Tower.)

- I do not see how this will help you, says the Priestess, her voice bringing us back to this time, this place, this moment by the sea. - The Patriarch will spend money on renovating his palace and this will only increase Contarini's profit.

- Contarini's entire strategy depends on his relic, Thene replies. - It is the excuse that the bishops have been looking for to build more and richer shrines to themselves, from which construction they may take a profit in money skimmed and gold trim, for Rome will surely send them money for the housing of a sacred relic. Contarini provides stone at great expense, the bishops take the money of Rome, the Senate takes money from the bishops and traders, and everyone profits. But! If the Patriarch finds himself in a

dilemma – to invest in building a church for a relic of doubtful providence, or to repair his palace – where will that judgement fall? Certainly Rome will not pay for both, and there is far less profit to be made by the Senate in repairs to a palace rather than in a new reliquary where every piece of gold leaf may be the offspring of five pieces that vanished.

- And the relic? asks the Priestess. - What of that?

- I have one card left to play, she replies. - I must simply choose the time.

## Chapter 35

The Three of Coins is a boy, barely fifteen or sixteen years old, all long, hanging limbs and tiny, oval face. Nothing seems in proportion about him, for he is surely too skinny for lungs to breathe, too tall for legs to balance, eyes too small to see, ears too big to hear. Yet here he stands, alive and, for all intents and purposes, well. A sometime thief, a sometime beggar, he is of that sort who is nothing for very long, but rather drifts from easy idea to easy idea, riding the wave of life until he either drowns or is washed up on some alien shore.

He is not the ideal piece for this purpose, but he is the only one she has left.

- Steal a relic? he muses. - I can try, could be interesting, could be boring, don't know.

- I sent a man to find it, and he was murdered.

The Three of Coins shrugs; he doesn't seem surprised by this. - My life ended when the Gameshouse took my card, he explains. - It was made clear that I weren't my own man no more.

A question she wants to ask. She looks, and does not ask it. Does not need to. This boy, this strange, distant boy stares at nothing much. It is the same vacancy she saw in the eyes of the Tower, the same focus in the gaze of the Priestess. It is the thing that hides behind the laughter of the Queen of Cups, the swagger of the Knave of Swords, the slouch of the Seven of Staves. Each piece in each way lived their life by their own definition, but beneath it all, there is a thing she dares not name.

Is this slavery?

A quick dismissal of the idea: slaves are taken by force, held against their will and yet...

...and yet:

Alvise Muna, Seven of Staves: *I had debts.*

Pisana, Queen of Cups: *I bet the life of my child.*

The Knave of Swords: *My sword broke.*

The Priestess: *There are some who made arrangements which they might*



*regret.*

Every piece has come into her hand through the Gameshouse, but what pushed them through the Gameshouse's door?

The Queen of Cups knew she was coming: *I was a player once.*

And what of herself, what of Thene?

She has not thought of her husband once.

There is no shame in that; she has had better things to keep her occupied.

And even if questions could be asked, what is she to do?

Walk away?

Back to Jacamo, back to the life that went before?

A player must play in order to win. A king who conquers the kingdom must slay many soldiers in his path; four men wish to be captain, and only one may rise to that rank. What of the others? What of those who are left behind when victory is won?

History will not remember them.

And so on, Thene, on.

On to the end.

## Chapter 36

She had asked a question of the Knave of Swords – a question he died answering. *Where is Contarini's relic?*

Now she realises what a foolish question it was. Contarini, Contarini, frightened, wandering Contarini! You played a card to catch spies in your house, you change the bed you sleep in every night, and certainly you smile and you laugh and you shake hands with prelates and princes, and say how wonderful it shall all be when you are Tribune, but Contarini...the word that has not yet been invented for you, but it comes; the word is *paranoid*.

What cards were dealt, what deals were made to give Contarini his ridiculous relic she doesn't know, nor does it much matter. The relic is not the point of this exercise, merely the excuse – an excuse to build, an excuse to embezzle, to proclaim triumph where there is almost none. But as it is a symbol still, it holds value, and where does Contarini keep a thing of great value?

About himself. Always – but always – about his own person.

Terrible trust!

If only you had trusted in others, Contarini; if only you knew how to smile and mean it, you could perhaps have won this game, but no – no. You never understood the value of such things.

She must tempt Contarini out of hiding.

How better to do it, she thinks, than through the pieces of her enemy?

She speaks to Seluda.

- You were friends with Zanzano, you say, before he betrayed you?

- I thought I knew what friendship was, he replies, - and by that clearly mistaken understanding of what was between us, yes, I was his friend.

- Do you have any letters he sent? A note or two? Something written in his hand?

- I may; why?

- Do you want to know? she asks. - Seeing as you still cling to some part of friendship, that is?

Seluda considers, and then quickly absolves himself. - No, he says. - I don't want to know.

A letter is sent.

A reply is given.

The reply – alas, the reply! – is given to a messenger boy who is lazy and easily bribed, and Thene reads it closely as the Three of Coins stands idly by, scraping the dirt out from beneath his nails and flicking it away in little black spots towards the water of the canals.

Thene reads, considers, then pens another letter, seals it again and sends it on its way.

An invitation, written in the name of Zanzano, suggesting that though he has spoken most firmly for Faliere these last few weeks, yet now he has some small doubts, and would Contarini be willing to discuss a couple of matters of mutual concern?

Why, it would appear that Contarini is most willing.

Most willing indeed.

Night in Venice.

Few cities are more beautiful and more ugly in the dark than Venice.

The city is a jewel of contradictions. We stand by the waters of the lagoon, you and I, and watch the moonlight ripple beneath a star-pricked sky. We hear the creaking of the ships, smell fish sizzling in the pan, hear the distant laughter and feel the warmth through an open door, and know that this is surely paradise, the beautiful city, and marvel at how great are the deeds that man has wrought.

Yet turn away, and what is there now in this place that is not a threat? The alleys too dark, the walls too close, the water lapping at your feet hungry, hungry for blood. How many bones were sucked bare by the wide-eyed fish which twist away from the worm and the rod to gorge on sweeter pastures? How many of the crows that nest in the highest towers have, of a frozen night in winter, not swept down to pluck an eye from the still-staring corpse of he who shall by tomorrow have no name to put on his tombstone? Beauty and blood: does the blood give the beauty its edge? Is skin fairer when washed in red? Or is it the blood itself which is beautiful, for surely men will blaze the brighter when they know that tomorrow they may be drowned?

Or maybe here is the most terrible truth of all: that in a city as tide-turned

as Venice is, perhaps it is simply too hard to find love, loyalty and truth, and so in other virtues people invest their hearts – passion, beauty, poetry and song – fancying perhaps that these shadows of the former are as great as love itself.

Contarini receives Zanzano's note and, as a good piece must, shows it to his player.

Does his player smell a trap?

Perhaps he does, but then the battle is too close between Faliere and Contarini, the net too tightly drawn to refuse this offer, and if a little something is lost, what a great deal could be gained! The letter is compared to others known to be in Zanzano's hand, the seal is checked, and indeed it seems to be his voice, his style, his composition, and so in the deepest hour of the night when even the drunk boys and merry girls who dance on the tables of the inns have at last lulled themselves into stupored sleep, a gondola sets forth from Contarini's home.

There are four people within it, and a gondolier who says nothing and of whom nothing is asked. Torches burn at either end to guide the way, but the moon is shrouded behind the high walls of the city, and only a little light pushes through the mosquito-humming dark. The waterways at this hour are a place for insects, some crawling along the surface, visible only by the pushing ripples of their darting motion; others zip high, bumping along walls like blind bats feeling their way through the air, indignant to find their journey so disrupted.

Through this, Contarini moves in silence.

Let us consider the others who accompany him.

One man we may immediately assess, name and discard: a guard carrying a short spear that he probably can't use and a chipped sword which perhaps he can. He is a problem, but not an insurmountable one.

Another we have not seen before, his face half shrouded by a velvet hood, but if we were to consider his role, his strength, his abilities, we could give at least a representation of a name to him, and say perhaps that he is that card known as the Sun, whose real name will turn out to be something Germanic, and who used to pass letters for Sir Francis Walsingham and who betrayed the Spanish king and is now what he most excels at being – a spy, a traveller and a watcher of men. He had some aspiration, once upon a time, of playing in the same Gameshouse where his masters sometimes dallied, but for

reasons we cannot know, the Gamesmaster never invited him to challenge for the higher league, though his skill was entirely apt to it.

Contarini does not trust the Sun, suspecting what he once was; but for all that he is a fearful man, he is an economically minded one too, for to him a man whose card is held is a man who is now owned. His gaze turns in satisfaction to the final occupant of the boat, a man in a bone-white mask, and Contarini smiles upon him, though if he smiles back we cannot see. How easily has this old, plump man, cheerful Contarini, come to congratulate himself on owning a piece as powerful as the Sun, and somehow managed yet to forget that he is a piece himself. The easiest intellectual option, the path of least resistance, and there you have the man.

A guard, a spy, a piece and a player.

Their route to Zanzano's house takes them under four bridges. Two are high enough that the gondolier needs only to bend a little to push them through it; of the other two, one requires him to squat, and one is so low indeed that it is miraculous that the pilot of this little vessel does not lie down flat to propel them beneath its stones. As they approach it, Contarini mutters his usual exclamations against *new money* and the vulgar, unpleasant things it builds, forgetting – choosing to forget – how yesterday he shook the hand of the very man whose construction this bridge is, congratulating him on his superb judgement in supporting Contarini's claim, and hoping to see him very soon for some private chat.

Coming towards this little bridge, it seems that a shadow stirs around it, and at the sound of footfalls, the Sun raises his head.

A sound that might be the scraping of a barrel.

A creaking that could be the drawing of a bow.

The Sun rises to his feet, steady in the still-moving boat, and seeing him rise, the white-masked player asks, - Something?

- Perhaps, replies the man, and then, - I heard...

What he heard we shall not know, for what he next *experienced* was a cracking of timbers and an explosion of sticky blackness across his face as, from windows high above, barrels of honey, mud and egg were thrown, all mixed together by an angry cook of Seluda's, the dark sticky stuff splattering across every soul in the boat which, rocked by this assault and then by the confusion of all within, sloshed first from side to side and then, with a final slow flop, capsized, hurling all into the water.

At this all light ceased, and for a moment five men flapped and splashed,

flailed and gasped in the murky dark. How terrible to drown; how much worse to drown in the dark when there is no sense of where safety lies, only water without bottom, darkness without end, clothes swelling up and dragging down, bubbles of air popping from nose and mouth, eyes pushing against their sockets with the pressure of liquid building in your gasping, choking face. Terror, terror to drown, and now the soldier's sword is an anchor and the fine fur lining of your cloak and golden chain about your neck is death that threatens to pull you down, the rich men drowning faster than the poor.

Yet! A light above, voices in the dark, and here are ten or fifteen boys, the forgotten, unloved, undrawn poor of the city. They crowd round the water's edge, torches burning and hands outstretched, and some three or four dive in to help the flapping, spluttering passengers, hauling them, some by the arm, some by the neck, one even by the hair, gasping onto the safety of the bridge.

- Money, money, please sir, money! cries the boldest of these unlooked-for saviours, or:

- I'm strong, you see how strong I am, I am very strong indeed you could use me, yes, as a servant, I work very hard because I am very strong!

Or maybe even the simpler, softly whispered words that are not a threat; no, never that, never threatening...

- I saved your life. I could have not done that, sir, and heaven looked no less kindly on my soul.

Contarini is a man of pride, always one to refuse gifts when offered lest they become debts, and even less willing to hand out his own money unless he is sure of what he shall take in return. Yet now he sits, this great man of Venice, dirty, wet and stinking, as dozens of little hands in a show of straightening his sopping gown pat him down for coins, rings, silver and gold, until the Sun, recovering some semblance of his wits roars, - Get away! and charges at the pack which disperses, laughing like hyenas, withdrawing some little way but not yet giving up the prize, the scent of blood in their noses, their victims stranded in the dark. All except one, who runs into the dark and does not look back.

Then the player is pulled from the water, his white mask lost, and he is an old man, grey hair, grey beard, pale eyes and a mole situated perfectly in the centre of his left temple that seems to be pinkish at the base and then deep, deep brown in the middle, as if a second mole has attempted to grow from the first. He gasps for air, sees the boys, sees his pieces, the gondolier lamenting

his battered craft, broken barrels floating in the water, and at once now his mind turns to the most important question –

- The box!

At once Contarini feels within his sopping garments, pushing leaden fabric away from his skin in great, sagging waves, and though he almost immediately feels nothing, still he keeps looking, for it is unacceptable, impossible, that he does not find that which he seeks.

- Who took it? roars the player. - Where is it?!

Now he staggers to his feet, and without care for his own safety or person, squelches towards the gaggle of boys, who laugh tremendously to see this drowned ox come for them and scatter before him, chattering at how funny it is to see old men move, and how much funnier it will be to see old men cry.

This pattern of pursuit and scatter, pursue and scatter leads the player a little distance away from the canal, until with a sudden burst like spring petals on the wind, the boys break away, running barefoot over stones away into the swallowing dark.

We look now at this player, clothes streaming, hair stuck to his head, gasping for breath, burdened by time and water. He turns his head side to side, his feet rooted as if crushed by his own weight, and sees now a figure, cloaked in grey, a white mask upon her face, a lantern at her side.

We can name this woman too, can we not? But he sees only what she is, not who she is, and cannot even bring himself to name her.

- *Whore*, he breathes, having no better wit for the moment.

She steps a little towards him and he tries to draw himself up to his full height, though dignity when you are leaking canal waters from the seat of your trousers is a difficult attribute to obtain.

- Seluda's little whore, he adds. - Your piece will die for this.

- I do not think so, she replies. - Stealing the relic from you was only part of tonight's work.

- It will not be enough: you will lose.

- I do not know if I will win, or if Faliere will beat me to the final reckoning. What I am sure of is that Contarini's claim will not survive past tonight, and you will never see the higher league of the Gameshouse. It is a trait I dislike in players to gloat over their defeated enemies, but in your case I have come not to gloat, but to witness. It has been suggested to me, strongly suggested, that the Gameshouse does not deal all hands evenly. My player is weak, and though I cannot compare my cards to others, not knowing their

draw, I am...uncertain...if they were as touched by chance as perhaps I would think. Therefore I wanted to see you, to witness this moment, and ask myself this question: why you? Or perhaps: why Contarini? Or perhaps both. Why would the Gameshouse seek to see a creature as patently vile as you clearly are in the higher league? What is their purpose? Why are we playing this game? I am sure you have no answer. You are a piece, and perhaps so I am. But in observing you, one day maybe I will be closer to the answer that I seek.

She finishes speaking and he steps towards her suddenly, fast, one hand rising as if he would grab her by the throat, breathless, and what is he thinking now? Can he imagine himself killing her – is he that man? We think that perhaps the truth of the matter is that he cannot think at all, and this is just the animal, the stray dog within his soul, that now twists his fingers towards her neck.

Yet she does not flinch, and at the stillness in her features he hesitates, breath meeting hers, his fast, hers soft, so softly waiting. Two rules there were laid out for the players, and he remembers them now.

- Will you? she asks, as he is frozen to the spot. - Do you dare?

It seems that he does not.

His fingers withdraw; he forces them shaking to his side.

- You are no player, she breathes at last. - A player would never fall so low. That's good. That's what I wanted to know. That means the Gameshouse intended Faliere to win.

- This is nothing, he says. - The bishops will still stand with us.

- No, she replies. - I do not think they will.

So saying, she turns away, and he watches her out of sight.



## Chapter 37

The sky glows red tonight.

A fire in any city is a disaster, but in Venice! So many buildings so tight together, so much timber waiting to ignite.

Yet this fire is contained, for the building where it begins is kept apart by its status from many others, and there is nothing if not an abundance of water to hand.

A Patriarch should not have so fine a palace, the Priestess tells herself as she watches the flames from across the water. How much we have forgotten. How Christ would weep to see us now.

## Chapter 38

And in the morning, the Patriarch of Venice pens a letter to his good friend, Abbot Padova, who we may say perhaps sold his soul to a woman in white and became that card known as the Hierophant, and for what? For a promise of secrets and blessings, whose value we will one day see does not outweigh the sacrifice that must be made.

Be that so, to him the Patriarch writes, telling of the fire which has all but gutted his glorious palace, and the priceless treasures that were lost! Gold melted in the heat, paints blistered on canvas, the faces of the saints destroyed, ancient Byzantine symbols turned to ash, the rosewater boiled in its bowls as glass cracked and turned to sand, a tragedy, a tragedy and an abomination and worse – oh, but far worse! Can the churches of Venice really afford to build both a reliquary for this “elbow of St Simon” if it is even verified...

(What new question is this, wonders the abbot, since when was verification a concern?!)

...and rebuild the Patriarch’s home?

Panic in the priesthood, panic in the Senate. The situation may still be salvaged, the election may still be saved, but here now come Angelo Seluda and Orio Faliere, and though they are enemies, bitter rivals for the crown, yet both of them smell blood and it seems – for just a morning and an afternoon – that they wordlessly combine efforts.

The profits from building a reliquary have been hugely exaggerated, whispers Seluda. - Contarini was playing you all, using you, offering rewards he could never have given, the priests all secretly doubted themselves – do you really want a man as unreliable as Contarini on the Supreme Tribunal?

And Faliere, frozen, icy Faliere, stalks through the halls of the Doge’s palace and murmurs with a voice that seems to never rise and yet cuts through every shadow, where is this relic anyway? What is this elbow bone for which Contarini would have the bishops go bankrupt?

Through it all, Contarini struggles, and his player too, begging, imploring, coaxing, wheedling, we can still bring great profit to this city, the Patriarch

can have his reliquary *and* his palace too, trust us, trust in what we can achieve, there has been foul play...

...but all for nothing.

And when, at supper, they produce the blessed relic itself, a priest who has buried many bodies in the crowded cemeteries of Venice exclaims, - That is not the bone that you showed us before, and is far newer than any relic should be! and at once chaos erupts as Faliere whispers:

- I would not wish to do my good brother Contarini down, but it does seem that this relic should be questioned...

And Seluda murmurs, - Poor Contarini – it seems he has been the innocent victim of some terrible, terrible hoax, and I wonder that he did not see it sooner himself!

So that, when the sun finally sets over the city, Contarini is done.

We watch him return to his palace, walking this time – shameful walking! – perhaps haunted by his soaking memories of the humiliating night before.

Of the man that was his player, we see nothing more.

And so in the halls of the Doge, when all have departed and the last sunset light burns in sideways and hot through the high windows, all things at last are still. We watch Thene, and do not know her mind. She gazes upon the images of great men, the faces of noble Doges, and the obliterated place where a Doge's face once was. She walks through images of the history of Venice, the glories of Lepanto, the sacking of Constantinople, memories of crusader princes who others called pirates and rogues. She sees the painted depiction of raging seas upon which the brave Venetians still set forth in brigs, caravels and galleys, mighty men with great shoulders rowing against the crashing waves, ancient Poseidon stirring the oceans below, blessed Jesus calming the skies above. For a moment she thinks she sees the face of Zeus in the bearded depiction of the Almighty as he bestows his blessing on the holy islands of the lagoon. A flicker in her eyes, a question of perspective, for did the people of this land not once worship the all-father Jove, and were they not, in their time, right?

She crosses herself quickly at this thought, and we are surprised.

It is the last time we shall see her make this sign for as long as we shall know her.

And then, quiet as night, he is there.

The man who would make Faliere king.

The two players, Thene and he, face each other down the empty hall. Both are masked, neither speak. Is it coincidence that has brought them here?

Fool you, for asking the question. Shame on you if you thought any of this was not wrought by another's hand, and long before we came to look on it.

At last the man says, - My apologies, my lady. For how I addressed you the night when we played chess. You are a better player than I gave you credit.

- You played with your words, and with me, when you spoke so, and I respect the game, if not the move, she replies with a little nod of her head. - And for my part, and I think it must also be so for you, I have...enjoyed...our game.

- Very much so, he replies, - and I regret that I will not play you again when this matter is done, since one of us must be exiled from the Gameshouse altogether at its conclusion.

She hesitates, then, - I nearly asked you your name.

- I would not give it.

- Nor I. It seems...unfitting...to the spirit of the thing. Yet I am curious to know who you are, that the Gameshouse would have you win.

- You think I have some advantage?

- Yes. I do.

- Come, come, he tuts. - That is bad grace from a good player.

- I have looked at this board and see no reason why Seluda should have been played, nor why Belligno was not, save an intention bigger than either of our parts. Contarini's man, though strong, proved to be merely...human...

She pauses on this word, considering it, and finds to her surprise that it is right. For what is a human if not flawed by humanity, tempered by feeling, doubt and hope? And is not a player more? Does not the player strive to rise above all of this and see only the moves themselves?

- ...and so I must conclude that you are the strongest of us, given the greatest chance, and I wonder who you are, that the Gameshouse would see you victorious.

- You do yourself down, my lady. You have fought a good fight. Perhaps even stood some chance of victory. Does the Gameshouse not wish you even success?

She opens her mouth to say a name, to explain all, but hesitates, blessed sense, hesitates before she speaks of the man with silver sleeves, of a Roman coin, of a bargain struck, and our heart may beat slow again, breathe, breathe,

for we are not ready, we are not ready to play the game that must be done, do not betray us yet, Thene, do not show the strength of our hand to one who serves our enemy!

Her lips seal, thin and tight, behind her mask, and if the other player has seen any alteration in her eyes, any drawing in, we cannot tell, and it may not matter.

- You speak of my victory as if it is still impossible, she says at last. - Yet the election seems even.

He does not reply.

Oh, fluent silence!

Her eyes narrow behind the mask and she gazes now into his blank, white face. Does she see? Does she see?

She cannot know but at once she guesses, for is there not a small Roman coin in her pouch that she has not yet played, and are there not cards in the field, pieces still to be moved, and could all not yet be thrown into doubt?

A recollection hits her now, her own wisdom, wisely given: one day the balance must break.

Faliere and Seluda stand almost perfectly balanced in this fight, the last pieces standing on the board.

What was the beginning of her advice that preceded this thought?

*Assassination is a crude move. Let other players expend cards on battling each other, the strong tearing each other down, until they are weak enough that I may strike.*

She looks at Faliere's player, and it seems to her that he smiles.

She turns and runs.

## Chapter 39

The Gamesmaster always had a sense of humour.

We loved her for that, once upon a time.

She found her inspiration for this game in a pack of tarot cards, matching the meaning to the piece, the human to the name. The Priestess – intuition, knowledge, secrets, that is her meaning. Yet sometimes she is also Isis, the mother of magic, and how disdainful would our Priestess be to hear herself painted with such a pagan brush, whatever the truth may be.

The Fool, full of hope in his journey. Galliard Viole, do you find hope as you wander through the courts of Europe? We do not think so. Sorrow haunts you, behind your smile, and yours is always the loneliness of the road.

The Sun. You burn more than you heal. Your light is fire, not fertility.

The Queen of Cups. They will burn you at the stake someday, not because you are a prostitute, but because you dared to write of heaven as a place where male and female have no name, and souls are equal, and love may be expressed in touch and silence, and without reserve.

The Gamesmaster chose you all, named you all, played you all, as she plays even now, and she was most apt when she named this final card and called him Death, and put him in the hand of Faliere.

## Chapter 40

Thene runs.

She runs through the streets of Venice, a madwoman in a mask, and people stare and scatter before her.

She runs, and is not a woman used to running but still she runs, distance irrelevant, time of no import, for she looked into the eyes of the man who plays Faliere, and she saw death there, and knew that the game was not yet done, and so she runs, and runs, and runs! It is a blessing that she knows this city, for in Venice the sun can be hard to find, the streets twist and tangle in on themselves, the canals bend in and out, forming slow sweeps that deceive any innocent traveller. Too many bridges are private, too many guarded by hungry men; you think you have found a landmark, but no, the alleys curl inwards, and when you emerge again you have lost all sense of place, all bearings, and you look for the sun and cannot see it between the high rooftops but do not panic.

Do not panic.

These are your streets, Thene, they are *yours*, you made them yours, you took them because no one was willing to give, you grabbed at a future and made it yours, you have the courage, you have the strength, do not fear, do not fear, and *run!*

The house of Seluda.

Suddenly, dozens of dignitaries are interested in him, men in dark robes and little caps flock to explain that, really, they were always on his side, always supported him in his bid, of course they did – of course! His role as Tribune would be so good for the city and for just a little consideration his support is theirs, just a quick shaking of the hand and a bargain...

She pushes through the crowd, which mutters at her rudeness: a woman, and a stinking, breathless one at that, what does she think she's doing?

Boys with letters, men with money, they have all come now, too many, too many, smiling, laughing, embracing, the best of friends – we in Venice are all the best of friends, and why would we not be, we are Venetian! – and at last comes to Seluda's side.

- You have to go! she hisses.

- Go?

He is smiling now, enjoying the attention, the accolades; it is easy for him to forget that not five days ago he was unregarded, unimportant, the people of Venice expected little of him and so paid him even less attention.

- I believe your life is in danger!

- I am with my friends! he replies expansively, gesturing through the crowd of faces.

She nearly shrieks with rage, at the vanity of the man. - This is why men need to be played, she wants to scream, - for I do not possess such a great ego as you do; I have not invested my heart and my self-esteem in the flattery of other men, only in victory, in *victory* which now you threaten to squander!

These words are not for now, not for Seluda, so firmly she grips his arm and whispers, - I think Faliere may send a killer!

- Let him come! My men can deal with it!

- Can they? Will you bet your life?

Now Seluda turns, and she sees the man beneath the jollity, the mind beneath the pride. - In Venice, he breathes, - death will always find you, wherever you hide. You cannot live your life waiting for it, for then you will not live.

- Nor will you *win*, she hisses.

He shrugs. - Victory is not life.

So saying, he turns away, spreading his arms wide to another man, a cry of - Paolo! My dear friend!

A moment she stands, bewildered and alone.

Her breathing has slowed, though her shoulders are high, her back bent, her feet burning from her run.

The crowd surges and pulls around Seluda. One of them hides a blade, or poison, or a pistol, or a rope. She watches the faces, and they all smile, smile and smile, and for a moment she despises them, despises the city, Seluda, and maybe even herself.

Her hand has slipped into her pouch, and though she cannot say when the habit was formed, she feels the little coin between her fingers, familiar and warm from where she has been touching it, pressing it into her skin like a lucky talisman.

And in that moment she thinks she sees the man called Silver, watching through a crack in a door, and knows that she imagines this, for there is not



enough space to see him there.

Then she thinks perhaps she sees a woman all in white, moving behind the crowd, but she ducks down low between two traders in Egyptian wheat, and though Thene cranes her neck, she sees the woman no more.

The coin rolls between her fingers, warm and old.

For an instant, her eyes roll through the gaze of a man, whose eyes were ocean-green, whose hair is straight, skin the colour of walnut, but reddish too about the cheeks and forehead, as if burned by too much sun and sea. He is a mighty figure, dressed in strange barbaric robes, fur about his neck, rings of bone about his fingers, but blink, and he is only another supplicant come to pay tribute to the honour of Seluda, civilised men in a civilised time, who smile and smile, and look always for the kill.

And in that second, we, who have so long stood and watched, feel a shudder as her gaze sweeps the room, and know that she sees us too. She sees us, impossible though it is, and she *knows*. She knows who we are, and what we desire, and in that moment when we fear that she will destroy us all, instead it seems to us that she smiles.

Then her gaze lights upon a man, and she knows his face, and can name him both for himself and for what he is, for he is Death as surely as he was once Jacamo, her husband. He is looking straight at her, his mouth a little ajar, but that will not deflect him from his purpose. One hand hangs by his side, the other is buried within his cloak and we can feel now almost as if it was our skin itself on the handle that it is a pistol he hides there.

How did this happen?

How did Jacamo de Orcelo become the card that is Death? How did this fate befall?

(He lost too much gambling at the Gameshouse, too many creditors were howling at his door. The debt, was indeed so much more than his wife had ever understood for the shame, the shame of the gambler who has lost his home, it eats you up, has eaten Jacamo whole. He considered suicide for a while, and with the pistol against his jaw ready to end his days, a woman in white came before him and said:

- I can wipe your debts.

- I know you, he replied. - I have seen you in the Gameshouse.

- You have seen my umpires, she answered. - You have seen my ladies in white. I am their mistress. I control the board.

- What are you doing here?

- A game is about to be played for the control of this city. I am looking for pieces to fill the board. You are about to lose it all; I will give it back to you for a bargain.

- What bargain?

- You will kill a man, at a player's command.

- I, a killer?

- You would kill yourself. I assure you, killing another is easier.

- Why would you do this?

- I enjoy the game. Games are made to be enjoyed.

- How is murder a game?

- Life is lived through things which are not true. We pretend ourselves foolish in order to show our wisdom. We find things funny, which are sad. We smile at those who we would destroy, make alliances with those we do not respect, admire ourselves for our intellect and always look for the ultimate prize. We would be great, every one of us, and to achieve greatness do not bother to look at those we have destroyed in our path. A game is all of this and more, and nobler, for those who play at last transcend themselves, and see both the consequences of their choices, and the board as a whole. I do not think there is a nobler calling than the game, and I would have you a part of it.)

Jacamo de Orcelo.

His gaze meets his wife's.

She wears a mask, but he knows her as surely as she knows him.

He does not smile.

Perhaps even he looks sad, a man she can pity, though she has never pitied him before.

They have their parts to play.

He pulls out his pistol. He is almost at point-blank range to Seluda; he cannot fail but to hit, to kill, and she too far away.

Her fingers close around the coin; she pulls it from her pouch.

His finger tightens about the trigger.

She closes her eyes and throws the coin.

## Chapter 41

The coin turns, the coin turns.

I loved the Gamesmaster once, but she loved the game more than she loved me, and the coin turns, and she is gone.

A pistol fires.

## Chapter 42

It is the last night.

The night before the election.

The last night before the end.

Orio Faliere paces in his study as he has paced so much, for so long, the floor worn down by his striding.

His player sits behind, mask still covering his face, legs crossed, arms folded.

Thene stands before them.

Silence, save for the stomping of Faliere across the floor.

We wait.

At last Thene says:

- You will withdraw your candidacy for Tribune.

Faliere's player laughs; Faliere does not, but paces – still paces.

- A man attempted to kill Angelo Seluda, she continues, - but his pistol misfired. He lost three fingers on his right hand, and was taken into custody. In custody he died.

Walking, walking, Faliere is walking. Angelo Seluda lives and Jacamo de Orcelo dies, and no one knows who gave him the poison that ended his days.

- You will withdraw your candidacy, Thene repeats. - You will end this race.

The player laughs again, but it is a sound cut short by the silence of his piece, Orio Faliere, pacing still. They wait for the old man, who makes another cross, and another, and finally stops directly before Thene, some seven inches taller than she, and says, - Why?

- Because I know about your wife, Thene replies.

Silence.

The other player leans in, legs unfolding, hands clasped in front of him.

Silence.

- You can prove nothing, Faliere says at last.

- What is this? asks his player, low and earnest. - What is this about your wife?

- I have the sworn testimony of the gondolier who carries her to her assignations. I have the witness of three ladies of the town who have observed her activities. I have the testimony of the servants who clean the beds, the men who bring the food and most importantly, I have the testimony of her lover.

Faliere's player is on his feet now, but Faliere is still, so still.

- My wife's activities mean nothing, he says at last. - I have always known her a whore. The city will forget.

- The city will forget that she sleeps with prostitutes, it is true, though the scandal will always haunt you. Whether it will forgive her lying with other men's wives, I am less certain. Even if it does, that is not the reason why you will withdraw your candidacy.

- He is not withdrawing – we are *not* withdrawing! blurts the player, but Faliere is ignoring him now, watching Thene still.

- You will withdraw, Thene continues, - because you love your wife.

At this, Faliere smiles. - I am told that I love no one.

- You put it about that you love no one. But the truth is you love her. You knew what she was when you married her, and you married for wealth. She does not love you, and you did not love her, but sir, I have had her watched these long weeks and I have concluded that it is not apathy which keeps you away from the touch of other flesh, it is love. You love her. You know about her activities and you seek to protect her. This distance, this coldness – it is not for you, but for her. You love her and you know that this proof which I have will not only destroy your campaign, but it will end her life.

- No, wait, this is... begins the player, but Faliere silences him with a gesture.

His eyes are fixed on Thene's.

Silence.

- Sir, the player tries again. - Sir, this is a trick, a lie; she is nothing, she is...

Again Faliere silences him, and the player steps back, reaches out to the wall for support, as if uncertain of his own weight. How hot his belly feels, how strongly pulses the veins in his neck; we watch him and we think – yes, we are certain of it! – we think it is good that he is so afraid. This player was destined to win, and there is great satisfaction when the strong are shattered by the weak.

What would you do to win?

Anything, he might reply, gasping for air. Please! Anything!

But now this player is destroyed by his own piece, for he makes some sounds, some little begging noises, but Faliere is not listening. The piece is human after all! Faliere is more than a symbol on a board.

- May I have time to think? he asks.

- You have until dawn, Thene replies. - You know where to find me when you wish to answer.

## Chapter 43

Thene walks through the city at night.

These are her streets.

She does not fear a soul.

The sound of fabric nearby.

A sense of eyes on her face.

Dawn will come soon and she is ready for it, though she knows already what Faliere's reply will be.

She is not even certain if she needs to destroy him for victory, having defeated so much to come to this point, but it is false, she concludes, to say that victory is the sweeter when it is snatched from the jaws of defeat. She will win a great many battles in times to come – let her first be triumphant.

Footsteps on the cobbles of Venice.

Water laps against old, smooth stones.

A woman's voice.

- May I join you?

We look, though it hurts so much to see her now. Dressed in white, her face hidden by the veil, even in these grubby paths she is so clean, so bright, so perfect, her voice soft and thunderous, her step gentle and long, we loved you once, we loved you, and you left us.

The Gamesmaster steps up to Thene at the other's gentle nod, and walks beside her.

A while they walk in silence, as dawn begins to reflect off the skies above Venice.

Then:

- This is a game which has been played before and will be played again, says the Gamesmaster.

- I thought as much.

- You have played it beautifully, my lady.

- Thank you. It has been an honour to participate.

- I have watched your progress and enjoyed the manner of your moves. You will be a fine addition to the Gameshouse.

- Addition?
- A fine player.
- Thank you.

They keep on walking. Then:

- A man spoke to you, did he not?
- You shall have to be more precise, my lady.
- A man known to some as Silver.
- I partially know the name. We played chess a couple of time, and cards.

Is that wrong?

- Not at all. The Gameshouse welcomes all games, even the lesser ones. There are no rules against this. Tell me: did this man make you an offer?

- What manner of offer?
- That you must tell me.

They walk a while, silent still, as Thene considers her answer. Dawn spreads, the grey light flecking with colour in the thin shutter of sky overhead. The Gamesmaster walks in silence, a ghost in the shadows, an anonymity all in white.

- Before I answer, she says, - may I ask a question?

- Certainly; outside the house we are but two women discussing mutual friends.

- Then tell me this: was the game evenly weighed?

- Of course! she replies, high and indignant. - Of course it was!

Then, - No, Thene says at last. - The man you referring to made me no offers.

- Very well, the Gamesmaster replies. - That is all I wished to know. And like the passing of the night, she is gone.



## Chapter 44

Later – centuries later – a stranger asked Thene what the first game was she ever played.

He meant it in the Gameshouse manner. Not a question of backgammon, checkers or chess, but the game that won her admittance to the higher league, where the currency is life, time and the soul, and the game is played in worlds and kings.

She was silent a long time, and I think the stranger realised then how much bigger the question was than he had thought when he asked it.

At length she answered so:

“The game I played which won me admittance to the higher league was one of kings. My king was Angelo Seluda – no one remembers him now – who wanted to be a Tribune of Venice. These days, we forget what the Tribunes were, but at the time, the matter seemed very important to him. Four other kings were ranged against him – Tiapolo, Contarini, Falliere and Belligno, but of those, Belligno and Tiapolo were destined to lose. Contarini was badly played, and Falliere...in the end, Falliere outplayed his own player, I think. He chose to be a husband before he was a piece, and for that I can admire him. I have played hundreds of games since then, and thought very little on that first but still...I remember not so much the victory, as the pieces. The Priestess, alone on her island. The Seven of Staves, scuttling for ever in busy obscurity. The Knave of Swords, dead by a violent man’s axe. The Fool, empty-eyed and distant; the Tower, who loved to set fires and stare at flies. Death, who gambled too much and paid too high a price. They, I think, stayed with me more than the victory, which was itself no great thing. Somehow still, I remember the pieces.”

At this, the other players laughed, saying, “Pieces? Pieces come and pieces go, and only the game continues!”

“No – but there is more,” she replied. “You asked me what the first game was I ever played, and I told you of the game of kings. But there is another question, more important, which is what is the first game that I was ever played *in*. That game began, I think, long before I ever competed for the

higher league, and though I have not yet seen its shape, its battle is still ongoing.”

At this, the other players fell silent, uncomfortable, perhaps, at an idea that many had felt but few dared express.

Then Thene smiled, and gestured to the table before them and said, “Will you make your move?”

Dice roll.

Cards fall.

Kingdoms topple.

Emperors burn.

The young are born and the old pass away.

And always the Gameshouse, the Gameshouse, it lives, it turns, the Gameshouse waits.

And my love too.

The coin turns.

The coin turns.

And we are gone.

Read on in [\*The Thief\*, the Second Gameshouse Novella.](#)

**Claire North** is the pen name for the Carnegie-nominated Catherine Webb. Her previous novel, *The First Fifteen Lives of Harry August*, was selected for the Richard and Judy Book Club, the Waterstones Book Club and the Radio 2 Book Club. Catherine currently works as a theatre lighting designer and is a fan of big cities, urban magic, Thai food and graffiti-spotting. She lives in London. Find her on Twitter as [@ClaireNorth42](https://twitter.com/ClaireNorth42).

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