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Sacred Treason

Written by James Forrester

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Sacred Treason

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Prologue



Tuesday, 7 December 1563

It was a cold day for a killing. The Scotsman, Robert Urquhart, rubbed his hands and breathed on them as he waited in Threadneedle Street, in London. Watching the door to Merchant Taylors' Hall, he clutched each finger in turn, trying to keep them supple, his grip strong. He cursed the grey December skies. Only when two men appeared at the top of the steps, walking very slowly and deep in conversation, did he forget the chill in his bones. His victim, William Draper, was the one on the left – the jewelled gold collar gave him away.

He studied Draper. Narrow face, grey hair and beard, about sixty. Not tall but well dressed, in an expensive green velvet doublet with lace ruff and cuffs. Eyes like a fox. He looked selfish, judgemental – even a little bitter. You could see how he had made his money: with an ambition as cold and biting as this weather, and with as little remorse.

Urquhart watched Draper pull his cloak close and wait, standing on the bottom step, above the frozen mud. The man continued talking to his less well dressed companion. The carts and pedestrian traffic of the street passed in front

of them, the snorting of the horses and the drivers' breath billowing in the cold morning air.

It could not be done here, Urquhart could see that. Not without risking his own arrest. That would be as bad as failure. Worse – for he knew her ladyship's identity. They would torture that information out of him. Arrest would simply require her ladyship to send another man, to kill him as well as Draper.

He walked to the end of the street and looked back casually. A servant led a chestnut palfrey round the corner from the yard and held it steady, offering the reins to Draper who mounted from the bottom step with surprising agility. Draper offered some final words to his companion from the saddle, then gestured goodbye with a wave of his hand and moved off.

Westwards. He was going home.

Urquhart started forward, walking briskly. He felt for the knife in his belt, the dagger in his shirt sleeve, and the rounded butt of the long-barrelled German wheel lock pistol inside the left breast of his doublet. He hoped he would not have to use it. The noise would bring all London running.

He followed his victim to his house in Basinghall Street. Four storeys high and three bays wide, with armorial glass in the windows. He waited outside for some minutes then drew a deep breath and slowly exhaled, taking a moment to reflect on his mission.

He climbed the few steps to the door and knocked hard. A bald man in knee-length breeches answered.

'God speed you. An urgent message for the master.'

The bald man noted the Scottish accent. 'Another time, sir, you would be right heartily welcome. Alas, today my master has given instructions that he is not to be disturbed.'

‘He will see me. Tell him I come with a message from her ladyship. It is she who bids me seek his help.’

‘Regretfully, sir, I cannot disobey an order—’

‘You are very dutiful, and that is to be commended, but I urge you, look to your Catholic conscience, and quickly. Her ladyship’s business is a matter of life and death. Tell Mr Draper I have travelled far to see him in his capacity as *Sir Dagonet*. He will understand.’

The bald man paused, weighing up his visitor’s appearance and demeanour. He looked at his shoes, dirty with the mud of the street. But the visitor seemed so confident; Mr Draper might well be angry if he turned away an urgent communication brought by a Scotsman. ‘Wait here, if you please,’ he said, stepping backwards into the shadows.

After several minutes he reappeared. ‘Mr Draper will see you. This way.’

Urquhart followed the servant along a dark passageway, through a high hall, and past a pair of large wooden benches piled with bright silk cushions. He noticed a gilt-framed portrait of the master of the house, and another of a stern-looking man in an old-fashioned breastplate and helmet – Draper’s father, perhaps. There was a big tapestry of a town under siege at one end of the hall. Above the fireplace were two brightly painted plaster figures of black women in red skirts, their exotic paganism allowing the plasterer to bare their breasts shamelessly. Here was a whitewashed stone staircase. At the top, a picture of the Virgin. Finally they came to a wide wooden door.

‘What is your name, sir?’ asked the bald man over his shoulder.

‘Thomas Fraser,’ Urquhart replied.

The servant knocked, lifted the latch and pushed the door

open. Urquhart crossed himself. He loosened his sleeve, felt the hilt of the dagger, and entered boldly.

The room was long, oak-panelled and warm, and had an elaborate plaster ceiling. Two fireplaces in the far wall were alight, the blazing logs held in place by polished silver-headed firedogs.

The servant turned to his right and bowed. 'Mr Draper, this is the Scotch esquire who has come on behalf of her ladyship. His name is Thomas Fraser.'

Draper was sitting behind a table at one end of the room, looking down at a piece of paper. Urquhart saw the same narrow face and grey beard he had seen outside the hall. He stepped forward and bowed respectfully. He heard the door shut behind him, and the latch fall.

'You come from her ladyship?' the merchant said softly, looking up. There were tears in his eyes.

Suddenly Urquhart felt nervous, like a boy about to steal silver coins from his master's purse. *Why the tears? Was Draper expecting him?* But there was just one thing to do and the sooner it was done the better.

'Sir,' he said, taking another two steps closer, so he was barely six feet from the table. 'I come with an instruction from her ladyship.' He reached for his dagger.

Suddenly a deep north country voice called out from behind him: 'Hold fast! Move no further!'

Urquhart turned. Behind the door as it had opened had been a huge bearded man dressed in a black doublet and cloak. His hair too was black and curled. In his early thirties, he had obviously seen action on more than one occasion. A livid red mark stretched from above his right eyebrow to his right ear. On his left hip he wore a silver-handled side-sword, and he was holding a pistol.

For one throb of his pulse, Urquhart was motionless. But in that moment he understood what had happened. Her ladyship had been betrayed. He did not know by whom, or how, but it left him in no doubt what he had to do. The instant he saw the scarred man move his pistol hand, he pulled the dagger from his sleeve and hurled it at the man's chest. The next instant he rushed towards him, one hand reaching out to grab the pistol and the other fumbling for the knife at his own belt.

When the gun went off, Urquhart was moving forward. And then, suddenly, he was on his side, the report echoing in his ears.

Only then did he feel the pain. It was as if his scream of agony was a sound formed within the severed nerves of his left thigh. There was a mess of blood and torn flesh. He could see splintered bone. As the sliced nerves and the sight of the shreds of bloody meat combined into a realisation of one single hideous truth, he gasped and raised his head, dizzy with the shock. The rip his dagger had made in the black cloak and shirt revealed a glint of a breast-plate. The man was drawing his side-sword.

'You are too late,' the north country voice declared. 'Our messenger from Scotland came in the night. Mr Walsingham knows.'

Urquhart screamed again as the pain surged. He thumped the floor, unable to master the feeling. But it was not the wound that mattered – it was the failure. That was worse than the physical hurt. It did not matter that he was a dead man. What mattered was that his victim was still alive.

Eyes blurred with tears of shame, he thrust his hand inside his doublet for his own pistol. The scarred man was too close. But he forced his trembling hands to respond,

and drew back the wheel of the lock. Gasping, he twisted round, aimed at Draper's head, and pulled the trigger.

The noise of the gun was the last thing he heard. An instant later the blade of the side-sword flashed through his throat and lodged in the back of his neck, in the bone. And then he was suffocating and tumbling in a frothing sea of his own blood.

It was not an easy death to behold.

1



Friday, 10 December 1563

Clarenceux sat at the table board in his candlelit study, listening to the rain. It drummed on the roof and splattered in the puddles in the street two storeys below. He pulled his robe close around him against the December chill, nuzzling his bearded chin in the fur collar, smelling the wood smoke that had infused the fur over the years spent in the same chair, in the same robe. Thunder rumbled across the sky. The rain seemed to increase in intensity, as if in answer to the thunder's command. He was alone but for his papers and this little halo of golden light.

Ever since the birth of their second child, seventeen months ago, he had spent the evenings working on his heraldic manuscripts, his visitations. His wife, Awdrey, had retired early as usual, to do her embroidery by the light of the candle in the alcove above their bed. He liked to think of her there, needle in hand, in her candlelight, while he worked here at the other end of the house, in his own light. It was as if their evenings were joined by the two golden flames. Even though they were doing different things in different places, they were together.

He reached forward and lifted an old gold cup – once

the property of a royal duke, to judge from the enamelled coat of arms it bore – and sipped some wine. He opened the manuscript book before him, and read the first page. The title read: *A Visitation of y^e counties of Essex and Suffolke, commenc'd July y^e 20th 1561, by me, William Harley, Clarenceux King of Armes.* That had been two and a half years ago, one of his regular expeditions to catalogue all the gentlemen in those two counties who were entitled to bear coats of arms. Such expeditions were among the most enjoyable aspects of his work as a herald. When war threatened, and he had to ride through enemy territory to confront a king or a general, his responsibilities were far more onerous. And dangerous. But that trip through Essex and Suffolk had been a good occasion; he had met many amiable gentlemen and very few pretentious ones. He smiled at the memory of setting out that day, with his companions all dressed in his heraldic livery. Even Thomas, his old manservant, had joined them, persuaded for the first time to don the brightly coloured clothes of a herald's entourage. He had frowned constantly, and grumbled regularly, but he too had been proud.

Clarenceux was about to turn the page when he heard a knocking sound, down below. Three clear strikes on his front door, echoing through the silent house.

Few people called after curfew. Queen Elizabeth might have abolished the law by which Protestants, religious dissidents and dangerous free-thinkers were burnt at the stake, but everyone was aware that the searches continued. Only now they searched for Catholics. A week ago a Catholic priest had been found sheltering in a house in London. The royal guard had put him in the pillory on Cornhill. In full view of the crowd, they had nailed his ears to the wood.

When the blood ran down, they smeared the word *papa* – pope – on his forehead, and laughed as they drank wine and spat it on him. After three hours they sliced off his ears and dragged him, screaming, to the Tower. No one had seen him since.

The echoing thud of metal on oak rang out again.

Clarenceux sat still. His house had never been searched before, let alone in the middle of the night. He himself had never been questioned. He had always believed a man of his rank to be above accusations of religious treason. He had led diplomatic embassies to Germany, Spain, Holland and Denmark. He had declared war on France, personally, in Rheims, on behalf of Queen Mary . . .

The knocking came again, hard, insistent.

But he was a Catholic.

He covered his face with his hands, and whispered a prayer into his palms. He did not have much time. Where was everybody? The boy servants would be sleeping in the back attic. Awdrey would be lying in bed with the baby in her cot. Annie, his daughter, would be in her room. The maidservant, Emily, and Nurse Brown would be asleep in the front attic. Thomas normally slept in the hall on the first floor, but he would think twice about answering the door at this late hour.

Again came the knocking, sounding through the house.

Clarenceux went to the door and lifted the latch. He felt a slight draught on his face. There was darkness beyond, and silence.

In his mind he saw torches by night. He saw himself manacled, being led to the Tower. He imagined the cut of the iron on his wrists, the sound of the chains. The fact he had not done anything treasonable would not save him. It

was the use of accusations, the spectacle of men being arrested, that mattered. *He* would matter, a gentleman paraded through the city in his heraldic livery, his ears nailed to the pillory – an example to the people.

Two more heavy strikes on the door.

He looked back into the candlelit room, across at the coat of arms painted on the panelling above the fireplace. They were his family arms, granted to his father, whose portrait also hung in the room. His father's sword was on one side of the fireplace, his own on the other. Like his father, who had served the old king, he was a gentleman. He had rights. But this might be the last time he would see this room. This might be the point at which he lost those rights, and all his status and property.

And so would his family.

He strode to the fireplace and took his sword from its hook on the wall. He picked up the candlestick from the table and left the chamber. The stairs creaked under his weight as he stepped down, feeling his way with his heels against the wooden steps, left hand holding the sheathed sword.

He entered the hall and raised the candle. The light was reflected in a small round mirror on the opposite wall. Further along, to his left, he could see the pile of blankets on Thomas's mattress in front of the fireplace. The fire was now just faintly glowing embers.

'Thomas?' Clarenceux called.

He heard his own deep voice fall away into the silence. He searched the shadows with the candle glow. 'Thomas, are you down here?'

The door in the wall opposite was open. Beyond were the stairs leading down to the main entrance.