The Principessa

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Extract

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A la nature si comande dome obbedinle.
If you hope to rule the power of Nature, you must first obey her.

(Friulan folk saying)

PART ONE

1

SOFIA'S RULES FOR SURVIVAL

Trust no one
Threaten no one
Hide your feelings and thoughts
Become a good liar
Avoid notice
Distrust your own desires
Smile
Keep your eyes open
Try to see with your enemy's eyes
Take special care when things go well
Be agreeable
Appear blind to the failings of others
Do not attach your heart
Be patient
Think ahead

Want to survive.

2

LA SPADA IN FRIULI, NORTH-EASTERN ITALY, MARCH 1607

'Stay!' shouted the *principessa*.

She kicked. Her horse leapt forward under her. As her attendant riders milled in confusion, her new young husband sat uncertainly on his placid mount. He was not a man for galloping.

Imagine her, at the moment that impulse seized her. Wearing the dark red boots and full split skirt of the Hungarian horsemen of the plains just to the east of La Spada, she could clamp onto the saddle like a man. She kicked again. Her black Barb mare unleashed a burst of the sudden speed for which the horses of the Barbary coast were valued. Together they flew up the slope of the mountain meadow between two flanking walls of jagged peaks, through a bright afternoon at the beginning of spring. The ground was heavy with melting snow. The cold air smelt of damp earth.

The mare had once won races carrying the *principessa*'s own colours of red and gold. Now it caught her urge for freedom and ran for the sheer joy of it.

At last! it seemed to say. Sedate for too long! At last! Whoopee!

The meadow rushed beneath the princess in a blur of pale green and gold, streaked by blue-grey patches of the last snow. The wind sucked tears from the corners of her eyes and forced cold fingers into her chest.

Flying. Flying.

She had not ridden like this since she was a child. Then, at the age of eight, she had been beaten for risking the life of the prince's only surviving legitimate heir.

All changing, all changing, all changing, said her horse's hoofs. Her thoughts scattered behind her, snatched by the wind, skimming over lurking rabbit holes, loose rocks, ice, anything that might bring horse and rider crashing down.

She heard hoof beats behind her and snatched a backward glance.

Her new husband of just two days, his face alight with ecstatic terror at his own daring, raced pell-mell after her up the meadow.

Yes!

Another glance showed her the attendants still in the distance at the bottom of the slope, still obedient to her order but stamping about in alarm at her unexpected flight. If anything happened to her, they would die.

Sofia leaned forwards, gave the horse its head entirely. The mare stretched its sure-footed stride to the very limit. Its power coiled and released under her. She floated on the glorious speed like a fragment of leaf on a snow-fed stream. She forgot rabbit holes and loose rocks. No longer *Principessa* Sofia, that sad heavy mass of ambitions, frustrations and fear, she was a light hollow shell filled only with the rush of blurred earth, the beating wind and the rhythm of her mare's hoofs.

A single thought rode with her, lightly, at the top of her mind.

Follow me! Follow me!

Her new husband, her sweet, timid, wealthy Baldassare, her unexpected gift from fate, had mastered his fear and galloped after her.

He would follow her again in other things and help her when she told him how. She had a new ally, with more life in him than she had feared on their wedding night.

Escape or rule.

Possible now, possible now, possible now . . .

Mare and girl soared to the crest of the meadow where it turned downwards and narrowed towards a mountain defile. A horseman came out of the defile and trotted lazily towards her. Sofia was already collecting up her mare and pulling it back from their shared ecstatic flight, when she recognized him. Her older half-brother, Prince Ettore.

Bad omen . . . rabbit hole.

She swung wide and cantered past him. Then alarm caught up with her. The hair rose on her neck. She reined in hard and turned in time to see the close brush of horses and Baldassare's fall. She heard the thump of his landing, saw him roll, lie winded. Then one hand waved feebly to tell her that he was still alive. His startled horse thudded back the way it had come, dragging his blue cape under its hoofs through the spring grass.

Ettore was off his horse before Sofia could reach them. He knelt beside Baldassare.

'Don't touch him!' Sofia screamed. She flung herself from her saddle.

Tenderly, Ettore lifted the younger man's head in his hands. Then he gave the head a short abrupt twist. Sofia heard a crack as if someone had stepped on a dry stick.

Ettore looked up and met her eye. 'My condolences, *principessa*. He seems to have broken his neck in the fall.'

A roar of despairing rage rose from her belly. With teeth bared and fingers turned to razors, she threw herself at him. Both of his cheeks were bleeding before the attendants could pull her off him.

3

LONDON, MARCH 1608

Francis Quoynt watched his golden fire rain down on the duke's guests packed into the formal garden on the north shore of the Thames. Black smoke swirled in the torchlight and slid between silk skirts and velvet shoulders like the probing fingers of an arriving fog.

Ashes, thought Francis. It all ends in ashes.

Glumly he watched a flight of his rockets shoot up into the night sky and explode in perfect unison, flinging out interlaced ribbons of falling stars. Well-born women gave little squeaks of mock terror and clutched at silk-clad male arms. Jewels flashed in the torchlight as soft clean hands applauded his work. He heard his name floating here and there in the hubbub of well-bred, approving voices, as clean and sharp-edged as an oak leaf. 'Quoynt!' 'Quoynt!'

He flicked a fallen smut of ash from his starched lace cuff. Melancholy sat coldly on his heart. His costly new boots pinched.

'Good evening to you also, my lord.' He ducked his head civilly to a passing figure who trailed a miasma of civet and orange water. 'Thank you for your kind words.'

He backed a little out of sight into a dark arch in the tall yew hedge.

Where had his passion gone? Even the special challenge later this evening did not excite him.

Misery had come upon him by degrees in the midst of his greatest success. He did not understand it – nor would he tolerate it. Self-pity was an indulgence for men with nothing better to occupy them.

He had no excuse for self-pity. He was above usual height, well-proportioned and still young, at the peak of his male strength. He also had the uncommon good fortune of still having all his teeth, digits and limbs. He had a fine head of fair hair like his father and, so far as he could judge, most of his wits. War had neither killed nor crippled him. He had succeeded beyond all imagining at this new peacetime trade. And if he had lost the woman he most wanted, there were others, even here in this privileged mob, who would have him if only he would take the trouble to woo. He had seen enough true misery to know that his own was a baseless fraud.

He looked down at his hands, trained to light fuses and to feel the most subtle changes whilst grinding together the ingredients of gunpowder. They looked unfamiliar now in jewelled rings. And far too clean.

The alien silk of his doublet gleamed like coal in the light of torches planted around the gardens. Pearls stitched around the cuffs of his sleeves glowed like tiny moons. His long legs were encased in yet more silk. He did not know himself any longer. He brushed another fallen smut of ash off the back of one hand.

Misery was not for a man who now had more money than he knew how to spend. It was wicked ingratitude to pine to return to leather and wool, but he did not like the price he had paid for silk.

He frowned up at a shower of white stars.

Empty show! This whole wasteful, pointless display did nothing but prove the wealth and status of his latest patron. Only two years earlier, after a youth spent in destruction, he could imagine nothing finer than to give innocent joy. But joy loses its point when you're short of it yourself.

As for innocence . . .! He scanned the crowd. There might be a faithful wife or devoted husband or betrothed virgin in that crowd, but he couldn't see any of them from where he stood.

'There you are, Quoynt!'

He had not hidden well enough. The duke's Master of Music jabbed a forefinger up towards Francis's face. 'Your bangs are drowning my music, which I composed especially for tonight! I insist that you make them quieter!'

Francis looked down at the little wriggling lapdog of a man. Hit him! Go on! Why not? His fists clenched. Why must he always behave well? Why must he always be civil to fools?

'Bangs and fireworks generally go together,' he said with a mildness that amazed him. 'I did suggest that you use drums.' Very soon, he feared, he would give in to that growing hunger to clout someone. Please God, it wouldn't be a duke. Or Cecil.

Twelve rockets fizzed up into the night sky, followed by a shock of thunder that rattled the trees and entirely drowned out the string quartet on the terrace behind the big house. Again, women screamed in false terror and clutched the nearest male arm. Again, applauding hands flickered against the unsteady orange torchlight. Rings and jewel-edged sleeve cuffs flashed.

'Stop your ungodly pyrotechnics now!' the Master of Music shrieked, rising onto his toes in fury. 'You import the reek of Satan . . .'

‘By your leave . . .’ Francis turned away towards one of his assistants who was waving urgently from the raised terrace behind the house. Silently the youth mouthed, ‘He’s here!’

Francis lifted his hand in acknowledgement, then went to alert the rest of his men, who lurked with soot-blackened faces, wearing coats of green leaves to protect them against sparks.

As their green-clad forms darted into place in the darkness beyond the torch-lit walks and central grassy promenade, a ripple passed through the guests like wind over water. The Master of Music felt it, turned and raced back to his musicians on the terrace.

With his right hand raised, holding a white handkerchief, Francis let the man have his fanfare, as far as those watery strings could ever manage a fanfare. He curled his lip. Feeble! Feeble. His ears craved the stout metallic shouts of trumpets crying ‘Onward! Onward!’ He let hand and handkerchief fall. Even now, after so many years, he held his breath.

In the next few thumps of his heart, Lady Gunpowder would decide whether to obey her would-be masters or to turn on them. She might rebel and set fire to hair and fry eyeballs like eggs, if she didn’t kill outright. In this moment, repeated again and again, he and his men risked their lives to give frivolous pleasure to men and women who did not understand what a godlike force, cousin to earthquakes and thunder, was condescending merely to entertain.

The din of battle exploded around the garden in a harmless wreath of smoke and thunder. Tonight, the Lady had obeyed. Francis breathed again.

Serpents of light twisted and writhed in a carpet of earthly fire in the flowerbeds. Squibs leapt and crackled amongst the skirts and legs. There was a blinding flash of white light.

Into this glorious mayhem, at just the right time – just as the last squib died – King James the First of England and Sixth of Scotland arrived on the terrace, revealed as if by magic after the flash, at the top of the garden steps, his arms spread to embrace the heaving sea of bowing, curtseying, cheering subjects below him.

'Good man,' muttered Francis. In spite of his black humour, he felt a small stab of satisfaction. It couldn't have gone better. Like a seasoned playhouse actor, the king had found exactly the right spot on his stage at precisely the right time.

The two torches placed by Francis lit the royal face clearly and made the king's black pearl-and-diamond embroidered suit twinkle like a clear night sky. A shower of falling stars from a trio of rockets now threw a rippling light onto the gem that lay over the king's heart, the size of a thrush's egg, visible testimony to the king's infinite wealth and power. Nested amongst the glittering constellations of royal sleeve, cuff and stocking edge, set in an intricate nest of enamel and gold, and wonderfully lit by Francis's fires, hung the King's Great Pearl.

The crowd of guests still cheered, voicing their surprise at the flattering condescension of this impromptu royal visit, for which everyone had been feverishly preparing for the last three weeks.

As he allowed the homage, his majesty studied his still-foreign subjects with a cold, assessing, intelligent eye. His protruding jaw worked slightly as if he were chewing on his tongue. Graciously, he allowed time for everyone to admire the splendour of his attire, the number and size of his rings and the many chains hanging across his chest, and to murmur how the price of the King's Great Pearl could, on its own, finance a war.

The royal eyes met Francis's, saw the fire master nod, and moved on with a gleam of gratification. Then the king leaned

to mutter into the ear of the small lop-sided man beside him. The short figure of Robert Cecil, the Earl of Salisbury and English Secretary of State, stepped out of the shadows behind his royal master and beckoned for Francis to approach. As the cheers dwindled, the *viola da gamba* player could be heard choking on the smoke.

On the terrace, Francis nodded and smiled but could not take in the king's words of praise. He was blind to the glares of the Master of Music and deaf to the whispers and murmurs of the crowd as it noted the signs of royal approval. He knew, even before Cecil asked him to wait at the water gate, that the moment he had feared for the last two years had finally arrived.

4

They sat in silence while the boatman pushed Cecil's private wherry off from the duke's water steps. They rode face to face on velvet cushions, their kneecaps almost touching, Francis with his back to the bow. As the night was fine, the sailcloth sides were rolled up and tied to the frame of the wherry's arched roof.

Francis eyed Cecil in the faint shifting light reflected off the water. The thick wool fabric and fur collar of his cloak smoothed out Robert Cecil's twisted, uneven silhouette. The high domed forehead and intelligent eyes caught orange glints from the wherry's lantern as the little man seemed to study the river. Francis felt sure that his patron could hear the pounding of his heart above the faint splashing of the oars.

'I've quite missed our evening jaunts on the Thames.' Cecil's tone suggested that this meeting was entirely social.

'I can't say that I have,' replied Francis. 'If you'll forgive me, my lord.' For two years he had been dreading the moment when Cecil would again ask to speak to him in absolute secrecy. He had known better than to hope it might never come.

'I won't say that I've missed the need.' Robert Cecil, the most powerful man in England after the king, leaned back and became a mere small lumpy shadow under the wherry's canopy.

Francis wiped damp palms on his silk-clad knees.

During those two years of waiting, they had kept up the cordial public relationship between patron and client. A relationship based, for Francis, on distrust, a degree of terror, and absolute knowledge that the little man had not done with him in his other, more hidden uses.

The rising tide tugged at the wherry as they turned upriver. Slowly, they left behind them the lights of the big houses lining the north shore of the Thames above London Bridge. With the houses, they also left behind the rich stink of the sewage that lapped at the riverbanks and sea walls.

In darkness, the flat muscular surface of the water felt infinitely wide. Beyond the leisurely comet of their own lantern, the stars of other lanterns wove an undulating net of light, from bank to bank and up and down stream.

Speak! Be done with it! Francis wiped his palms again.

They stared silently at the net of lights flung across the water. On the far shore, the lanterns hanging outside the Southwark inns raised a frail barricade against the dark void of the Lambeth marshes.

'I beg you, my lord. Spit it out!' Francis burst out, at last. 'Two years is a long time to torment a man . . . waiting for the axe to fall.'

'And why do you think you might deserve the axe?' Cecil sounded friendly enough.

'My lord, it was a mere metaphor.'

Francis glared down at the dark water that slid past the low side of the wherry and clamped his mouth shut. Cecil had that effect on most men – unsettling them into letting slip words they would rather keep mewed up.

‘Most men would have swooned at the praise you had from his majesty just now on the duke’s terrace,’ said Cecil severely. ‘I’ve kept my part of the bargain, Quoynt. Given you success, the chance to glut yourself on praise and acclaim. But you don’t wish to feast, it would seem. A different patron might consider you ungrateful.’

Francis lifted his head sharply. ‘Is my loss of appetite so clear to see?’

He knew Cecil by now. This was the prod meant to unsettle him and leave him open to the stiletto blow from an entirely different direction. But Cecil’s usual dry relish for his games seemed missing.

‘My lord . . .’

Cecil raised a small shadowy hand. ‘Spare me polite protest, Quoynt. I know very well what I’ve done for you and your family.’

Whatever else you might have done, thought Francis. And however unhappily I may have earned your favour.

For many at court, a hint from Cecil was as good as an order. For the last two years, he had been unstinting in his praise of Francis and had recommended him amongst the nobility. Under the little man’s patronage, Francis had been transformed from a military fire master, unemployed after the new peace with Spain, into an acclaimed artificer of civilian fireworks.

‘With your help, my lord, I have prospered beyond my imagining.’

Cecil snorted.

‘We are all grateful for your protection.’ By ‘we’ Francis meant himself, his father Boomer, suspected of Catholic sympathies during the horrors of the failed Gunpowder Treason, and the lovely, still-vulnerable Catholic Kate, known by Cecil to have once committed the treason of hiding a Jesuit priest. Oh, Kate . . .!

Francis thrust her from his thoughts. With such a debt, and two such hostages to the little man's pleasure, how could he grudge Cecil any service?

'My lord, please don't mistake my loss of ambition. Blame my ignorance.' The wherry rocked with his fervour to explain. Cecil gripped the sides. He could not swim.

'As a soldier,' said Francis, 'I only ever knew dukes and knights man-to-man on the battlefield. I didn't foresee how working amongst them and their ladies in their leisure at court would twist me into a false courtier.'

'You make a passable imitation of one. Is it so painful?'

'I feel like a dancing bear dressed up in a petticoat and ruff.' Too late, Francis remembered whispered gibes in Whitehall that Cecil resembled a performing monkey dressed in court robes.

There was another silence while they continued upstream, swaying gently forward and back with each surge of the oars, headed for the tiny sparks of Whitehall ahead on their right.

'I can't save you from being a courtier,' said Cecil at last. 'But I can at least offer you a very different court.' He turned again to look at the water.

Francis also pretended to stare at the water. 'Where is this court?' he asked at last.

'Patience, Quoynt.'

Francis clenched his fists on his knees in sudden rage.

Dear God, don't hit Cecil!

Cecil's manipulations swilled together with the Master of Music and all those false screaming women and perfumed, over-prinked gentlemen who deigned to permit Lady Gunpowder to perform for them like a six-penny bawdy-house whore.

'My lord, haven't I proved my loyalty and discretion? If I am to serve you again this other way, I beg you, no more

tormenting, no more toying! Just tell me what you want of me. I'll do it if I can. I'm sick to death of civil games!'

Let Cecil have his head off if he wanted it. Francis could take no more. He yanked at his starched ruff, snapped the ties and threw the accursed thing into the river. Both men watched it melt into a mess of pale floating weed.

'I had not intended to torment you, Quoynt.' Cecil sounded surprised.

And how does it feel? thought Francis viciously. To be surprised for a change?

'I merely save words.' The Secretary of State let go of the gunwales and began to gather his robes around him. 'What I will now show you would need a three-hour sermon to express.'

The collar had drifted out of sight. The oars splashed gently as the wherry began to turn. Francis heard faint cheerful shouts exchanged between two distant wherries. Dogs barked far away in the City. A fish jumped near their boat. On the closer shore, a woman's laugh could just be heard. Francis turned to look over his shoulder. They were approaching the lantern on King Henry's water stairs at Whitehall, which was the residence of the king and true seat of power in England, however much the men who sat in Parliament at Westminster might deceive themselves.