

## THE GREAT GAME

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I looked at the leather-bound book in my hands and felt worried. It had been months since I had heard from Walsingham, but there was no safe way for him to contact me: not, at least, without exposing my true identity. It felt hard to believe that almost a year had passed since I first came to Fotheringhay. As the candle beside me flickered, providing only just enough light for me to see my own writing, I hastily scrawled on the parchment that I would soon send to Walsingham.

I walked over to the dirty window and reflected on my surroundings. Miles of rolling countryside stretched out in front of the castle, without a person in sight. Since my arrival, I had loathed Fotheringhay Castle, the prison to one of the most dangerous people in the country. The Queen's indecisiveness was increasingly being seen as a weakness. Even while incarcerated, Mary was still scheming – imagining the death of our beloved Queen. But eighteen years had passed since her imprisonment, and still the Queen delayed in making a final decision to execute her, in spite of the advice of her Privy Council. I looked around me, and sadly the bare stone walls looked all too familiar, making me feel sick to my stomach. From the time that I arrived, Fotheringhay was a place that encouraged my tendency to worry.

Then I saw something in the distance, or rather *someone*. It was the silhouette of Mary, Queen of Scots. She rushed towards me and soon I saw her figure clearly.

“Eleanor?” she asked, her voice hushed. “Come with me”. Her skeletal fingers found my wrist, and before I knew what was happening she was dragging me down the hall, whispering frantically as she did so.

“This is of the utmost importance. You are forbidden to speak to anyone else of these matters – do you understand? There are people that would wish to stop me. I fear there may be servants here who are working for my enemy.” I simply nodded my head; I would not let my words get in the way of this opportunity to be admitted into Mary's inner circle. Into becoming one of the people she trusted.

Once in her bed chambers, she continued talking. “You must believe me. The throne of England is my birthright. I would rather die than see Elizabeth rule for another year.” I could feel a sea of anxiety deep in my stomach, and my throat felt so tight as if I was being choked. Was this another plot against Elizabeth's life? Surely it was my duty to protect my Queen and my country, but should I not get information first?

“There is a priest: John Ballard. He wishes to install me on the throne, and make England a Catholic country. Another man, a court attendant, is helping us. The King of Spain has also promised his assistance.” Only now did I realise the true scale of the plot. Should Spain invade us, we could lose everything, thousands would be killed. But I could not display any apprehension in my response – she must not know that I was in contact with Walsingham. But still, I must gain information. “This court attendant, what is his name?” I asked, trying to maintain my composure.

“His name is Babington. Anthony Babington.”

*Babington*. The name reverberated through my mind. I vaguely recognised the name; yes, he was often present in court. Mary looked at me, searching for any slight falter – any indication that my allegiance might belong to someone else.

“There is a problem, however. There are guards all around this castle – no one can get in, and no one can get out. I must contact my allies, they must know I am with them. I want you to take the letter to Babington, and after that he will contact Ballard. I shall have one of my men accompany you to Babington, to make sure you get there safely. However they could be recognised, and therefore must not be seen conversing with Babington.”

I tried to think – all this new information would not allow me to consider the situation easily. Once in London, perhaps I could take the letter to Walsingham? But again, if the letter did not prove Mary’s involvement in these plots, the chance would be lost. Still, I could not allow these letters to reach Babington, for that might lead to the death of my Queen. What if Babington recognised me? I knew his name, so there was a chance that he would know me, not as Mary’s maid, but as a noblewoman – a member of the Queen’s inner secret circle.

“There must be an easier way. What if someone sees me hand the letter to Babington? The entire plot shall be ruined. Would it not be easier to send the letter?”

Mary looked at me with a mixture of pity mixed with disbelief. “Do you think I have not tried that? With guards stationed at every exit to this prison, it is impossible to send letters unseen.”

This was difficult; I myself could not deliver the letters; however, Mary must be under the illusion they had arrived. What options did I have?

Then it struck me – why not deliver these letters the same way I had sent mine to Walsingham? There was little wrong with the plan: Mary would believe the letters were being sent to her conspirator, and Walsingham would see the letters this way, but I should send a letter in advance so that they were aware of my idea.

“What if we put the letters in barrels – empty beer barrels?” I said with a hushed voice, feigning excitement. “The barrels are taken out and left, I have seen it myself. We can instruct Babington to send someone to retrieve the letters and there is our problem solved.”

Throughout my speech Mary listened intently, and only now did she show a wicked smile. “Well, I should have to contact Babing ...”

“Oh, I shall arrange for him to be told” I said, interrupting her. “But now, my Lady, you look rather pale, perhaps you are coming down with a fever. Might I suggest you lie down for a while?” I gently guided her towards her bed, where she sat down. She looked rather startled, but did not object any further. “I shall come and collect you as soon as I receive word from Babington.”

I walked back down the hallway, replaying what had just happened in my mind. I wondered if Mary knew what she was doing – even she could not imagine the consequences that she would undoubtedly face. A part of me felt sad, because even though my head told me that she was a crooked player in a twisted game, she never seemed to be cruel or malicious. But still, my duty is to my country, and her intentions towards the Queen were certainly bad.

Once back in my own room, I started writing again. My hands were shaking – the castle was always cold without any fires lit, but also adrenaline was now coursing through my veins. I told Walsingham of my plan; we could intercept these letters without anyone ever knowing. I told him how this meant we could finally ensure the end of Mary’s influence, as we would now have the proof we needed.

I let some wax drip onto the letter to seal it, however I did not press my ring into that red liquid – no one could know this letter was from me. And with that, the game began.