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THE SUN KING RISES

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Translated from the French by Sue Dyson

CHAPTER ONE

Rome - Wednesday 2 February 1661, nightfall

The bells of the Château Saint-Ange were ringing out for all they were worth, announcing the evening service. A silhouetted figure hurried along the wall of the southern tower as if trying to escape the din, then crossed towards the Tiber and disappeared down the stairway which led to the riverbank. Buffeted by gusts of wind and squalls of cold rain, the shadowy willows growing against the wall now covered it almost entirely. François d'Orbay let go of the folds of his rain-soaked grey cloak. He paused for a second at the bottom of the steps, allowing his eyes sufficient time to become accustomed to the half-light, then pulled down his hood to protect his head and started walking again, along the overgrown riverbank. The boat was waiting for him, moored to a ring. Without a word, d'Orbay nodded a greeting to the boatman and jumped on board. The boatman leant across and pushed the boat away from the wall, then took the oars while his passenger settled himself on a wooden plank wedged across the stern. Borne along by the current, the boat made good progress, the boatman's skill keeping it close to the quayside, and almost invisible from the riverbank.

As they were passing Ponte Mazzini, the boatman suddenly lifted his right oar, causing the boat to lurch towards the opposite bank. The boat picked up speed in the current and was heading swiftly for the wall when, at the last moment, the boatman swung it sideways against a stone outcrop just beneath the surface of the water. The hull scraped along the quayside and the boat came to a sudden halt. Plunging his hands into the water, the boatman grabbed hold of a rope and fixed a copper snaphook to it. He signalled to his passenger to duck down.

Guided by the cable, the boat entered a tunnel where there was

barely a finger's depth of water beneath the hull. Stretched out in the boat, d'Orbay gazed up at the mossy, vaulted roof, pressing the hood of his cape over his face to protect himself from the stench of sewers that caught in his throat.

As the darkness grew more complete, the boat slowed down. The boatman's voice echoed in the tunnel:

'We are almost there, sir.'

D'Orbay did not reply; he was too busy trying to focus on the glimmer of light which had appeared in front of the boat. The air became lighter as the tunnel broadened out.

He could make out five torches mounted on the wall, and opposite them a quay of white stone with a staircase leading upwards. Leaving his guide there, d'Orbay jumped out of the boat. He walked swiftly, his boots echoing on the stone floor.

Before long he detected the muffled sounds of a conversation. A moment later, pushing aside a heavy curtain of dark velvet, he entered a room whose rich decorations contrasted strongly with the bare underground passageway he had just come through. The bare, damp stone gave way to panelling in precious woods, adorned with paintings and decorated with two large Venetian mirrors reflecting the pale light from the candles.

François d'Orbay let out a sigh of satisfaction as he saw the smiles of the six men present, who had fallen silent as he made his appearance. *Six of the fourteen*, he thought as he passed across the stone threshold. *Six who have come from England, Spain, Italy, Austria and Poland.*

They were seated in large, black-leather armchairs, all identical but one, whose back was crowned with a gilded wooden sun, and whose arms extended to form the claws of a griffon. *Five plus one*, thought d'Orbay, gazing at its occupant with a mixture of affection and respect. Giacomo Del Sarto, a faithful friend and a doctor who was capable of miracles. Giacomo Del Sarto, the great and mysterious master . . .

'I am happy to see you again, Giacomo.'

The tall, thin man he had just addressed did not answer, but signalled to him to sit down. Taking off his cloak, d'Orbay threw it onto a chair and came forward to greet each of his fellow guests.

'A thousand pardons for my lateness, my friends. The journey was not entirely without incident.'

Still without a word, Giacomo gestured that this mattered little, then leant forward to pluck the starched cover from the round table before them. Once this was removed, the marble table revealed at its centre a mosaic motif, featuring the same sun surrounded by fourteen interlinked arches.

'Now that our Brother from Paris has arrived, I propose that we get straight to the point. Some of you are no doubt wondering why I have summoned this extraordinary assembly. Would you enlighten us, François?' he added, turning to d'Orbay.

'Our information regarding Mazarin's health has been confirmed,' he replied. 'This time he really is mortally ill. No matter that his mages predict a prompt recovery; he is close to death, even if he is Chief Minister. The rats are already busying themselves behind the scenes, and Paris is buzzing with talk of his succession, in both financial and political terms. After an unofficial thirty-year reign, Mazarin is at last resolved to die.

His henchman, Colbert, is plotting in secret to conceal the origins of the old scoundrel's fortune to endow him with some semblance of honesty . . . But that is not the key issue. What matters is that this can serve our plans: the King's youth, the end of an era, the unclenching of Mazarin's iron fist, all provide us with an exceptional opportunity which may not recur for a very long time. We must therefore take advantage of it.'

D'Orbay paused, struck by a sudden thought. His gaze drifted over the dark wood walls, then stopped at one of the enormous mirrors, as if confronting his own reflection had jolted him back to what he was saying.

'We would of course have preferred less upheaval, but I am confident we will succeed. We must simply ensure that people are not stirred up too much. The recent failure of the revolution that brought down the monarchy in England and the restoration of Charles II to his father's throne mean that things may get out of control. The new King will doubtless wish to avenge his father and track down those who condemned him to death. Those of our Brothers who were involved in that affair believe they were advancing our cause, but now the whole edifice lies in ruins. For the moment that matters little. All that does matter is that this unfortunate failure should not compromise our plans in France.'

One of the participants slid forward in his chair and signalled that he would like to ask a question. With a nod, Giacomo invited him to speak.

'But is it not said that in Paris the rebels are becoming restless?'

D'Orbay frowned.

'I don't believe that for a moment. What do you think stirs the hearts of ordinary people as the Kingdom of France is in the process of changing its master? Why, the theatre, my friends: all of Paris speculates upon the fate of a new play by Monsieur Molière, who is inaugurating the Palais-Royal theatre and has promised a drama to prove his genius! A Chief Minister is dying, yet people are interested only in counting the supporters and detractors of an entertainer . . . Incidentally, I shall take advantage of my presence in Rome to meet

one of the former leaders of the Fronde, the exiled Archbishop of Paris, Paul de Gondi. I can easily gain access to him and will try to find out what his former friends and co-conspirators are planning.'

A man with a strong Spanish accent, who had remained silent up to this point, now spoke.

'All the same, should we not fear lest the young King of France seek to increase his personal power as he contemplates his English cousin?'

D'Orbay stood up with a sigh. The wooden floor creaked beneath his riding boots. He paused before a chessboard that lay on a small mahogany gaming table and Distractedly picked up an alabaster pawn, rolling it between his fingers.

'Everything is possible where crowned heads are involved . . . Young Louis, However, thinks more of ladies, hunting and music than of power - at least he has until now. He hates only conspiracies and traitors. It is up to us to avoid appearing in either of those roles.'

Replacing the pawn, d'Orbay walked back and stood behind his chair. In the flickering light of the chandeliers, his wet hair, tied back with a velvet ribbon, seemed blacker than jet. Trying to mask his impatience, he waited a moment before continuing:

'In any event, my Brothers, we no longer have a choice. Mazarin's death throes do not leave us enough time to turn back. In fact they dictate that matters must be hastened.'

His voice grew more solemn.

'We cannot risk allowing this opportunity to slip by, nor can we allow any possible public disturbances to undermine us. This is what has prompted my hurried journey from France and our meeting. I ask your pardon for not consulting any of you in advance, but we have seen too many couriers eliminated and too many secret codes broken to entrust any more serious announcements to messengers.'

D'Orbay sat down in his chair, clasped his hands for a moment, then laid them flat on his thighs as he scanned the faces turned towards him and attempted to decipher his companions' thoughts. In the silence a servant entered, drawing aside another hanging which concealed a double door. Without a word, he offered his tray of wine glasses to each man, acknowledging them all with a brief nod. D'Orbay watched him leave, his work done, then turned back to the six men seated around him.

All right, he thought, taking a deep breath, the time has come:

'My friends, as our rule demands I have come to request your authorisation for our Brotherhood to transfer the Secret which we guard to the place where we will act. .'

The Spaniard cut in once again:

'Transferring the Secret is one thing. But what of the key that enables its revelation, the key we have been seeking for so many years? What will happen if we do not find it in time? England has

shown us the risks involved when action is taken without it . . . Would it not be better to delay a while longer?’

For a moment, silence fell over the little gathering as its members eyed each other. The only sound was the sputtering of a candle as it was going out. Its flickering light emphasised the Grand Master’s hollow features, accentuating the impression of fragility which emanated from his frame.

With a sombre expression, François d’Orbay suppressed an ill-tempered gesture.

‘My friends, our Brotherhood has known of the existence of the Secret for more than five hundred years. We possess the manuscript in which it is hidden. Only the means to reveal it to the world slipped through our fingers fifteen years ago, and continues to elude us. If we possessed it, we would be able to convince the King of the legitimacy of our action. That is why we must make every effort to rediscover the key, right up to the last moment. Indeed, that is why the transfer of the coded manuscript from Rome to France is so vital.’

His voice became more impassioned.

‘But even if fate were to deny us that achievement, I am nevertheless certain that we should not draw back. As I have told you, such an opportunity may not come again. The King is still young; he is malleable, and destabilised by the imminent loss of his mentor. He trusts the man we have chosen to further our cause.’

He paused for a moment to judge the effect of his words.

‘Throughout all these years, step by step, we have established the conditions for our victory, my Brothers. To delay would be madness: believe me, our Brother Nicolas Fouquet can make the Truth prevail.’

In the profound silence that followed his speech, these last words resounded with the solemn emphasis of a ritual chant:

‘Do I have your consent, my Brothers?’

As though summoned by some silent command, a servant appeared, this time carrying a wooden urn with a round hole in it. He placed it on the table and opened a hidden drawer at the base of the urn. From it he took a leather bag, untied its strings and emptied its contents onto a small silver tray. Black and white wooden balls rolled onto the metal with a dull clatter.

The servant went round the gathering, presenting the tray to the seven men so that they could each take one white ball and one black. One by one, each man came forward to the urn and placed inside it one of the balls hidden in his hand. Then Giacomo had the urn brought over to him and opened it, slowly taking out the balls, one at a time. This done, he invited the others to observe the result of the vote. Seven identical white balls lay in a line on the mosaic of the sun.

‘So be it,’ murmured François d’Orbay. ‘The die is cast.’