

Outliers – Stories from the edge of history

Season Two, Episode Eleven

Seal of Fate

By Jon Cooper

Thomas Phelippes:

Today I meet with Mary. The words run thick between my ears. Today I must meet with Mary Queen of Scots and thrust myself towards her confidence. I must become our Queen Elizabeth's spy and Mary's link to the world outside her captivity. If I can hold myself together, I will become the sole agent for Mary's plotting. I must pour the necessary poison in her ear. My hand tightens on the strap of the litter as it bounces once again on these deeply pocked roads.

Nothing is decided, nothing is certain, I must remember this.

There's a knot of excitement and dread, a nervous, anxious little weave that causes the litter strap to dig deeper into my hand. I release it immediately. I must regain control of myself. As I do, the litter lurches once again and my head is forced, for the third time, into the wood panelled roof. I curse under my breath and that or the bang elicits a mumbled response from the litter driver but it's hard to hear the particulars over the drumming rain.

I have never met a Queen before, the feeling is curious, like stepping into the centre of the very spinning world; all are drawn to a Queens' gravity. Of course, I have seen portraits of Mary, The Queen of Scots. I have spoken at length with the



odious little Walsingham about her exile from Scotland, about her crusade to return the Catholic faith to England's shores. I have spoken about her for so long now that I feel like I know her; but I don't. One can never really know a Queen.

What I'm charged with though is unique. It is mine alone. I must desire not just to know her but to stand in the shadows of her thoughts. To take her pen and craft her dark desires against my Queen Elizabeth into a path which will lead Mary to the chopping block.

My fist is tight on the strap again. I must calm myself. I must calm myself.

The litter lurches to a halt and flicking up the blind of the litter door I can barely make out the home of The Earl of Shrewsbury through the driving rain. Where are the servants? It's pouring down with rain. A guest should be accompanied in such weather. I call out but there's no response. If I'm not accompanied soon my lateness will be taken as rudeness. I look up to the litter driver, who shrugs but does not move. Pulling up my cloak over my head I make a path to the door. Unbelievable!

I'm left to pound on the door for a minute in the driving rain. A full minute! When one of the servants does finally open the door I must go to great pains to explain my presence over the pouring rain. "I have an appointment", I say repeatedly. "An appointment with the Queen!" but I'm met with a blank faced stare. I'd expected to be received as an ally, an equal, eventually I'm permitted entrance as a matter of attrition. Eventually my appointment is recognised, as it should have



been from the very beginning, and I'm ushered, sodden I might add, into a gallery.

Straightening myself as best I can I realise I am soaked to the core but there is no altering that now and standing in the middle of the room a shiver passes through me. In a moment Mary will enter. In a moment this bedraggled retch will meet a Queen. Looking around, I work out how best to position myself. I do not wish to sit and dampen a chair so instead I stand looking out a window towards the grounds. I try to look enigmatic framed in the window but I'm simply cold. Too bloody cold. The rain hammers with the wind against the glass and while I lose myself for a moment in my thoughts; there's a dog at my heels. I dislike small dogs. I give it a small shove with my boot and it skitters away.

Time passes slowly and I shuffle from one foot to another. When finally the door opens Mary is framed in it. She's every bit the Queen and I am lost for words. Auburn locks tumble across her shoulders and down towards a simple but elegant gown. I start to speak the French which I had planned as an opening gambit but she's out ahead of me.

"I am led to understand you speak French Master Phelippes." She says, hands poised at her waist. "If it so pleases my Queen." I stammer forth; mid bow. She pulls the dog, oh god it's her dog, to an embrace; gliding into the room.

"You are wet Master Phelippes. Shall we have a fire and talk a while? I wish you to tell me of life outside this estate. It has been some years since I was allowed to step foot beyond it." I draw closer to her.



“Please, call me Thomas, though your majesty we must be sure to not be over heard.” I say, going to pet the dog which has wiggled itself free from her arms. It snaps at my fingers.

“Privacy is my chief concern Master Phelippes.” She says and for a moment there’s a knowing glimmer in her eyes.

The litter lurches forward suddenly and I’m thrown against the door frame momentarily, it barely breaks my bow. A little theatrics never hurt and as the litter turns to head down the long gravel way, towards the road. I see a last glimpse of the smiling Queen at the window. She wishes me well on my way with a simple, definitive and yet kindly nod.

Relaxing back into my seat I breathe a sigh of relief; that meeting could not have gone better. It covered all the points of my best laid plans. She had marvelled at my achievements in mathematics and linguistics. At my knowledge of the French language and culture, of her native Scotland, of her imprisonment these last few years. She opened her heart and her history to me; and all with ease. I will be frank and say my confidence was in tatters at the open of our council but with each successive moment that passed we drew closer to one another. As the servants bought wine and wood for the fire we spoke as two ordinary folk might. She was not a Queen in those moments but a human being. Almost like a sister, perhaps.

There were moments when I showed my lack of experience around nobility; of course. Small, miniscule lapses, which could have been embarrassing but instead were embraced by her as signs of my open nature.



Of course she is known to lie, to bring people easily into confidence but really she is just saying what people wish to hear. She's said to tell either side what best they need to hear to advance her agenda. It is said she will tell the Catholics one thing while still plotting with the Protestants but lying is, after all, an admirable quality. Had circumstances been different, had her Catholic faith and her treacherous desires not placed us on two sides different sides of a War then things . . . then it might . . . have been different.

The tragedies she has experienced in her life she wears with remarkable grace. She is an extraordinary individual. Graceful, teasing, of sharp intellect and wit. Within but 20 minutes of our meeting we were relaxing by the fire and speaking as if long lost friends. At points I sparred with her about her thoughts on our Queen Elizabeth, pretending to drop my guard and offering her a look which might suggest an openness to her darker designs. Alas, she was too quick, she would flatter and riposte. She was skilled to draw one in while also keeping her distance. Wisely she knew not to just trust me on a first meeting but that is to be expected. It is preferred. Soon enough she'll name me to her ladies in waiting as the preferred carrier of her correspondence and the real work can begin.

Withdrawing an apple and a knife from my bag I begin to carve out segments and mentally rehearse my discussion with Walsingham. "We rather hit it off I'd say", ignoring his ever arched eyebrow. He'll be surprised, but also impressed. "Did you ever doubt me, Sire?" I'll reply and with that said he'll start to see me in a new light. He'll see me as a man anew.

That arched eyebrow of his is never far from my thoughts. It's almost been the defining look of our relationship. He doubts me. He doubts not my ability nor my intellect, of that he sees



an equal. What he doubts is . . . Well I cannot really say. He entrusts me with some of the most important business in the land but he doubts me still. I can feel it. Perhaps that is his want though, control is best kept in doubt. As our good Queen's spy master he's both the cleverest man I have ever met and the most infuriating. He is a rapier of a man, sharpened in single purpose to protect our Queen Elizabeth and the Protestant faith. I do not envy the pressure on his shoulders but I crave the power that comes with his approval. He holds the power of life and death in this land. He alone can bring entire networks of men and women to their knees before the chopping block. He lives to undercover the plots of others and shortly I will be more than just a man that hands him the tools to achieve it. Shortly I will be his equal. His mind will be changed in this; by my actions today.

Banging on the roof of the litter I yell, "Do not spare the horses." I'll soon be back in my London and ready to begin the work proper.

Walsingham is furious. He paces the room with fervent abandon. I've been unceremoniously summoned to The Tower of London in the dead of night by him to vent his fury on me.

For some unknown reason the Queen has not chosen me as the courier for her secret communications. There could be any number of simple, practical reasons as to why but Walsingham digs down to find specific and personal ones. It is as hurtful as it is well aimed. I defend myself, as best I can, reminding him of how confident I was on leaving me meeting with Mary but when he's in this sort of mood it's best to let him soothe himself. He's right to be livid. Without a man in the middle, a go between, it will be impossible to intercept Mary's correspondence. I can understand. It was important. I am undone.



As his time of thunder and yelling subsides, he slumps into a chair facing the fire. The Tower is quiet at this time of night apart from the occasional announcement for the change of the Guard. It is cold and standing this far from the fire I struggle to think of words which may change our circumstance. With his back to me, Walsingham suddenly asks if I can set to work? Normally I'd protest at the temperature, at the lateness of the hour but his simple question at once renews and puzzles me. "What can I do Sire?"

"You weren't the only plan, you know", he states bluntly and it stabs a little at my pride. He had always aimed to introduce 'a man in the middle' and insuring against my possible failure he reveals he has devised an alternative method of intercepting Mary's secret letters. "But it is not as reliable. If you had succeeded then there would have been no need of this untrustworthy delivery."

A beer delivery tradesman, loyal to my spymaster, to be precise. Walsingham had formed a plan for Mary's letters to be hidden in the hollow of empty beer barrels bungs. These letters would be bought to him, skilfully resealed, and sent on to her co-conspirators. This way Walsingham would catch all sides of the conspiracy. It was quite simply a stroke of genius; but for one problem. "Mary writes in code", he went on "and so I still have need of your invaluable skills." My heart lifts. Mary is cunning and cautious. She is admirable. She has unknowingly kept me relevant. Thank you Mary.

Walsingham rises from his chair and motions me to sit at a desk furthest from the fire, just an added discomfort. He places the letter on the table, pinning it to place with his index finger and he instructs me that I must crack the code. Tonight.



Without so much as an adieu he's off from the room. Staring down at the letter I can immediately tell this Protestant code is strong. It is seemingly random letters and symbols. Its combinations are infinite, its cypher perhaps too strong. I have seen letters like these before and many were impossible to translate. It may as well be written in a language I cannot relate. If I fail Walsingham again, if I fail our Queen Elizabeth and the Protestant faith. If I fail . . .

Pushing back the chair I call for more candles, some ale, bread and cheese. Tonight will be a long night and I am unable to calm my mind. Even if I were to find a solution to this code then what would it mean? The letters may be of no consequence at all. They could be simple gossip or news from other lands. But then again they may be more. They may be the details of an escape, of troops mounting in Scotland to charge on our own lands; of a Catholic army mounting from France. The price of failing is too high and yet the price of succeeding may change the very course of this isle. Mary is the key to this lock somehow.

The night stretches long, and I am getting nowhere. As respite, I busy myself with other coded correspondence to translate. The ease with which these can be broken is a balm to my racing mind but all the time Mary echoes in my thoughts. I think of our hello. Our goodbye. Those simple human repetitions.

Strong in my mind is the way that Walsingham needs me, of how I am indispensable but also how he despises failure. I must focus my mind. I must.

Those simple human repetitions. Those simple human repetitions . . . Like the way he strolled from the room without



an adieu. Like meeting Mary, like bowing her farewell from the litter.

It is. Impossible.

Is that five guard changes since first this letter was thrust before me? The sun is up and the courtyard busy with activity, food is cooking and The Tower Ravens caw for scraps. I remember on my first day here one of the older Yeoman Warders boasted of knowing different birds by sight - when they all looked the same to me. Walsingham latter poured scorn on the claim, telling me that each raven has its own piece of territory around the Tower to which it returns without fail. Once you know the pattern, you can recognise the different ravens. If you can know with certainty where things stand then it is easy to hide the truth. I envy the ravens.

I'm become distracted again. I must focus. I must concentrate and yet I can't stop seeing flashes of meeting Mary. Of our hello, our goodbye. Of the ravens.

Of our hello, of our . . .

The ale is knocked flying as I seize the letter from my desk. The repetitions. The frequency. When you meet you say hello. When you leave you say goodbye. Kings to countrymen. We all do the same. When we write letters we sign our names. We . . . We . . .

All the symbols, they are all letters, all individual letters and she's been saying her name. Mary. Mary is written throughout the letter. Now I know four letters. I know four letters! Now I



can check the frequency of others. The familiarities. Wait. Not just them. The use of gender, the way we formalise the language into constants and vowels. There's patterns to it all.

The day speeds through, it is mid-afternoon before I even look up in shock and relief. The frequency of vowels became the key. Pick enough of them up and the words start to rise to the top.

Pausing for the first time in hours I straighten my back and pinch my nose. There are individual letters left to complete the work but there's enough now to read. For the first time I look at the woods and not the tree. This letter is from Mary to a man named Babington. The body of the document is simple. Babington proposes invasion. He proposes rescue of Mary. He proposes the dispatching of the 'usurper Queen Elizabeth' by six noble gentlemen. He means to kill the Queen . . . This single page is infinitely heavy now.

I must inform Walsingham I must tell him that Mary Queen of Scots has . . . The power is mine now. A power few know. Kings, Queens, Walsingham. I am unsure of how to feel. I am the sole man outside of their plot to know the truth. By submitting this paper I will uncover Mary's treachery. But Walsingham's first question will be, how can we find the identity of these six men? If I can hand him the entire plot rather than just Mary herself then I would be more than just the tool. I would prove myself decisive.

If I were to I take up my quill. If I were to forge a question in Mary's hand, to ask for the names of the six 'noble' men. Then all would out. This will mean her head and likely theirs. They would be found and dragged to cell in the depth of the Tower. They would be placed upon the rack, or worse. They would



have their bodies torn from . . . Mary would be arrested. They would erect a scaffold in the centre of a room, place linen on its top and in the very centre, pride of place, would be a chopping block.

People like to dress up death in words and flowers, use turns of phrase like 'losing their head' but the truth is more bloody and practical. It is an oft used wood block, steel and the promise of a pressured man, half drunk, to hit the mark. It is the violent act, the blood on linen. Into the world, as out.

Though nothing is signed and sealed till I choose. Nothing is decided, nothing is certain, I must remember this. I could choose not to condemn Queen Mary and these men, to their deaths. But in doing so I would become part of their plot. I would deny myself the grace of my Queen, my god and the proof of my ability to act.

I take up my quill. I write in Mary's hand, following her code. "I will be glad to know the names and qualities of the six gentlemen, who are to accomplish the designment."

I am to become a man who met a Queen and who killed her just as surely as if I put my hand upon the axe itself. I can hear my heartbeat echo in my chest. I feel like a child caught misbehaving by a mother. The Queen I met will die with my revelation of this letter. I have succeeded. I have become her architect of death.

I feel a swell of pride.

I feel powerful.

I feel a hole open up in me that will never close.

