

Part One

*Copenhagen, 1629*



*Lilac and Linden*

A lamp is lit.

Until this moment, when the flame of the lamp flares blue, then settles to steady yellow inside its ornate globe, the young man had been impressed by the profound darkness into which, upon his late-night arrival at the palace of Rosenborg, he had suddenly stepped. Tired from his long sea journey, his eyes stinging, his walk unsteady, he had been questioning the nature of this darkness. For it seemed to him not merely an external phenomenon, having to do with an actual absence of light, but rather as though it emanated from within him, as if he had finally crossed the threshold of his own absence of hope.

Now, he is relieved to see the walls of a panelled room take shape around him. A voice says: 'This is the *Vinterstue*. The Winter Room.'

The lamp is lifted up. Held high, it burns more brightly, as though sustained by purer air, and the young man sees a shadow cast onto the wall. It is a long, slanting shadow and so he knows it is his own. It appears to have a deformity, a hump, occurring along its spine from below the shoulder-blades to just above the waist. But this is the shadow's trickery. The young man is Peter Claire, the lutenist, and the curvature on his back is his lute.

He is standing near a pair of lions, made of silver. Their eyes seem to watch him in the flickering gloom. Beyond them he can see a table and some tall chairs. But Peter Claire is separate from everything, cannot lean on any object, cannot rest. And now, the lamp moves and he must follow.

'It may be', says a tall gentleman, who hurries on, carrying the light, 'that His Majesty, King Christian, will command you to play for him tonight. He is not well and his physicians have prescribed music. Therefore, members of the royal orchestra must be ready to perform at all times, day and night. I thought it best to advise you of this straight away.'

Peter Claire's feelings of dismay increase. He begins to curse

himself, to berate his own ambition for bringing him here to Denmark, for taking him so far from the places and people he had loved. He is at the end of his journey and yet he feels lost. Within this arrival some terrifying departure lies concealed. And suddenly, with peculiar speed, the lamp moves and everything in the room seems to rearrange itself. Peter Claire sees his shadow on the wall become elongated, stretching upwards for a few seconds towards the ceiling before being swallowed by the darkness, with no trace of it remaining.

Then the end of a corridor is reached and the gentleman stops before a door. He knocks and waits, putting a finger to his lips and leaning close against the door to listen for the command from within. It comes at last, a voice deep and slow, and Peter Claire finds himself, in the next minute, standing before King Christian, who is sitting in a chair in his night-shirt. Before him, on a small table, is a pair of scales and by these a clutch of silver coins.

The English lutenist bows as the King looks up and Peter Claire will always remember that, as King Christian first glimpses him in this dark middle of a winter's night, there comes into His Majesty's eyes a look of astonishment and, staring intently at the lute player's face, he whispers a single word: 'Bror.'

'I beg your pardon, Sir . . . ?' says Peter Claire.

'Nothing,' says the King. 'A ghost. Denmark is full of ghosts. Did no one warn you?'

'No, Your Majesty.'

'Never mind. You will see them for yourself. We are one of the oldest nations on earth. But you should know that it is a time of storms here, of confusion, of incomprehension, of bitter boiling muddle.'

'Of muddle, Sir?'

'Yes. This is why I am weighing silver. I weigh the same pieces over and over again, to ensure that there is no error. No *possibility* of error. I am trying, piece by piece and day by day, to reimpose order upon chaos.'

Peter Claire does not know how to reply to this and he is aware that the tall gentleman, without his noticing, has gone from the room, leaving him alone with the King, who now pushes the scales aside and settles himself more comfortably in the chair.

King Christian lifts his head and asks: ‘How old are you, Mr Claire? Where do you come from?’

A fire is burning in the room, which is the *Skrivestue*, the King’s study, and the small chamber smells sweetly of applewood and leather.

Peter Claire replies that he is twenty-seven and that his parents live in the town of Harwich on the east coast of England. He adds that the sea in winter can be unforgiving there.

‘Unforgiving. Unforgiving!’ says the King. ‘Well, we must hurry on, pass over or skirt around that word. *Unforgiving*. But I tell you, lutenist, I am tortured by lice. Do not look alarmed. Not in my hair or on my pillow. I mean by cowards, rascals, liars, sots, cheats and lechers. Where are the philosophers? That is what I constantly ask.’

Peter Claire hesitates before answering.

‘No need to reply,’ says the King. ‘For they are all gone from Denmark. There is not one left.’

Then His Majesty stands up and moves towards the fire where Peter Claire is standing, and takes up a lamp and holds it near the young man’s face. He examines the face and Peter Claire lowers his eyes because he has been warned not to stare at the King. This King is ugly. King Charles I of England, King Louis XIII of France, these are handsome men at this perilous moment in history, but King Christian IV of Denmark – all-powerful, brave and cultured as he is reported to be – has a face like a loaf.

The lutenist, to whom, by cruel contrast, nature has given an angel’s countenance, can smell wine on the King’s breath. But he does not dare to move, not even when the King reaches up and tenderly touches his cheek with his hand. Peter Claire, with his blond hair and his eyes the colour of the sea, has been considered handsome from childhood. He wears this handsomeness lightly, frequently forgetting about it, as though almost impatient for time to take it away. He once overheard his sister Charlotte praying to God to be given his face in exchange for hers. He thought, it is really of little value to me; far better it were hers. And yet now, in this unfamiliar place, when his own thoughts are so sombre and dark, the lute player finds that his physical beauty is once again the subject of unexpected scrutiny.

‘I see. I see,’ whispers the King. ‘God has exaggerated, as He so often seems to do. Beware the attentions of my wife, Kirsten, who is a fool for yellow hair. I advise a mask when you are in her presence. And all beauty vanishes away, but of course you know that, I needn’t underline the self-evident.’

‘I know that beauty vanishes, Sir.’

‘Of course you do. Well, you had better play for me. I suppose you know that we had your Mr Dowland here at court. The conundrum there was that such beautiful music could come from so agitated a soul. The man was all ambition and hatred, yet his ayres were as delicate as rain. We would sit there and blub, and Master Dowland would kill us with his furious look. I told my mother to take him to one side and say: “Dowland, this will not do and cannot be tolerated,” but he told her music can only be born out of fire and fury. What do you think about that?’

Peter Claire is silent for a moment. For a reason he can’t name, this question consoles him and he feels his agitation diminish by a fraction. ‘I think that it is born out of fire and fury, Sir,’ he says, ‘but also out of the antitheses to these – out of cold reason and calm.’

‘This sounds logical. But of course we do not really know where music comes from or why, or when the first note of it was heard. And we shall never know. It is the human soul, speaking without words. But it seems to cure pain – this is an honest fact. I yearn, by the way, for everything to be transparent, honest and true. So why do you not play me one of Dowland’s *Lachrimae*? Economy of means was his gift and this I dote upon. His music leaves no room for exhibitionism on the part of the performer.’

Peter Claire unslings his lute from his back and holds it close against his body. His ear (in which he wears a tiny jewel once given to him by an Irish countess) strains to hear, as he plucks and tunes. King Christian sighs, waiting for the sweet melody to begin. He is a heavy man. Any alteration of his body’s position seems to cause him a fleeting moment of discomfort.

Now Peter Claire arranges his body into the stance he must always adopt when he performs: leaning forward from the hips, head out, chin down, right arm forming a caressing half-circle, so

that the instrument is held at the exact centre of his being. Only in this way can he feel that the music emanates from him. He begins to play. He hears the purity of the sound and suspects that this, alone, is what will count with the King of Denmark.

When the song is over he glances at the King, but the King doesn't move. His wide hands clutch the arms of the chair. From the left side of his dark head falls a long, thin plait of hair, fastened with a pearl. 'In springtime,' Christian says suddenly, 'Copenhagen used to smell of lilac and of linden. I do not know where this heavenly scent has gone.'

*Kirsten Munk, Consort of King Christian IV of Denmark: From Her Private Papers*

Well, for my thirtieth birthday, I have been given a new Looking-glass which I thought I would adore. I thought I would dote upon this new Glass of mine. But there is an error in it, an undoubted fault in its silvering, so that the wicked object makes me look fat. I have sent for a hammer.

My birthday gifts, I here record, were not as marvellous as the givers of them pretended they were. My poor old Lord and Master, the King, knowing my fondness for gold, gave me a little gold Statue of himself mounted on a gold horse and bearing a gold tilting pole. The horse, being in a prancing attitude, has his front legs lifted from the ground, so that the foolish thing would fall over, were it not for a small Harlequin pretending to run beside the horse, but as a matter of fact holding it up.

And furthermore, I didn't ask for yet another likeness of my ageing husband. I asked for gold. Now, I will have to pretend to love and worship the Statue and put it in a prominent place et cetera for fear of causing offence, when I would prefer to take it to the Royal Mint and melt it into an ingot which I would enjoy caressing with my hands and feet, and even take into my bed sometimes to feel solid gold against my cheek or laid between my thighs.