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Power of a Woman. Memoirs of a turbulent life: Eleanor of Aquitaine

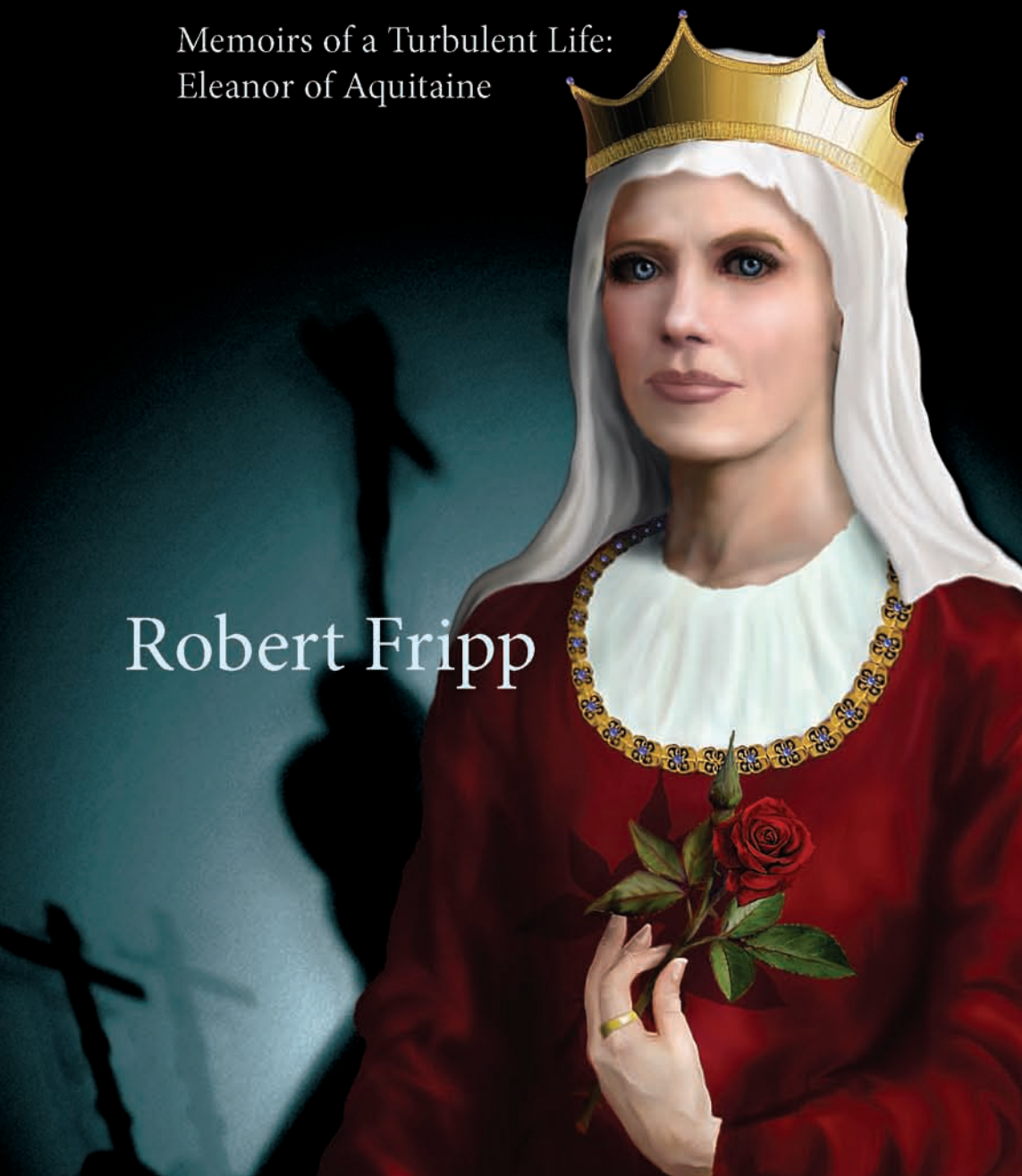
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POWER OF A WOMAN

Memoirs of a Turbulent Life:
Eleanor of Aquitaine

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Readers can find a full timeline of Eleanor's life at RobertFripp.ca.

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CONTENTS

INTRODUCTION	viii
PART I. FATED FOR FRANCE	
1. The Royal Road from Aquitaine (1122-1137)	13
2. Oh Paris, would that you were Poitiers! (1137-1141)	24
3. Trouble at Bourges; fire and the sword assail Champagne (1141-1144)	32
4. Crusade (1144-1147)	40
5. Ambush, flood, ambush again (Winter 1147-1148)	49
6. Antioch, of precious memory (Spring 1148)	57
7. Jerusalem, a pause in time (1148-1149)	67
8. In peril on the sea (1149)	76
9. Rescued from the sea; from Louis, no escape (1149-1150)	80
10. Fond thoughts on Fontevrault	88
11. Annulled: fifteen years and one marriage (1151-1152)	92
PART 2. DESTINED FOR ENGLAND	
12. Of marriage and love, estates far apart (1152-1153)	103
13. An inter-regnum at Angers (1153-1154)	110
14. I, Aleānor, by the wrath of God, queen of the English (1154-1155)	118
15. Enter a rival, Thomas Becket (1155)	128

16. Splendor, the subtle servant of diplomacy (1158)	138
17. Toulouse and other turmoils (1159-1160)	144
18. Theobald's death rings out the old (1161-1162)	148
19. From love to hate: a bridge soon crossed (1162-1164)	156
20. Escape, pursuit, rebuke (1164)	167
21. Becket: blast and counter-blast (1165-1166)	171
22. A brief digression on Fair Rosamond (1165-1176)	177
23. A parting of two ways (1167)	181
24. Towards an end-game: bishop versus king (1169-1170)	186
25. Murder in the cathedral (1170)	191

PART 3. A WOMAN ALONE

26. Poitiers and the Court of Ladies (1168-1173)	199
27. Feeding the hungry falcons (1171-1173)	210
28. Mars conquers Venus. Banished to England (1173-1174)	223
29. Henry settles accounts. Castle checks queen, king prevails (1174)	233
30. Sundry trials and injuries (1177-1179)	239
31. Philip and Louis, waxing and waning (1179-1180)	242
32. The past was nobler than today (1182)	246
33. The nearer in blood the bloodier. Conflict from Caen to Limoges	252
34. The survivors play the game, again (1186)	263
35. A well-timed diversion: Crusade (1183-1188)	267

36. Knight takes king (1189)	276
37. A new yoke and new burdens for England (1189-1190)	280
38. Curious diversions in Sicily (1190-1191)	287
39. Strife transposed to Palestine (1191-1192)	296
40. Queen Aleānor, the bastion of empire (1191-1194)	305
41. A settling of scores (1194-1195)	324
42. Is there justice in heaven? (1196-1199)	336
43. Birth, marriages and deaths (1199)	355
44. Isabella plays Helen, the Angevins play Troy (1200-1202)	374
45. Faltering, fading light (1203-1204)	384
BIBLIOGRAPHY	389
ΕΠΙΠΟΤΕΣ	390
ABOUT THE AUTHOR	395

POWER OF A WOMAN
MEMOIRS OF A TURBULENT LIFE:
ELEANOR OF AQUITAINE

INTRODUCTION

Eleanor of Aquitaine, that toughest, most resilient of women, dictates her memoirs to a young secretary, Aline. They begin “around Ash Wednesday” (19 February 1203, Julian calendar). Eleanor has retired in her eighty-first year, either to her capital city, Poitiers, or to the abbey she cherished, at Fontevrault.

The former queen, first of France, then England, was wife to two kings, the monkish Louis VII of France, and the hot-tempered, law-giving warrior Henry II of England. With Louis, Eleanor went on Crusade and gave birth to two daughters. With Henry, she rebuilt England, governed their growing Angevin empire and gave birth to too many sons. Leaving Henry, she returned to Poitiers where her Court of Ladies promoted the cause of women. Her subsequent role in fomenting her sons’ rebellions against their father is debated, although Henry II himself had no doubts: he exiled Eleanor to England until he died. She was 67 when she became regent of England for her crusader son, Richard the Lionheart; 71, when she raised a ruinous burden of taxes to pay Richard’s ransom, at the same time crushing support for a coup by her younger son, John. She was 78 when she crossed the Pyrenees in mid-winter to fetch her granddaughter, Blanca (Blanche of Castile), as a bride for the heir to France.

Through John, Eleanor became the mother of England’s Plantagenet dynasty and an ancestor to many royal houses. Her hard, intransigent presence set a precedent that would make it easier for women to accede to the English throne. (The Salic Law barred female succession in Europe.)

A few facts about Eleanor's secretary slip into her text as Aline struggles to keep up with the flow of her mistress's words. Born around 1188, Aline was raised in Normandy. Unusually, she could write; and, after her service to Eleanor, she was destined to marry an Anglo-Norman landowner and live out her days in England.

The poetry of the troubadours, the first of whom was Eleanor's grandfather, makes clear that her name was pronounced Aleänor (Allay-anor). That is how *Power of a Woman* spells it.

Robert Fripp
Toronto, 2010

I. THE ROYAL ROAD FROM AQUITAINE 1122-1137

A line, Aline, write faster, child! The ebbing measure of my life must soon be spent. While God still gives me breath I would breathe words before eternal silence clasps me in its fold.

I should have started this long ago. No matter. Life was for living; bloodless recall is better suited to old age. That must be why it pleases our Lord to preserve my wizened carcass: he goads me in my dotage to recount my road-soiled journey through the wiles and wayward byways of mankind.

So write, Aline! I shall ramble from time to time, as old age will have it. Nevertheless, you shall be my inky voice, my steed upon the road of time. Take down my words, the only lasting currency of passing flesh. Until this account is written you will be my shadow in the sunshine and the wraith beside me when we walk in shade. And when I stop to catch my breath, make sure you dip your quill.

I was sired by Guilhem the Tenth, duke of Aquitaine and count of Poitou,¹ in 1122, the fourteenth year of King Louis the Fat; out of Anor, the daughter by a previous marriage of my grandfather's second wife, the former countess of Châtellerault. In one respect things were then as they are now: the fate that a noble family feared worse than disgrace was the division of its estates. That was why my grandfather, who was called the Troubadour,² put his son and heir by his first wife to his stepdaughter by the second. Both were of one family—but not of one blood!

Thus I was born, to duty before privilege, for such is the house of Aquitaine. Not a week went by but my nurses would instruct me, and later my ladies and my tutors, that the word *droit* entails duties before it bestows rights.

And so it was. From spring until past harvest time we were on the road, we females as cumbrous decorations, while my father the duke's court moved from town to castle, castle to town, dispensing justice, collecting taxes, issuing warnings and warring rebellious vassals.

I see a vision still, of men-at-arms beyond the dark stone mullions of a window, flashes off bright helmets graven in my head as they ride off to inflict prudence on some Gascon vassal, a lord made over-proud by the fastness of his fortress hedged about by deep ravines. How old was I the day I scaled my father's mounting block and begged to be swept up in the sparkling embrace of his chain-girt arms? How cold he felt. Even in the heat of summer his iron arms were colder than the stones I had just climbed. And yet he was just—a man of justice and of learning and, though the remoteness imposed by high office served to conceal emotion, he was a man who loved.

Thus we traveled, from the Loire to the Pyrenees; from the Massif—nay, from Auvergne—to the piney barrens of Les Landes, where trees dissipate the summer heat and stifle sound. A great baron's court puts more miles behind its feet in the traveling season than a tinker. There

were days when Pétronille and I looked down from our upholstered cart and envied the roadside waif his hut. It was his stationary place we craved, not his station.

Ah, Time, you thief in the storehouse of memory! The many bends along the highroad of my life conceal the vistas between this fleeting moment of pure being and ancient recollections coursing like deerhounds through my brains. In a life of fourscore years and more, who can look so far back? So many rivers crossed; too many days. The very richness of experience crowds and clouds the brains. Whole years are banished. Other memories have stamped themselves into my mind as if they were illuminations, painted for posterity upon the wind-whipped pages of a book: now seen, now gone again. Memory can be a stranger in its own house. Or do I mean estranged from its own house? I struggle to recall the crucial things, while trivia come clothed in gilt and shining colors and the fashions of the day.

Do all one's memories speak truth? Some must be wishes masked as recollections, borne as fact upon the current of old time. The loneliness of age bestows one singular advantage: no mortal body from my generation lives to contradict what I shall say.

So write me truly, child! Whether they be false or fact the memories I dictate shall, piercing like an arrow through the mirages of time, one day attain the stature of old truth.

Of my mother I have scant recall. She died when I was eight. My brother, too. Mother was a dainty soul: a woman of her day, they said. She had no reason to connive beyond the limits of her circle: such business was for men. There was an afternoon we sat among the weeds beyond the jousting yard at, I think, Poitiers, and she crowned us both with daisy chains.

Long ago I stopped pretending I truly knew her. But I have invented her, and after such a span of time, is there a difference? Which swish of silk was she? Which waft of lavender as ladies came and, laughing, touched my cheek as I sat, holding court, lounging at the table that was Nana's massive breast? "Aleñnor, this is Lady So-and-so." "Aleñnor, this is the Countess of the Loire." "Aleñnor, this lady is Anor, your mother."

Shall I meet her when I close my eyes at last? No, Aline, don't speak. You are not God to know.

That was my first world. I was fifteen years old when my second world fell apart. I don't recall whence came the news: surely from Galicia, but maybe it was Paris. I received a party of knights and emissaries in my hall at Bordeaux. God, how they stank from riding thirteen hour days in summer heat. Sixty-six years later I still smell them; and my mind's eye can still recite the devices on their tabards, rust-dark as they were, for in the party's haste to bring us news they had sweated through their chain-mail days on end. But even at the time their faces were blank walls, for I was numb. I remember a long, still moment of poise—a woman of my birth betrays no hint of fear or sorrow—while I cast a stern mask of thanks-for-duty-done upon the gathered faces of still sterner messengers. I bid Old Ferat bring them drink and meat; of courtesy I gave redundant orders in their hearing for their comfort and the stabling of horses; then I withdrew, too much in haste, to the womb of my chamber and a flood of tears and anger that I knew must never stop. God, how I mourned him, savagely, as a woman rips the flesh of a treacherous lover. Thirty-eight years old. How dare my father die, at wars with half his vassal-lords, every man of them nibbling at Aquitaine and tearing at Poitou. For days I starved myself, rent garments, bedding, veils.

Father died on Good Friday during a pilgrimage to Compostela. God grant his great soul peace. It has always seemed incredible to me that

news of his death was such a sensitive weapon of state that the secret was preserved for better than a month, his retinue sworn to silence.

Then the madness of the greater world, the male world, beat down the doors again. Rumors anew: an army was spurring towards us through the burning days, from Paris. King Louis lusted for us. That we knew. Father had been a less than scrupulous vassal to his king.

Who or what brought me around, I know not. Wet-eyed women everywhere, more in fear for the future than in sorrow for Father. My ladies, washerwomen, maids, tutors, all leveled in an alliance of gender against an iron, bearded world. My bed became the throne for misery and mutual support. Perhaps that was when I decided I prefer the company and courts of women.

When I was calmer, statecraft I had learned in lessons long before was dusted off, explained again. Our lands were greater and richer than those of France. Our Duchy was as great as the Angevin empire and its lands in Normandy, not counting its overseas province, England. Our lands were such a prize that, if either the King of France or the Count of Anjou should master us, the victor would thereby put the pincers on the other. We were a land of inestimable wealth commanded by a weeping girl, a tethered chicken inviting foxes.

That crafty, well-guided devil King Louis learned of Father's passing soon enough. I would in time gain great respect for his advisors. But during those first alarms we knew only that my father the duke was dead, and that rumors of an army outran the French king's cavalry from Paris.

In that same week there came a moment like no other in my life, before or since. The household had been in mourning some three days, maybe four. I stood on the walls, watching the dying sun cast burning amber lights upon the rippled face of the Garonne. My tears were spent, my body racked by hunger, ravaged by exhaustion, shivering with sleeplessness and fear. I never suffered vertigo, but suddenly I was clutching at stone and gasping for breath. Russet ripples of the river turned to fire,

enveloped me, and yet I found that I could neither cry nor call, though I was being sucked away. My hands began to shake, my teeth to clench and chatter till I thought that I would surely bite my tongue. I have often wondered how long that parlous state of unbeing lasted. I have lain with men—nay, kings—as virgin and as wife and never known a morsel to compare with that unbidden hour.

Don't blush, Aline, your turn will come, and disappointment follow.

In that instant all my senses drained away, all feeling, too, and with it all my doubts and frailty. How strange to stand there, grasping the parapet, smitten by the thought that I was afflicted by the falling sickness, thinking I might lose my grip and tumble down. And yet I felt no fear, for in that moment God, for surely it was He, instructed me that He would give me strength for ever. Before the sun had fully set I roused myself to courage the troops. That was the first time I commanded men: it was far from being the last.

They say hunger and sleepless nights conspire to cause that sort of inward light. Fathers of the Church—nay, John the Baptist and Christ himself—have wrested wisdom and visions from fasting in a wilderness. Perhaps my experience on the parapet was of that nature, the product of an inward wilderness born from days of mortal hunger and mental strain: it was as close as I have come to a damascene moment of epiphany. It has been a useful instrument. Thank God it left me with the life-long mettle to prevail.

Where was I? Ah yes, prevail. When calmer heads prevailed it became clear that King Louis' embassy intended not to bury me, but to marry me. After that evening on the parapet I was certain to my very bones that I was born to rule. I would have achieved the rank of queen without the whim of a pig!

You smile behind your hand, Aline. Have you not heard the tale?

Louis the Fat's elder son and heir was Philip. Philip had been born to grace; Philip had been bred to rule. By all accounts Philip was wise in learning, skilled in diplomacy, accomplished in arms, in the etiquette of courtly ways and at ease when conversing with women. He was riding one day, escorted, of course, when a sow waddled out of the Seine and thrust her muddy carcass under his horse. What use were splendid knights in all their trappings, set against a pig? That was the end of Philip.

And that was the making of me.

Never fear mighty men, child. They are dumb beasts. It's accidents make history.

In those days the rules of noblesse were stricter than they are today. Younger sons of noble houses were not allowed to marry, lest they and their heirs made claims against their families' estates. Primogeniture was everything. So King Louis' second son, Young Louis, had been packed off at a tender age to the monastery at Notre Dame. Life on his knees, prayers ten times a day, mindless discipline attained through exhaustion imposed by the rule of bells, a diet of guilt and penance for sins he had neither the imagination nor opportunity to commit, and a thorough disgust for the agents of sin, we women. Mark me, he seldom saw one, saving likenesses of the Blessed Mary. Naturally he had a special disgust for women's *parts*. That was young Louis' lot, my Louis, until he was twelve.

Then Philip was killed at the hest of a pig, and Louis was hauled away from his missals and expected to unlearn the habit of humility, to be readied for his father's throne.

Louis-the-Son's limitations were explained to me almost from the hour when Louis-the-Father's force encamped, in splendor, on the far bank of the Garonne. The king himself, sick unto death, had sent as emissaries to my maiden corpus the five hundred richest, most puissant barons and knights in his lands. All this to woo me, and my duchy, into the iron embrace of France. It was the coming of these magnificent men whom we, in Bordeaux, had feared as a raiding army.

Out of consideration for our fears, few among those mighty lords ventured at first to cross the river. They thought that *en masse* they might overwhelm me. Louis' ambassadors were assured in their power, if not their language. To our ears they spoke a garbled tongue, unlike our *langue d'oc*. But this is a detail. That first day, no less than Thibault of Champagne and the king's own cousin Raoul craved audience. Always present, and always leading while seeming to follow, was Abbé Suger, all-hearing, all-seeing, his senses keen to every nuance. Suger had been the coursing-hound and shadow of King Louis' life and reign, his wisest counselor, his truest friend. Such was the importance of this embassy to my humble self, I later discovered, that King Louis had ordered Suger to attend me at Bordeaux although both men must have known that the abbot would never see the dying king again.

I learned from Suger that my father, on his deathbed, had appealed to Louis the Fat to take me under his protection and to put me to marriage wisely. Extraordinary. Father's life was a chaos of unplanned feuds and muddled action. Not till he lay dying did he formulate a plan.

Ah, Suger. How can I express that man, Aline? How does a celibate monk put marriage to a maiden, explain her prospects, joys and duties in her husband's world, and speak of children and the getting of them, hinting all the while at what befalls a woman in her marriage bed? Somehow Suger accomplished all these tasks in my own hall, guiding me imperceptibly away from the battle-freighted glory of the barons.

Those iron men of France found me self-possessed. Yes, I can say that, for so I had been reared. I understood the arts of song and dance, the eloquence of argument and logic, and I could parse a ballad in Latin or French as well as any man, including Grandfather. I had traveled the world throughout, such a world as my forebears knew. I had seen much, visited much, and had all manner of experience to choose from. I had much to compare, and what is judgment if not a juggling of comparisons?

These mighty men came from Paris expecting to meet a trembling maiden. They found instead a fifteen-year-old duchess whose moment of epiphany had strengthened her resolve beyond all men.

Listen to me carefully, Aline, for I can teach you much about the feral state of men, the “better” sex, as legalists and prelates would have us human souls believe.

A knight who holds a weapon ties his hands. He must either strike or be encumbered by his load. Thus he loses his own freedom to be free. A woman may command with empty hands for she is free to use such weapons as she will. Let her choose words, for darts wound faster than a sword. Let her choose frailty, for limpid mud mires heavy cavalry. Let her choose the sheen of silk, for silk attracts as iron repels. Let her choose allure, for thereby she can sap resistance. Let her seem foolish, for men accede to women’s seeming folly. Let her be subtle, for subtlety will always out-manuever strength. Women are as water wearing rock.

Suger knew something of my power for he, too, stored his weapons in his head. We were a match, Suger and I. The others could but wonder as I entertained at meat. I was the female infant sitting at the head of the board in her father’s and her grandfather’s place, cushioned to see above the viands, upholding with gay laughter all the sunlight and the breezes of our western lands against the gloomy glory that was France.

A moment more, Aline, then you can rest.

Let me speak of Young Louis. Poor sweet Louis, you were two years older than I, but your cloistered life had ill prepared you for a future free of walls. Two weeks we jousting in each other's company, waiting to be wed. Two weeks we rode and talked together, exploring all the ancient wonders of Bordeaux. Did you desire me, Louis? No, you dared not. Despite your tranquil front you feared that hell's flames waited in a woman's arms. You feared my body as a harbinger of mortal sin. You feared the freedom of my spirit as if it were the poisoned apple plucked at Eden, a fruit from which you dared not bite. You had been freed from the cloister five years before you met me, but you were never free of guilt. No, never, so long as I knew you. How those clerics flayed your naked brains.

As for me, I was born to be allied with a noble house, and there were few more noble than my own. Was it to be Anjou, or France? My frail person was a weapon of more power than all the iron armies in the land. Ten thousand men-at-arms caparisoned for war counted for less than my consent.

To smile at you, Louis, was but to smile at destiny. Why else had God caused me, a female, to be the eldest issue of a duke? Why else had God seen fit to call my brother Guilhem Aigret home to Paradise? Had my father lived he would have done what I did of my own free will. He would have wed me to you, Louis, thereby alliancing Poitou and Aquitaine to France, though Father would have hedged the marriage contract with many more constraints. I had traveled, Louis. I had seen a portion of the world and wondered at the mysteries of peoples, arts and poetry. I saw your life and future crown as a step forward in my own subject people's onward march.

Archbishop Geoffroi of Loroux married us on a Sunday, one of the hottest days of the year. Mass, and marriage in the cathedral of

St. André. A sumptuous wedding breakfast was rather spoiled—Louis was easily shocked—because when we appeared in the arch of the royal portal the crowd began shouting “plen-ty, plen-ty” as if I were a sow to farrow offspring by the litter. In that respect I failed him. As we walked among the crowd the chanting pounded out a rhythm which I, in my virginity, did not identify. Louis, how you despaired the lewdness of our ordinary folk.

We rose in haste from breakfast, and all but fled Bordeaux. The French numbered but five hundred, plus their households, and we feared our rebel vassals in the chaos of the times. Word had it that those who so conspicuously missed our wedding might still greet us, with an ambush on the road. What richer prizes could they ransom than their duchess with her husband, the heir to France, and all the leading nobles of that land?

Our French escort awaited us below the Larmont hills across the blessed Garonne. I think we put sixty miles behind us on the road to Saintes before our captains felt secure.

It was at Taillebourg that Louis and I, shall we say, discovered each other. For him to love me in that way was a betrayal of everything the monks had stuffed into his baby head. In my innocence I had to instruct him, and what did I know? When he at last plucked up sufficient courage to explore my female parts it was as if he were defiling Stations of the Cross.

Courage, Aline, we'll soon be done!

Louis spent more hours upon his knees that night than in our nuptial bed. Never mind. Despite the heat and prayers the thing got done. It was then that my mind connected with the chanting of the crowd. No wonder the ancients versified their poetry of love in long-short feet. A man at labors in a bed moves not unlike the pulse of running meter.

And now I tire. Pull that screen across the sun and leave me. Go rest your hand, Aline. I need to sleep.

2. OH PARIS, WOULD THAT YOU WERE POITIERS! 1137-1141

Good morning, Aline. I had a dream last night, the most vivid I have summoned in twenty years. Does that sound strange to you? Perhaps the effort of dragging forth the past by day will set its mark upon my nights as well.

I cannot tell if you stammer and blush because you are overly impressed by my rank, by the angel of fair fortune who guards my life, or by the press of years that weigh on me in age. To tell the truth, there are days I marvel at my life myself. I wonder at the smile of God that guided me so far along the way.

Some weeks ago I was watching when two women discovered a leaf which, long before, had been used to mark a place between the sheets of an ancient book. It had lain there for decades before they found it, loyal to the place of a time-lost reader, stiff in age and parched by the astringent march of years.

A sear leaf. There, I liken my frame to a leaf! I should have retorted: that leaf still gives expression to the color and the richness of the

sapful spring that raised it from the earth. Look at these blotched, clawed hands! Hands that wore the signet of two Duchies and the *alliances*³ of two kings.

Even so, the best of histories weighs heavily. Sometimes I fear to travel to the past lest melancholy overwhelm me. Dark humor is a malady of age, child. You will have to help transport me to my past and bring me safely home again.

Perhaps I have started dictating my book to satisfy an ulterior motive. When age imprisons one in unaccustomed solitude, only conversation with one's nearest and dearest confirms the truth of one's past worlds. That is why old women chatter so. Confirmation of their life's reality depends on it.

Enough of sentiment! Where were we? Ah, yes. On the road...

Louis and I made our entry to Poitiers with more decorum than we left Bordeaux. How could we not! We lodged in the tower which Grandfather, the Troubadour, commissioned for my grandmother, the former countess of Châtellerault. To my people's delight, Louis donned the coronet of the counts of Poitou. I should have said this yesterday: it first graced his temples on the morning of our wedding in Bordeaux.

We tarried two weeks in Poitiers, impatient to receive the tardy tribute of certain vassals who disdained to give my lord the homage that was now his due. This delay seemed not to trouble Louis at the time, and I soon forgot the affront altogether. It was later, when Louis returned to Poitou at the head of an army, when I realized how the insult simmered in his brain. Two months later some of my Poitevin vassals rose in revolt, whereon my monkish king became a butcher, chopping off their hands himself.

Don't distress yourself, Aline. Life can be unkind. Besides, those men were unlettered. Not one of them could put his hand to such useful toil as you. I do believe you have as pretty a script in French as my

former secretary, Peter of Blois, though Peter—petulant old goat—has much finer Latin than you.

Throughout our life together, aspects of Louis' inner mind eluded me. I was his wife, not his confessor. Looking back, I think he wreaked his fury on Poitou because, while we lingered in Poitiers, his father could linger no longer in Paris. Word reached us while we tarried in Grandfather's tower: the King was dead. Long live my lord and husband, Louis the Seventh, King of the Franks. Barring the messengers, who knelt before they spoke, I was the first to kneel at Louis' feet and with full feeling say, "God save the king".

It transpired that Louis the Fat had endured the heat of July in great suffering, hoping to see his son and Abbé Suger again. And, I'm sure, he wanted to meet the new daughter-in-law whose presence spoke to the success of his long-held policy, the increase of France. But his dying hopes were not to be. There came the moment when he ordered his servants to place him on a bed of ashes, where he stretched out his arms in the shape of a cross, and died.

How life gathers speed, a charger spurred by circumstance. Overnight, the child of a duke became a duchess in her own right. Weeks later I left Bordeaux as wife to the heir to France. I would shortly enter Paris as its queen.

I thank God that I came to Paris for the first time in summer. Had we entered the Île de la Cité beneath gray skies I swear I would have wept for home-sickness and loss. The city that I entered as its mistress was a grim, depressing place. The enchanted worlds of my birthright and of Father's ducal progresses seemed a lifetime ago. But youth is resilient, and at fifteen years of age I was queen of a dank labyrinth, the citadel that had long been the capital of the Franks. Besides, I have endured worse in the sixty-six years that have borne my life along since that unhappy day. I had yet to clap eyes on London. More of that anon.

I do not mean to dwell on the failings of Louis' palace. No doubt in

time of siege I would have been glad to poke my way around a stone-bowelled, smoke-blackened fortress with embrasures for windows, dark as the pit of hell. The glory of the Capets was a towering mole-mound starved for light. It had been built three centuries before as an unsinkable ship, a bulwark against Viking sea-raiders, with tightly-winding stairs and narrow passages constructed for defence.

It was there, on that island in the Seine which was Louis' first and only real world, that we jousted in earnest, in joy and in heartbreak, for too many years.

I spoke of Poitiers. If only its leading citizens had shown restraint during the first discontents imposed by our alliance! Louis' campaign in Poitou strained our marriage from the start. Within months, some Poitevins were declaring Poitiers a commune free from rule by my "foreign" king. In hindsight I feel that Poitiers felt a ripple from the splash affecting many Lombard towns: wealthy citizens were making queer demands for "municipal liberties." How I wept, beseeching and scolding Louis privately. But he would not be ruled by me. The dust of our passage to Paris had barely settled when he took an army back along the road to Poitiers and fired my people with a hatred for the Capets and for France.

Louis had no skill in rhetoric or reason. As a monk he obeyed; as a king he was obeyed. As a monk he submitted; as a king, he made others submit. Between those two opposing temples his brain conceived no middle way. Louis' actions were of one camp or the other. Had this revolt occurred in any other city he surely would have led his troops with Christian moderation. But my Poitevins' foolish insurrection was a blow against his bride, and thus his pride. He took it as a slight to the *alliances* with which we pledged each other's troth.

Our Lord spare my city! for Louis did not. The mild monk would not be ruled by God, by argument or by his queen. His vision was too narrow, the contradictions of his life too sharp. Had I been allowed to

show myself and reason with my people, no blood would have been shed. But I was not allowed to go: Louis would be king!

It was only after my tearful entreaties that Abbé Suger put aside his great labor—he was rebuilding the abbey of St. Denis—to post like a common messenger in urgent haste to Poitiers. People said God sent Suger in response to the cries and prayers assailing heaven from Poitou. But even Suger had to wrestle night and day with Louis' demons before he finally prevailed. Within months of our marriage it was clear to me, and to the world, that Louis' tutors had instructed him in everything except those qualities he needed most: the skills to exercise the royal power in moderation.

Speaking of the royal power, the bell calls us to offices. Too late for prime; it must be sext. Leave me, Aline, and bid my secretary attend me afterwards. Guy Diva and I have a pressing matter to discuss.

When Louis returned to Paris he buried himself in Notre Dame's cloister again: he was always more an oblate than a king. By the lights of the Church he was the perfect postulant, the novice meek in dress and attitude who would one day take his vows, except that he was the king and therefore, of dynastic necessity, a husband. During those first, unhappy months in Paris I formed the impression that the tower-grotto of the Capets sustained our household on Friday fasts each day of the week, with privations, hair shirts, and a diet which the meanest Poitevin scullion would have scorned. The royal compound at one end of the Island merged with the offices of the Church at the other. Between these temporal and spiritual extremities, there was little to ease the palate or lighten the mind.

I was not alone in grieving our translation to Paris. There was the matter of language. Furthermore, my followers, who were accustomed to freedoms of the mind, a well-stocked board, entertainments and space discovered in dismay that every day which dawned in Louis'

flesh-abasing citadel was Lent.

The Franks, of course, took us for hot-blooded southerners and spoiled wastrels. We were appetites in search of satisfaction who lacked for discipline and clamored for minstrels and to satisfy desires. My mother-in-law, Adela of Maurienne, withdrew to her chateau in Champagne. I think her retreat had less to do with frictions between her unworldly Capetians and my boisterous, worldly household than with a widow's desire to define her own place. Oh Aline, would that I had been so fortunate: I would have bolted in a moment, back to Poitiers.

And yet, as a tree disadvantaged for light gropes toward the sun, we found our ways ahead by seeking solace in what was, indeed, an extraordinary culture of learning. In that respect, Paris refused to disappoint. Many an evening I stepped from the solar to the tower heights to eavesdrop on students' voices: they were older than me, drunk on argued subtleties of thought as well as wine. Paris was mother and father to learned men of many lands. Even the unschooled English came to learn. Grammar, rhetoric, logic; geometry, arithmetic, astronomy, music; learned doctors offered the full gamut of the *trivium* and the *quadrivium* as well as medicine and law. We soon discovered that competing doctors of theology claimed Paris as their home.

I see you have to cut another quill. We'll stop awhile.
 You are very pretty, Aline. Did you know that? Of course you do. Long dark hair and that delicate nose. Braids behind the ears, free-falling in front. Why do you wear your hair the old-fashioned way? Forgive me, I stand corrected. As you say, it's still the style in Normandy. And contrasting pale cheeks. You look as I once did, but your hair is darker. You're a true beauty, Aline.

There you go, blushing again. If you can't accept a compliment from an old woman without turning the color of raw beef, how will you cope with the eyes and the verses of suitors with lust in their loins?

You're too thin-skinned: your father guarded you too well. But by the time you're done with me you'll be as thick-skinned as a washer-woman's hands that steeped for a lifetime in lye. You'll be the better for it, too. And lucky. A woman's lot is better than it was when I was young. Mark you, the need for change was in the air. Our early years in Paris coincided with a sort of spring emerging from a winter of the mind. People were claiming freedom to find personal paths to faith, through reason, rather than taking doctors' homilies as truth.

But the eternal message of the Church when I was young was simple: faith without reason; faith needs no reason. Blind faith, and obedience: to ancient rote; to learned fathers of the Church who lived and died before King Charlemagne. What did those ancient savants know about the press of modern times?

How old-fashioned I must sound to you, Aline. I hope I can convey how the ferment that coincided with my youth was as a tonic to the women of my household during those first, dreary years.

Our entertainments were limited. Still, it's a poor loaf that wants for leaven. We flocked to the debates—some of us, I fear, to preen before the eyes of men. Much of it was silliness. The doctors' learned treatises called up such fluff as would not raise the eyebrow of a nun, let alone the hackles of the Church. Does a bird fly by the grace of wings or by the agency of air? Is a pig led to market by a rope or by the man who holds the other end? Good harmless Aristotle, but a vehicle for fun.

Am I distracting you, Aline? No? Good. Old women have to talk. It brings the past alive.

Early summers were the best time. Our feet bruised the chamomile lawn beneath the cedar trees, while trailing sleeves and skirts stirred up the smell from the broken leaves. An odor not unlike citrons. A smell of the south, of warm, dry earth. How that little piece of ground, embattled on both sides by the rushing river, conjured thoughts of home.

Those days, even the most timid among my women were embold-

ened. We hosted sermons and debates in the royal garden on the Île. How we all looked forward to the fray! There was a Breton preacher, Peter Abelard, who had no fear of God, still less of the Church. He was a favorite, goading doctors of divinity as if they were oxen. His debating skills struck so many doctors dumb that they might as well have been. There really is no intelligent rebuttal to the injunction: "Think!"

Women of every rank loved Abelard. He afforded us such naughty pleasure, mocking the doctrine of obedience, attacking priests as blinkered beasts who drew a plowshare back and forth, year in, year out, along a single furrow. No wonder the riches of each fertile field of faith are never reaped, he would say—he meant each Christian soul—for how can soil be reaped that was neither plowed nor sown? The untilled field that is each human mind must come to faith assisted by the light of reason.

The Church condemned his teachings, twice, the first time before I was born. Rather than give a bishop the pleasure of burning his book he did it himself, and then rewrote it. I had been in Paris four years before the stiff-necked Abbé Bernard silenced Abelard the second time.

Peter's message was: question blind faith, for it is blind. And question that which you obey. That was why we women were so fond of him. Not just for his audacity. In those days women were wombs: wombs to put to marriage; wombs to breed; wombs to command; wombs who would meekly obey. A man served two masters, his lord and the Church. A woman served three, for she obeyed her man before the other two. Abelard raised at least the hope of a free mind. How bold he made us feel. What vicarious joy!

I think that's all I can recall today. This old womb has had her say.

3. TROUBLE AT BOURGES; FIRE AND THE SWORD ASSAIL CHAMPAGNE 1141-1144

I had been queen four years when we got into trouble at Bourges. The see fell vacant, so Louis named his chancellor to fill the bishop's chair. Bourges is convenient to Poitou, and Louis, despite the hours he spent on his knees, was not averse to convenience. The town is well placed to host the royal court. My vassals could reach Bourges as easily as Louis'. So we appointed a trusted minister as bishop to serve our needs.

This sparked trouble. The impertinent clerics of Bourges elected their own nominee, who chanced to be in Rome, in the lap of the pope. Louis raised his hand against him, naturally; and stopped him entering the see. So the impostor, Pierre de la Châtre, decamped to Champagne and sent a wounded letter to the pope.

Are you keeping up, Aline? Good. You're a hard worker, child. Writing is almost as useful as embroidering. More women should learn their letters.

The pope, of course—they're all as thick as thieves—sided with the priests and ordered his fellow back to Bourges to reclaim our see. Even then the situation might have been saved, except that the pope sent a letter to Louis' ministers, chiding the king for playing the "foolish schoolboy." Imagine penning such mischief to the court of the king of France. Such arrogance! The upshot was that Louis swore a mighty oath on the holiest relics, vowing that this Pierre would never enter Bourges as bishop. Pope Innocent responded by excommunicating us, and our household with us. There the matter seethed, a matter of profound unease.

You can imagine how deeply this wounded the Capets. Louis—he was twenty-one—had spent his life abasing himself to the whims of the Church. For what!

Still, we had no time to reflect. It was then that my sister's marriage tore our world apart.

♦♦ If but a fourth part you might bear..." How does it go? How does it go? Pardon an old woman's fog. I need the words; I need to fetch those words to carry on.

The Countess of Die. Yes. It was her poem. She wrote it some years ago. It can't have been graven too freshly in time; I would have forgotten. The long-past is fresh; it's the past year I can't remember. She's a wonderful *trobairitz*.⁴ The first time I heard her verse it stuck in my head with those two awful years. It sounds better in our native *langue d'oc*. I'm wandering, Aline, but take down what you can:

"If but a fourth part you might bear,
Friend, of the pain that tortures me,
Then you would see my suffering..."⁵

Now I'm tired. No, no, we'll go on! I don't want this sorry tale to burden tomorrow as well as today. As briefly as I can:

Louis was still sorely distressed by the Bourges affair when my sister, Pétronille, came of marriageable age. The late king's cousin wanted her. Raoul of Vermandois was ancient, a bull ready for beef, but politics is politics: I saw the benefit of an alliance with his lands in the north-east and the Vexin, which forms a natural line of defence between France and Normandy. A match between Pétronille and Raoul would move Paris to the center of a grand alliance. So I fought to bring it about.

Louis was already beset by anxiety over the Church's reaction to Bourges. Denied the comforts of his Church he was desperate for support. I gave it, of course, with all my love. For the next three years I became his confessor. Looking back, I know I exacted a price, for Pétronille's sake and ours, as I thought. But it trapped us in the end.

Perhaps I over-reached. Raoul was already married, to the niece of Louis' strongest vassal, Thibault of Champagne. Still, due diligence revealed—royal courts are full of hair-splitters—a trace of consanguinity between Raoul and his wife. It took a good deal of persuasion, but I finally found three bishops who agreed to annul Raoul's marriage and marry him to Pétronille. Whereupon Raoul's estranged wife threw herself and her children on the charity of her uncle, the great Thibault. Well, the cowardly schoolboy is always the first to cling to the master's cloak. Which he did. Thibault of Champagne invoked the help of that noisome abbot, Bernard of Clairvaux. Bernard in turn appealed to his bosom friend with whom he had traveled to Rome ten years before, the pope.

Before a season could pass, Innocent II rained anathema upon us all: smiting the bishops who had sundered Raoul's marriage; annulling Pétronille's marriage to Raoul; and forcing Raoul to take his first wife back on pain of excommunication and, what was worse, forfeit of certain lands.

Naturally, Louis held Thibault of Champagne to blame for this surfeit of ills. As if that were not enough, Thibault was also sheltering the pope's pretender to the bishopric at Bourges.

Louis had never been exposed to enough of life's contradictions to forge a middle way. No one had taught him how to argue toward compromise; or better, collaboration. All was black, or white. So he took personal command of an army and laid waste to Champagne. The outcome was inevitable. At Vitry-en-Perthois the townsfolk sheltered in the church and Louis' soldiers burned it down on top of them. Some said a thousand people burned to death, others that the dead numbered a thousand and more. But who can count beyond a thousand? Such a number is beyond reckoning. This took place in front of Louis' eyes. It was more than three score years ago, but they still call the place Vitry-le-Brûlé.

For a year and more I nursed Louis back from his lowest ebb. Poor tortured soul, no peace at all. The Church, of course, had cast him out.

As for my sister, poor Pétronille was in despair. She was a maiden again but no virgin. I advised comfrey, of course. It tightens the passage. Old wives have prescribed suppositories of comfrey since the First Crusade, a hundred years ago. Husbands don't like to return from Palestine to suspect their wives of taking other men. Ho, Aline! You gawp with your mouth wide open, but you don't even blush today. We make progress. It's true, child, quite true. The hymen grows back. Not that *you* will ever need to resort to such naughty subterfuge.

Was I dozing? Yes? Such dismal years, the fourth and fifth of Louis' reign. They trouble me. I try to forget. But each event is a stitch in the tapestry. You are clever to write so well.

Everyone came to Paris to celebrate the re-consecration of St. Denis. We took advantage of the occasion to quiet the ripples from Bourges and the war in Champagne. Not that these were really laid to rest till after our Crusade. But how could any beating heart, no matter its age, forget that awe-inspiring day!

Suger had spent years rebuilding the royal church on the Île, the abbey of St. Denis. Would that he had expended his monies and his labor on the royal apartments! No matter; it ill behooves me to cavil. On the feast of Saint Barnabas in the seventh year of our reign, the priests translated the relics of St. Denis with all due pomp from the crypt to Suger's abbey. The abbey of St. Denis was in truth born again. Like fresh snow, its new dressed stone blinded the eyes. The edifice loomed up like a giant wall of chalk. Dazzling withal, dazzling without and dazzling within! Its colored windows changed a glorious day to still more wondrous rainbows.

Everybody in that press of people fought for breath. The event brought five archbishops, thirteen bishops and most of the barons of France. You cannot imagine the scene. Butchers stole the very air from bishops, bishops from counts, counts from fishwives, fishwives from nuns. Hawkers trampled on dukes' feet, dukes on students', students on market boys'. Was ever such a pilgrimage! Ourselves were several times stopped, unmoving, captives to the crowd, becalmed in a tempest of shouted greetings, blessings, reaching hands, foul breath and pleas for alms. Louis himself pressed back the throng. How wonderful, and yet how wondrous strange. Men and women fought to place themselves where sunbeams touched them after passing through the stained glass images of Jesus, Mary and the saints. To look around was to watch as faces were transformed by being lifted to the colored lights, each mouth agape with awe, each heart touched by the holy spirit, each transfigured countenance a faith reclaimed.

It was at this gathering that Abbé Bernard confronted me. Such a grim ascetic, that man! He had trained himself during a long life in the cloister to ignore beauty—nay, to transcend the material world. For him, this world of impure being distracted from pure, spiritual truth. I mentioned that the abbé once accompanied his friend Innocent II to Rome. People said that he traveled through the Alps without once

casting eyes upon the waters of the lakes or upwards at the snow-capped peaks. To Bernard, such things were distractions; all sensations were temptations, base appetites to be eschewed; and all flesh was but straw to stoke the fire of the spirit. Bernard directed his feet through faith, aided by ecstatic visions. Years before, he had taken the sensualist Abbé Suger to task. I was an infant when he began chastising the Benedictines of Cluny for backsliding in the matter of gaudy display:

“The church clothes the stones of her walls in gold while her people go naked. The church feeds the eyes of the rich from the purse of her poor. Those who seek sensation find amusement; those most in need find only emptiness.”⁶

Had Bernard prevailed, Suger never would have restored St. Denis to its present splendor.

It was at this, to him distasteful, gathering that Bernard sought me out. He became in time a formidable foe. He was no fool. My forefathers had scant respect for clergy; my father least of all. But, as the biggest badger shuns the slightest ferret, even Father was wary of Bernard. Father had made the mistake of backing the wrong pope and expelling the bishop of Poitiers, so the Church had excommunicated him, and Poitou with him. It soon became clear that excommunication would not so much as jangle Father’s chain-mail, so Bernard intervened. I was three at the time. One Sunday, at Parthenay-le-Vieux, the abbé ran out of the church waving the pyx in Father’s face. We never learned what magic Bernard conjured, but Father, a giant among men, fell senseless to the ground.

I’m wandering, Aline. You must hold me to my text.

Briefly, during the festivities at St. Denis, Bernard suggested I use my influence on Louis to bring him to contrition for the misery he had wrought in Champagne; and for the other matter, Bourges. In exchange

he, Bernard, was prepared to offer spiritual guidance, to extricate us from the woes distressing the Capetian throne.

I should not mark Bernard down unduly. Did he not tip the scale with the powerful prayers of Clairvaux when I was still without child after six years a wife? We named our firstborn Marie in thanks. The first child a female! Did the bells ring that day in joy or disappointment? Well, even a female child proves that a wife is not barren. And Marie in later years was a wonderful joy to me and a marriage-pawn for the Capets.

Have you noticed, Aline? Men are so cynical. The very *Paternoster* credits them with the act of conception, as if a woman's womb is but *their* vehicle in which *their* child is brought to term. But let a woman fail to give birth or give birth to a girl, then she is to blame. I am weary beyond measure of homilies on Christ's origins: "conceived of the holy ghost, borne of Mary the maid."

Remember what I said about men, child. Never fight them on their terms, or they will win. Bernard bested Peter Abelard by denying him the chance to address the griefs those churchmen brought against him. This grim monk would not silence me so easily.

By the time Bernard confronted me, the Church had begun to demand meekness in women. It is only since I was a girl that statues of the Blessed Mary have been carved with their eyes cast down. Why should not a woman hold her head erect? I looked the abbé in the eye—which meant I had to look down anyway!—and put my sister's case again, and he, wise in his cloistered way, broke off our interview. Mark me, men like Bernard see nothing more than devils in a woman's smile. To such as he a woman is a creature lower than a beast. And a woman with spirit is beyond repair!

Now I've told you: be armed and use your knowledge to advantage. Ride men, or they will ride you. Depend on it, unless it serves their purposes, men give no weight to anything a woman says.

It's getting dark, Aline. We work late today. See how the sunlight moves around the wall, striking columns one by one. Some are bright, some dark. Eventually darkness overtakes them all. I count the offices by those pillars. They are as constant as a sundial.

Constant, that's the word I was looking for. Constant—as men can never be.

What right had they to ask Louis to be constant to the Church? Constant! To obey every whim they foisted on him? Those priests, who kept an infant king upon his knees and made him what he was.

My family reared ten generations of Guilhems, all fiery men: the first was a comrade-in-arms of Charlemagne. From the moment I could reach my father's stirrup I was bred to the history and taste of power. But the Capets raised Louis to impotence. Accept. Obey. Accept. Obey. Accept... His inner man was mild as a palfrey, mild as a statue of the Virgin in these timid, fearful times. When at last in pure frustration he was forced to kick against the Church's endless pricks he had no rein to guide him. No rein but me.

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